

## **The Teaching of English at U.P.R. R.P., F.E.G.: A model for reflexive, critical and creative thinking about language**

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### **Resumen**

Este trabajo presenta un modelo teórico sobre el proceso de aprendizaje del inglés como lengua no vernácula. Recoge la experiencia de un comité utilizando el concepto de la educación general en la construcción de un modelo para el desarrollo de las competencias comunicativas y lingüísticas para propósitos académicos. El departamento de inglés atiende estudiantes de diversas proficiencias; desde principiantes hasta estudiantes bilingües. El modelo armoniza las metas educativas, filosóficas y el enfoque interdisciplinario que caracteriza la educación general.

Palabras claves: educación general, inglés académico, interdisciplinario, competencia lingüística, competencia comunicativa.

### **Resumen**

This paper presents the University of Puerto Rico, College of General Studies (FEG<sup>1</sup>), theoretical model for English language learning. It discusses the work of a committee that has utilized the concept of General Education to construct a conceptual model of communicative and linguistic competence for academic purposes. The English department serves non-native speakers of English having diverse proficiencies, from beginning ESL to higher-level students who are equally comfortable in both Spanish and English. The model harmonizes general educational goals, teaching philosophy, and interdisciplinary approach to learning.

Key Words: general education, English for Academic Purposes, interdisciplinary, linguistic competence, communicative competence.

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviation FEG comes from Spanish, "Facultad de Estudios Generales."

## **Introduction**

The University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus (UPRRP) English Department at the College of General Studies (FEG) serves non-native speakers of English having diverse proficiencies--from beginning ESL students to higher level, bilingual students who are equally comfortable in both Spanish and English. As detailed below, the UPRRP-FEG English Department has constructed a conceptual model of communicative and linguistic competence to harmonize our educational goals, philosophy, and interdisciplinary approach to teaching. The model is compatible with all levels of required first-year General Studies English and represents the conceptual system informing our practice.

English education at FEG prepares students for entry into the academic speech community. In this social context, communicative competence has a specific meaning; it refers to *the use of the English language appropriately, meaningfully and intelligibly for academic purposes* (English for Academic Purposes, hereafter EAP). Significantly, the model does not focus on the teaching of social functions of English or approaches such as conversational English. The FEG goal is for students to be able to listen, speak, read and write critically in English and for them to acquire the linguistic knowledge and metalinguistic awareness that will allow them to independently use and grow in the language.

Academically appropriate language is thoughtful, coherent and inquiry driven. Expertise in the academic register is expected to transcend the academic speech community to influence the students' personal, professional and civic lives where habits of mind such as thoughtfulness, coherence, and inquiry will be useful in reading the broader world. Therefore, although not the focus, the expectation is that the competence students acquire has an application outside of academia as well.

Linguistic competence is developed in concert with communicative competence; knowledge of the social norms of language use are useless without *knowledge of the rules for sentence formation and combining required for mastery of standard English*.

Without a minimum level of linguistic competence, communicative competence remains hypothetical because it refers to language use within a social context, i.e. the ability to combine words into meaningful sentences cannot be separated from contemplating the social register. Furthermore, linguistic competence in this paper also refers to *awareness of fundamental linguistic concepts about language as a system of signs that enables humans to talk about the world and ideas, displace themselves in time and space, and delve into the unknown*. In short, to be a competent EAP language user, students know what language is, how the linguistic system under study compares to their native language, what its norms of combination are and the specific demands of the academic register.

The freshmen served by the FEG will find little conflict between the norms of academic communicative competence in Spanish and in English<sup>2</sup>. At FEG, both Spanish and English classes educate students to use language in academic settings; therefore, the courses in both languages converge in the area of communicative competence and, thereby, reinforce each other. They also converge as language courses; both teach about language as the primary human system of communication. This constitutes the academic content or object of study that serves to build linguistic, communicative, and intellectual competencies. The distinctive FEG interdisciplinary approach constitutes a third area of convergence as it nurtures dialogue across disciplines. The Spanish and English courses obviously diverge in the area of linguistic competence as each names a different system which is uniquely situated in contemporary Puerto Rico. As already suggested, and presented in the model below, linguistic and communicative competence constitute complementary and integrated goals in the FEG/EAP. These emerge and develop through the interdisciplinary understanding and study of the language.

In this model, all four traditional language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing) are balanced and integrated. Students learn to listen and evaluate arguments,

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<sup>2</sup>See Pousada (1994) for a full discussion of the complexity of learning to be linguistically and communicatively competent as new members of a speech community.

ideas, and evidence provided orally and in writing, as well as to articulate and defend their own views. The better they know their object of study, the English language, and the norms of the academic speech community, the more meaningfully, intelligibly, democratically, and creatively they can use English for academic purposes.

This paper contextualizes and presents the process of constructing a model to inform departmental decisions about how to offer an educational experience in English that is simultaneously reflexive, critical, democratic and creative. It also discusses the significance of conceptualization and theorization as the foundation of a larger project. The conceptualization and creation of the aforementioned model is but the first stage in a five-stage process that will produce an intercommunicating array of models, procedures, and activities to guide and assess practices:

1. Conceptual model
2. Teaching model
3. Student assessment model
4. Design of staff training seminars
5. Staff assessment model

Needless to say, this is an ambitious project that will provide a more holistic view of our work and, of utmost importance, allow us to better serve students. This article shares our experience to promote similar conversations elsewhere. Below we present the first stage in this ongoing process of developing an integrated approach to EAP that ultimately offers our students a comprehensive and coherent curriculum.

The interdisciplinary background of the authors—education, linguistics and literature—mirrored the FEG approach to knowledge. Each author looked at the model from their own informed perspective, shedding light on the deeper connections represented by the diagram. The more we looked at, tweaked, and discussed the model with other colleagues, the richer the process became and the more convinced we became of its usefulness. This conviction led us to write this paper to document and share this experience in the event that other language teachers may benefit from the process and its product.

### **What is language education?**

All language education should transcend occupational need or quotidian, socially functional utterances to entail understanding of how meaning is made through language. It includes the knowledge about language and its use required to transform English into an instrument of thinking expressed as written and oral communication. Therefore, within this framework a simple, timely connection to the present or the individual learner's context does not suffice to make the teaching of English relevant and effective. Instead, language learning engages learners intellectually as well as affectively, so that the learners' knowledge is validated as it is transformed and, moreover, the language becomes useful outside the classroom: e.g., verbal exchanges, heightened awareness of language, appreciating different genres, reading and writing across the curriculum, and directing their own ongoing acquisition of English.

Linguistic awareness and collaboration are two mutually strengthening concepts in this model. They most directly connect to metacognition and attitudes, respectively. Linguistic awareness of how a language works and how it interacts with their native language leads students to understand the language learning process. A collaborative environment creates solidarity and removes stigma or shame thereby removing affective barriers to learning. Collaboration also underscores the dynamic, interactive, and democratic nature of learning and communication through language. In such a safe environment, where positive affect anchors intellect, teachers can create an experience of personal validation and group collaboration that will nurture learning. In this context, student errors are engaged productively in the learning process. In fact, these errors, as they occur spontaneously, can constitute the most productive part of a class. Although they may take us away from a planned lesson, errors are rich in nuance and relevance if the teacher seizes the opportunity to reflect upon what they reveal about student knowledge, intuition, interlanguage, and interference.

When students arrive in FEG classrooms in their freshman year, they have ideas about language and experiences with language that color their views about the task at hand.

Part of our job is to put the students' ideas in contact with the ideas of others: classmates, researchers in linguistics and other disciplines, and the teacher. This encourages students to become language learners that think and question rather than merely accept and imitate, that is language learners with a will to act. Reflection and the formulation of questions, therefore, take precedence over rules and correction. Much of this reflection comes from the very errors students make in class. These errors serve as rich raw material for reflection and cognitive growth in language.

In nurturing classrooms, metacognitive activities create awareness of strengths, weaknesses, common errors and the identification of personal barriers to learning. By learning to self-evaluate, self-monitor, and self-correct, students acquire a level of independence that allows them to take charge of their own learning.

### **How does critical thinking fit in?**

At FEG, we teach critical habits of mind by focusing on particular objects of study—on English, in the case of this model. Three fundamental concepts inform how we approach our object of study in FEG: integration, reflection and change. In this view, critical thinking is an attitude more than a skill, an attitude of passionate attention (McGuire, 1973; Pinar 1988) and passionate questioning of taken-for-granted beliefs. This requires attention to ideas as opposed to submission to authority. In this model, the integration of attitudes, metacognition, expertise, knowledge and creativity through interdisciplinary reflection produce changes in cognition, affect and will to act.

Critical thinking requires pushing students out of their comfort zones, disturbing them so that they will question the ideas they live by. Making connections across disciplines constitutes a fundamental step in developing this skill. Interdisciplinary connections underscore the complexity of the object of study and, moreover, the questions that have helped constitute it. In this way, learners acquire knowledge of what is known and better understand how this knowledge came into being. For example, an interdisciplinary look at language helps students better understand the task before them. To achieve this, the course may look at research in neurology that inquires into

how and where the brain processes language. Reading about and discussing specific experiments done to answer questions about human language not only sheds light on the complexity of our object of study, it introduces students to academic inquiry. They can observe how questions are formulated and how they are answered. Prescriptive, rule-governed information on language, on the other hand, emphasizes following rules through a static view of correction. In contrast, engaging an understanding of the complexity of language, its creative possibilities and how knowledge is constructed offers a more discriminating awareness of language that gives students the tools to intelligently confront and master it.

The overriding idea here is that education should be a process of strengthening one's ability to interpret and transform the world. It should help students uncover questions about their own, unexamined ideas. This can be achieved by propitiating cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). When students are confronted with ideas that do not fit with what they already know and believe, they are forced to question the discourses they live by. As teachers, we initiate them into academic communicative and linguistic competence by welcoming them into a community of inquiry. We offer students new concepts to think through (Schumacher 1973). As educators, we engage our students in critically examining their own lives. By quarrelling with their texts (Brodber 1988) they uncover the unquestioned beliefs that direct their lives. In short, they learn to raise questions more than to find answers. They begin to critically construct their own thinking instead of consuming knowledge digested and spit out by authorities. This cognitively creative process characterizes critical thinking and constitutes a fundamental part of this model.

To conclude, critical thinking requires awareness of the discourses they think through as a first step in consciously retaining, refining, or discarding them. The teaching of EAP must include helping students inquire into how they speak, what they mean by the words and metaphors they use, and how their words and metaphors often contradict the very ideas they preach. As the cognitive sciences tell us, the conscious mind is but a small part of our mental makeup (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Turner, 1991; Gazzaniga,

1998). The greater part of mind consists of an unoriginal, dominant cognitive background of default concepts, images and categories anchored in social convention. These are the ideas we think and act through; these are the ideas the academic community interrogates, these are the ideas that will shape students' futures and the futures of others, therefore students should be put to the test of whether their ideas and language use advance or impede the attainment of a more just world.

### **How can this model be put into practice?**

The project described in this article began when the Dean of Academic Affairs requested that the FEG English Department prepare a teaching model for assessment. Working in conjunction with the Department's Director, it was established that an ad hoc committee would be formed to first produce a conceptual or theoretical model focusing on competence, one that would later inform decisions about curriculum development and student assessment. The assumption behind the project was that the initial formulation of an effective conceptual model of communicative and linguistic competence is necessary for improvements in the areas of teaching and assessment. Instead of adopting and adjusting rubrics from the US, this project strives to align the teaching of English with the needs of students at UPRRP and the goals and approach of FEG.

The early stage of this project included a series of three workshops on the effective teaching of English, "Teaching English - What Works?" These workshops, given over the course of a semester, were attended by approximately 35 full-time professors of English (approximately 95% of its teaching staff). The workshops focused on a competence approach to teaching. Each workshop encouraged professors to conceptualize competence within a holistic framework that differentiates competence and the teaching of isolated skills.

The first workshop, *Fundamentals for the elaboration of a model of communicative competence as a non-vernacular language*, was given in February 2010. Before it was



held, a committee of three people was formed to develop a theoretical model of communicative competence for use by our professors of English. The committee was designed to include faculty members at three different periods in their respective careers, senior, mid-career, and junior. Its members, the authors of this article, come from a variety of academic backgrounds, having professional training in the areas of education, linguistics, and literature. As suggested above, this diversity is crucial to the educational philosophy of the FEG.

During the first workshop, committee members noted the ambiguity of the term competence and observed that members of the department defined competence in a variety of ways. Discussion of these differences revealed distinct understandings of relevant scholarship in linguistics as well as questions about the connections between theoretical work on competence and assessment. In light of this confusion, this article provides succinct definitions of competence in the introduction.

The committee's work continued with the discussion of a variety of written materials. First among these were the written missions of our Department and the College of General Studies. It also reviewed the department's stated objectives alongside those of other academic institutions that teach English to non-native speakers at the college level. Reviewing these documents allowed the committee to identify connections between its main task and the fundamentals covered in the first workshop.

Early on committee members read and debated different views of competence. The committee met twice weekly for most of the semester. Readings on competence were complemented by studies published within the University of Puerto Rico, including materials recently published by FEG personnel (e.g., Rodríguez Beruff 2009, Vélez 2009, Haiman & Lockwood 2003-2004, Haiman 2006). This material defines and contextualizes General Studies within the most recent UPR-RP curriculum changes referred to as "the new bachelor's degree." These publications are significant because they establish what it means to state that the teaching of English in FEG is informed by

an interdisciplinary approach to learning, and academic investigation.<sup>3</sup>

The process of completing these readings led to the reconceptualization of the main task as the development of a model of communicative and linguistic competence, rather than a model focusing on communicative competence alone. This shift responds to the committee's concern that the omission of explicit reference to linguistic competence goes against the integrative teaching philosophy advocated by the FEG. It also responds to concerns faculty members expressed at the initial workshop. At that time, some members asked whether an emphasis on communicative competence entails a shift away from grammar and practical knowledge of language structure, which is not the case. To further encourage an integrative view, the committee adopted three criteria (i.e., cognition, affect, and will to act) presented at the staff workshops by Dr. Angel Villarini based upon the scholarship of renowned 19<sup>th</sup> century Puerto Rican educator Eugenio Maria de Hostos.

A progress report on the work of the committee was presented at a departmental meeting on April 14, 2010. At the meeting, two main issues were discussed: how to refer to "the English" taught in the department and the significance of communicative competence for teaching. After lively discussion and review of academic descriptions of English for Academic Purposes, professors agreed to adopt "English for Academic Purposes" to refer to the register and variety of the language taught in the department. The communicative competence we teach is that needed for academic work, not for social functions or other uses of English, although the academic register can be put to broader use. The second issue discussed focused on how English is taught. Next, faculty members agreed that the teaching of English has multiple and simultaneous objectives. The following description of these aspects, taken from a UPR report on linguistic competence (Grupo para el estudio de las competencias lingüísticas, 1998) was discussed and accepted:

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<sup>3</sup> Since education is a dynamic and ever-changing process the FEG approach has become increasingly transdisciplinary, but we choose to continue to use the term interdisciplinary because it is the term most prevalent in the relevant documents.

A nivel universitario, esto nos plantea el examen y discusión de la función comunicativa de la lengua en el currículo universitario desde dos dimensiones: su aspecto instrumental y su aspecto académico, en relación a la enseñanza del español como vernáculo y del inglés, los idiomas que se espera que manejan los estudiantes del Recinto. El aspecto instrumental apunta hacia la función del hecho comunicativo integrado a las disciplinas, es decir como medio o vehículo para la adquisición de todos los conocimientos. En su aspecto académico, los dos idiomas se nos plantean como centro y razón de estudio, es decir como objeto de estudio.

At the university level, the communicative function of language should be examined and discussed from two dimensions: instrumental and academic. These two dimensions relate to the teaching of the Spanish vernacular and English, languages the UPRRP university students are expected to master. The instrumental dimension refers to the interdisciplinary communicative function as a means to the acquisition of knowledge. The academic dimension, on the other hand, centers both languages as the objects of study.

This model contemplates both dimensions, instrumental and academic, although the apparent division between them in the quote disappears in our model. Linguistic competence as defined in this paper integrates what the quote describes as the instrumental and academic dimensions; English is both a vehicle to the acquisition of knowledge and the object of study in the model presented here. Our concept of linguistic competence, which includes rules of English language use and knowledge of language in general, connects to both dimensions in the quote above as students have to become aware of the social norms and rules of English to attain instrumental and academic competence. When language in general, and English as a specific case, constitutes the object of study, linguistic and communicative competences arise as two complementary aspects of language to be mastered. Teaching either, outside the context of human language in general, leads to fragmentation and returns to more traditional, disciplinary forms of language education.

At the department's third workshop the EAP Committee presented a preliminary version of this model. Faculty members discussed and asked questions about it. Like the version presented here, the model set the parameters for documenting students' communicative and linguistic competence in English at the start of their academic

careers. The presentation also explained that to develop the model further, we needed August entry-level profiles for each of the four levels of English taught in the department (i.e., Basic Intensive, Basic, Intermediate, and Honors). These descriptive profiles, an example of which is included below, document various dimensions of competence for speaking, reading, listening, and writing. The committee presented a working draft of the speaking component for a beginning Basic English student as a partial example of a profile, explaining that the generalizations in the descriptive profiles build on professors' experience and familiarity with student performance at each level. At the end of the meeting professors agreed to adopt the model and to use it in developing full student profiles during the following semester (August-December 2010).

At the beginning of the following semester, the EAP committee distributed a feedback form to the department. It allowed professors to identify points to be clarified and solicited comments on how the model might be improved. Based on the feedback, the EAP committee integrated the comments and refined the model.

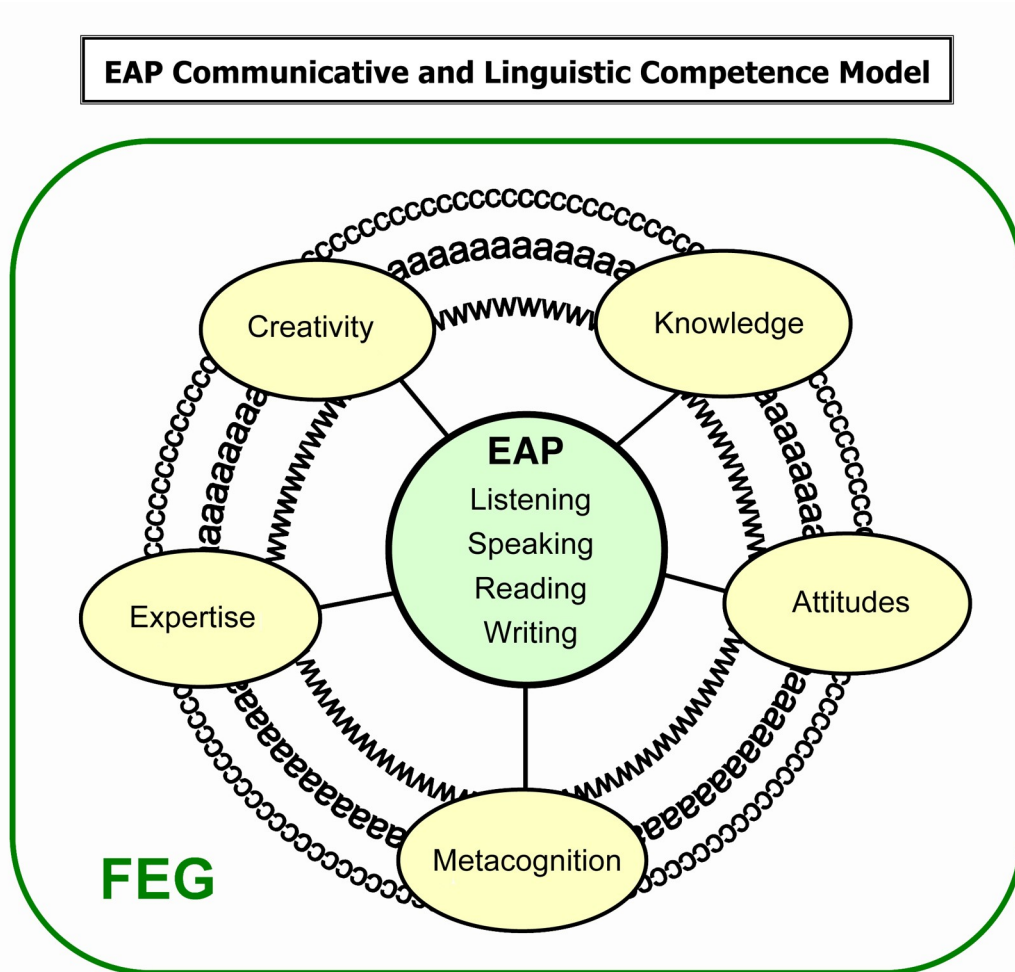
It is interesting to note that within the committee and the wider department the collaboration required to produce this model simultaneously put the model into practice and found it to be effective. Like students, as we produced the model we were learning: we examined our own attitudes, read to acquire new knowledge, engaged in lively discussions, and reconciled our differences through metacognitive analysis to create a visual representation that captures the expertise we gained from the process. In the writing of this essay, all the dimensions of the model continued to stimulate thinking and the ongoing reformulation of ideas. Therefore, this experience convinces us that the model can have the same enriching effect in the classroom.

At the time of this writing entry-level profiles have been drafted and are under discussion.

### **An EAP Conceptual Model for the College of General Studies**

The EAP Committee met twice a week for an entire semester to develop this theoretical

model. The model had to capture and represent our reality at FEG. At FEG, the students look at the English language to discover interdisciplinary connections that shed light on it. The following model was submitted to colleagues for feedback. The discussion that ensued in the departmental meeting, subsequent level meetings, and in more informal encounters proved indispensable to making the committee's work inclusive. To represent our work at the English Department in the College of General Studies, we designed and submitted to our colleagues for discussion the following conceptual model:



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5 Elements taken from Dr. A Villarini "Competences' Elements" Model

c= cognition; a= affect; w= will to action

The diagram offers a holistic approach to what we do in the FEG English Department. The diagram shows the students' EAP listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities at the center of the model. The four skills interrelate and connect with the five elements: knowledge, creativity, expertise, metacognition, and attitudes. They do so through cognition, affect, and will to act (CAW). Therefore, this model shows interaction among all parts and is embedded in the FEG interdisciplinary approach--the stronger the interaction among all areas of the model, the higher the communicative and linguistic competence of the student.

Skills refer to the practical ability to use the language when listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, the use of this term should not be interpreted as adopting a prescriptive approach to learning or reliance on the isolation of language from meaningful communicative interaction.

EAP communicative competence entails tying the five elements into the four skills through cognition, affect, and will to act. For example, speaking competence means that communicatively (norms of academic English) and linguistically (English language structure) the student has integrated the five elements cognitively, affectively, and performs critically. This competence is evidenced when the students use the language appropriately and intelligibly. A positive attitude and self-confidence fall short without the will to act.

As an alternative to the diagram, the EAP Committee also prepared a table that includes the same constituents. The table was used to prepare student profiles by filling in each box integrating the CAW criteria to show how each of the four skills and the five elements of competence intersect.

A short review of terms utilized in this model facilitates its interpretation and use. Cognition refers to the student's ability to consciously and unconsciously think about and use knowledge to comprehend and express language with clarity and coherence

through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It also refers to the student's ability to explain parts of the linguistic system and communicative process. Demonstrating the complexity of cognitive ability, students become adept in the areas of phonology, lexicon, syntax, and semantics. The students' observable behaviors are an important measure of their cognitive development.

Affect refers to students' feelings and emotions toward the English language and their perception of their skills. The affective criterion includes factors such as student motivation, attitudes, perceptions, ideologies, and values. It also describes learning objectives that emphasize a feeling, a tone, an emotion, or a degree of acceptance or rejection (Krathwohl, 1964). Again, teachers rely on their experience and observations of student behaviors to assess and address affective needs and provide appropriate learning environments and strategies. Within this context, students also model such behaviors among peers.

Will to act refers to the level of awareness underlying students' performance, not merely the performance per se. Students observe their learning contexts and the challenges of learning English in Puerto Rico. Self-observation, coupled with more and more knowledge of their object of study, increases their confidence in using the language competently. When students feel capable, they will perform. If not, they will not act. Albert Bandura calls this belief "self-efficacy." As he states, it is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (1995, p. 2). In other words, self-efficacy is a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation. Bandura describes these beliefs as determinants of how people think, behave, and feel (1994). He sees a person's attitudes, abilities, and cognitive skills comprising what is known as the self-system. Synonymously, will to act encompasses this complex and ever-evolving system.

A positive attitude and self-confidence fall short without the will to act. Will to act is an essential criterion since it is what moves the student to do something, to use the language, to make changes. Motivation alone is insufficient to achieve competence. As

colleagues confirmed in our workshop discussion, a student may be highly motivated to improve his speaking ability but not act to find strategies to confront the fear of speaking English. Or a skillful student who is already confident may not have the will to correct through conscious effort his/her most recurring errors. Thus, the will to act is the underlying force that moves students toward achieving communicative and linguistic competence in the four skill areas. It is more than just wanting to master English, competence requires engaging the mind in using the language intelligibly, effectively and appropriately.

For a better understanding of how the intersecting criteria of CAW work, let's look at the speaking example illustrating the interaction of the five elements through cognition, affect, and will to act. A typical student whose entry level is INGL 3161: Intensive Basic English, FEG's first level, will have the following speaking profile. Cognitively the student uses the process of literal translation to produce utterances in English, but lacks vocabulary to complete the task competently. Affectively, the student fears speaking English in public. Finally, in terms of will to act, the student has the desire or motivation to speak, but does not know enough about the complexity of the object of study to perform accurately and critically.

### **The 5 Elements of Competence**

Attitudes are the affective, ideological, and dispositional openness to language. Many students, because of prior negative experiences, are fearful of speaking English, feel they are unable to learn the language, or are antagonistic to the language because of ideological issues. The flip side of this, evident at the higher levels, is an over-confident attitude that may prevent them from refining their English language proficiency. These affective barriers must be overcome because negative attitudes can keep students from doing their best. Meyer and Turner's (2002) research discusses how this can occur. It indicates that emotion, motivation, and cognition are inseparable processes in classroom contexts. They advocate the need for theories that provide for the interaction of these processes, not theories that emphasize one process over the others (p. 112).



This model emphasizes interaction.

Knowledge, in this model, refers to the ideas about the object of study. Students understand how different disciplines offer useful and complementary perspectives and information about the English language and the uses to which it is put. Different questions uncover different aspects of the object of study. From the integration of these perspectives arises the complexity of the object. It is this knowledge that allows them to understand how human language, and specifically English, works. Upon this foundation, students build an understanding of the indivisibility of linguistic and communicative competence.

Metacognition is the conscious awareness of the elements of communicative and linguistic competence. Students think about language in general as well as their strengths and weaknesses in the English language, including their most prominent errors, the cause of such errors (e.g., interference from L1, unfamiliarity with specific rules, limited vocabulary, fossilized grammatical forms), and how to correct them. Students think about what areas of Spanish linguistic and communicative competency can be transferred to English and what areas cannot. Students may also identify positive and negative ideas they have about themselves to evaluate the logic of their ideas and to assess their knowledge. As Goleman (1995) points out, developing metalinguistic competence strengthens the sense of self-efficacy making the person more willing to take risks and seek out more demanding challenges.

Once students have begun to understand their fears and the linguistic and communicative tasks that confront them, they are open to developing their expertise and creativity. To be an expert in the language requires external use based on internalized knowledge. By use, we mean not only instrumental use, but the ability to explain and defend usage of language. Therefore, expertise refers to when students can support their views with evidence, credit reliable sources, articulate their ideas clearly and coherently, both orally and in essays, and can also discuss the how and the why of these language usages. These are some of the requirements of the academic

register.

Creativity is the processes through which individuals construct meaning and/or express originality. Students' unique ways of putting words together to construct meaning are honored within the constraints of the English language system. They use the language both to express the ideas of others in their own words and to formulate their original ideas. Students also learn to express their ideas across different genres.

These five elements of competence work in coordination at all times despite the fact that exercises may be designed to focus on one or the other at specific moments. The model insists on the integration of its components and moves away from its antithesis, fragmentation.

### **Entry Level Profiles**

The following descriptions are adaptations of the working draft of student entry-level profiles prepared by professors for, Basic English 3101. Based upon their classroom experience with UPR students, professors produced the draft, bearing in mind the interaction of skills and elements under the constant influence of CAW. Subsequently, the EAP Committee adapted their work for the purposes of this paper.

### **Speaking**

Students at this level can construct meaningful speech and communicate despite their grammatical and lexical limitations. The classroom setting is probably the only opportunity they have to use spoken English because there are few domains for using English in Puerto Rico. Their language is limited to casual speech in an informal register.

At the cognitive level, students have sufficient vocabulary to sustain a conversation with little hesitation and to express their ideas intelligibly but false cognates, calques, and other L1 interference characterize their utterances. Because these students have more vocabulary than structure and very limited linguistic knowledge, special attention must be given to structural competence in using the English system as well as general

linguistic theory. By May, they produce more formal and syntactically well-formed utterances supported by an understanding of what language is and how language works.

Affectively, students are relatively confident and enthusiastic speaking in front of others, and are not embarrassed by their mistakes. They get frustrated and switch to Spanish only when passionate about a topic. They are motivated by the idea that English plays a significant role in professional and career development and this translates into more interest. Initially, they don't give enough credit to their own potential. Eventually, however, they realize their knowledge, creativity and potential as language learners in academic settings. By May, students are open, aware and well disposed to working on their weaknesses.

Students' will to act is mediated by these cognitive and affective factors. They participate in class, persist, and take chances. These students want a good grade and therefore engage in speaking activities for oral evaluation, voluntarily share their ideas and contribute to lively class discussion. By May, they self monitor; they use errors as opportunities to learn, and consciously work on their weaknesses. Students have acquired awareness and proficiency in the formal academic register and improved their ability to create intelligible and academically appropriate speech.

## **Reading**

At the cognitive level, students have sufficient vocabulary and a basic sense of how words are structured into sentences to be able to read and understand texts with a clear underlying structure. They may, however, have to read the material several times for understanding but fail to do so. They are accustomed to textbooks that guide their reading with clues to understanding (e.g., bold type headings, dialogue boxes, vocabulary lists) and are, therefore, unable to determine on their own what is important. They can grasp the main idea but frequently miss details and tend to interpret texts very literally. They have difficulty following story lines that have a surprise twist or a non-

standard format. They rely heavily on the use of Spanish-English dictionaries and on literal translations. By May, they can independently underline, annotate and summarize a reading as well as react critically. They will also have knowledge of discourse markers and how they connect parts of the text to one another resulting in better and speedier understanding of readings.

Affectively, students express that their reading in the English language is strictly for academic purpose and not for personal enjoyment. They are conscious of the importance of English in their college studies and career development, but are unaware of reading as a dialogue between the reader and the author. They are insecure about their own comprehension. By May, students demonstrate greater awareness of the interactive nature of the reading process and critical thinking skills.

In August, students lack the will to read critically expecting the teacher to explain and interpret the text for them. They are forced to read when they realize that the grade for class participation rests upon critical discussion of the assigned texts. By May, they have the will to read more than once, depend less on the dictionary and interact critically with the text. They understand that reading comprehension requires critical analysis and interpretation and thereby confront the reading tasks more competently.

## **Discussion**

What insight and advantages does a project such as the one at hand, which begins with the development of a theoretical model, offer? Does initiating the project at the level of theory rather than the examination of specific practices offer teachers, learners, and relevant university administrators specific advantages? Why not “just jump” to the development of curriculum and teaching materials? We suggest that this “theory-first” methodology offers two main advantages.

The first and perhaps most apparent advantage is that the theoretical model proposed encourages the review and rethinking of assumptions. The project itself has suggested

that these processes should precede the development of curriculum. The basic example of grammar illustrates the need to engage and re-examine quotidian assumptions: Even among language teachers, the concept “good grammar” is naturally and frequently associated with adherence to a didactic tradition that emphasizes a prescriptive approach to the accurate reproduction of decontextualized forms. The model presents grammar in a different light. Its multifaceted approach to representing the complexity of language and language learning underscores that the full complexity of the learning process includes a variety of factors that are simultaneously negotiated by the student. The model situates grammar as a resource for meaning-making. This involves engagement with a variety of elements, including expertise and creativity. It gives attention to all four skills, underscoring that each has pedagogical, social, and cognitive dimensions that should be imagined not only in isolation, but also in conversation with each other.

A second advantage is that of anchoring the larger assessment project in a theoretical model that paves the way for better and more effective teaching through the promotion of a knowledge-driven view of competence. Like the next stage in this larger project, the development of guidelines for teaching, it does not focus on the perspective of the teacher. However, it does allow a teacher to actively track and evaluate his or her progress in addressing various factors associated with language learning. Given that theory is often the result of a reflexive process, it promotes not a set of restraints to which the learner and teacher must conform, but a description that can assist teachers in visualizing and developing appropriate activities and instructional materials. More to the point, it addresses the specific beliefs, expectations, and understandings that are relevant to the EAP classroom. The model does not dictate “how to teach” and avoids the construction of a predetermined answer for a variety of challenges, concerns, and problems. The definitions and relationships it depicts suggest that communicative and linguistic competence emerge as the results of a diverse and dynamic set of elements and criteria that operate differentially across contexts and individuals.

The EAP committee became aware of issues and concerns about the process of

designing and conceptualizing the model. Part of the challenge was constructing a model that unequivocally captured the dynamic integration of the parts. When the model was presented to staff, the concept of integration caused the most difficulty because of the habit of isolating parts and alienating concepts; this led to traditional prescriptive fragmentation instead of the intended holistic view. It is important to point out that the order of the five elements is arbitrary. They are neither ranked nor prioritized in terms of importance, nor situated in a hierarchy. The order of the elements is discretionary, depending on student need and teachers' informed preferences.

While the EAP committee discussed the model with professors from different levels, confusion arose about distinguishing two concepts of CAW: will to act and affect. To clarify, we went to the original source, Hostos (1939/2000). In his book, *Moral Individuality*, Hostos discusses four components that intersect in human individuality: body, affect, will, and reason. The concept of will, according to Hostos, includes instinct, reflection, and desire. To fulfill will requires both reflection and execution. Reflection refers to the duty of guiding our will to confront acts that require sensibility, reason, and conscious awareness. Execution is operationalizing physical, moral or intellectual challenges.

The concept of will to act in our conceptual model follows Hostos in emphasizing both reflection and execution. Through practice, execution will become automatic and intuitive, but EAP requires careful use of language, therefore, reflection must become a habit of mind. For Hostos, it is not in the act that you measure will, but in the reflection that precedes the act. Will is the commitment to think first—that is the foundation of action, the thinking itself, not the concrete behavior that arises. For example, professors at times ask students to write an entire paragraph in the simple present tense as a practice exercise. This exercise requires only mechanical repetition. An understanding of the meaning of tense and how it functions to relate actions to each other in time demands more thinking and understanding concerning the complexities and challenges of language. Therefore, contrary to the mechanical exercise, a more

natural one would encourage students to reflect on their own language use and execute the changes they need to use language more meaningfully and formally. Communicative and linguistic competence requires making choices.

Therefore, will to act must be understood on Hostos's terms, as the result of a long thoughtful process. Will to act requires awareness of students' own difficulties, thought, and commitment to transform their communicative and linguistic competence. We agree with Hostos's concept of will and realize now that the difficulty professors faced in conceptualizing will as situated in the model resulted from uncertainty about its meaning. Cognitive and affective factors cannot be separated from students' will to act. If a student is unable to comprehend the task at hand, and feels frustrated and incapable of performing correctly, he or she will refrain from the task. Thus, in order to transform a negative end result, students have to enter a process of conscious awareness of CAW as criteria for their own competence. CAW depicts what professors should look for and promotes transformation. The rest is up to the students.

One shortcoming we would like to discuss and which is important to remedy in order to complete this first stage of our task implicates the entry-level profiles. Initially, to avoid a deficit approach, the entry level profiles were written from the perspective of what students could do when they arrived in class in August. We continue to think this was a good thing—validate what students bring to the classroom. But, we now realize that we also need to specify what they cannot do. It is this last part, that some may interpret negatively as deficits, that we most need to progress to the next stage--the teaching model. Thus, the entry level profiles would be more helpful if they included what we will teach at this level. We do not see this as a "deficit" because this model clearly shows the complexity of learning, therefore "deficit" is both a misnomer and an oversimplification. In this model, errors are a fundamental part of the process, the food for metacognition, if you will. Therefore, not knowing something is not a "deficit" but an asset, a door that gives access to new knowledge. Our reluctance to fall into a "deficit approach" and our recovery from this error is another example of the model in practice. Discussion, analysis and openness to change helped us free ourselves from the deficit

discourses that limited the usefulness of the profiles. To assess student need is not to say they are needy or deficient but to recognize we have our work cut out for us, we know what that work is, where we are headed and the outcomes we strive to achieve.

Another challenge related to writing the entry level profiles took the form of complaints about the lack of hard data to support the descriptions of student abilities and needs. We advance the following discussion to contextualize and address this complaint.

First, there are different forms of data and some abstracting incurs in analyses of all data. For example, we certainly do not have concrete, hard data of blood pressure measures, brain activity, heart rate, etc. with which to measure the affective factor of fear. Despite this fact, most of us, at one time or another have alluded to “fear” as the underlying cause of lack of participation for some students. How do we come to such a conclusion? We do so using behavioral cues that are read off non-verbal language (e.g. tension, reluctance, seat preference). Part of our job is to observe and interpret behaviors. Acute observation coupled with empathy goes a long way in sizing up a group and tailoring curriculum to their needs. Obviously, we cannot categorically say what is going on in students’ minds. That is not the intention; instead, the intention is to use our experience and expertise as teachers to describe our students.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, as teachers, we are eternally cast in the role of educational researcher. Classroom inquiry forms an integral part of our job. We should be constantly inquiring into students’ CAW development not only by asking them questions but also by asking ourselves questions and observing the data before us. For those who have requested concrete examples of the behaviors to be looked for, we can suggest that for auditory comprehension we can look for concentration or distraction, look for responses that address the question directly versus those that are only in the thematic ballpark or those that show no understanding of the question being posed.

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<sup>4</sup> See departmental assessment projects, especially Dr. Janine Santiago’s data on professors’ academic preparation and experience:  
<http://sites.google.com/site/departamentoingl/avaluo/informes-avaluo>



The objection that professors cannot talk about or describe what students are feeling or thinking directly contradicts our daily practice. How is it that they are ready to say in their outlines that they develop critical thinking but hesitate when asked to write a profile because they have no hard data with which to evaluate thinking? Where is their evidence that they develop critical thinking in their classrooms? How do they assess their own practice? This project strives to insure that the faculty know their students and on the basis of their experience know how to better serve them. Everything professors do in their classrooms: acute observations, discussions, written assignments, tests and grades, among others, tell us what students are thinking, feeling and learning. This is our hard data.

To aspire to a teaching model and the other procedures and activities contemplated above as the five stages of this ongoing project, faculty members should produce student profiles based on our own informed observations of behaviors: in class, on exams and exercises as well as during individual conferences and other interactions. Consensus on the model and the profiles will allow us to strengthen curriculum. We must emphasize that consensus requires honest and prolonged discussion.

The objective of this model is to give insight into what our educational task is through an understanding of how the factors that make up the model are integrated in intellectual development. Linguistic and communicative competence derives from the mental interweaving of these factors—the model shows the different types of input engaged in the mental processes. Understanding and contemplating the model and the complexity of language learning as a mental process engaging all body systems, social context and varied input will prepare us for better teaching.

We cannot end this discussion without emphasizing the richness of this experience. At first, when the task was assigned to us as an ad hoc departmental committee, it just meant more work. But, as we began to organize how to tackle it, we found we had to ask ourselves fundamental questions about language, language education, institutional mission and our personal goals as teachers. The model grew out of the method we

used and the method we used constituted an implementation of the model—there was no distinguishing them as they fused organically. This dynamism became an ingredient we would henceforth strive to inject into other meetings and into our classrooms. Our work evolved as an implementation of the model. We found that although we were experienced teachers with much in common in terms of our teaching goals, our ideas about language and learning differed considerably. Because we like and respect each other, we were open to the views of the others and did not feel vulnerable about voicing our confusions or confessing our ignorance. In other words, the meetings were safe, collaborative and nurturing as the classroom should be. Upon completion of the task, we felt we had learned much about our students, our curriculum and ourselves. We realized that we cannot ask students to enter the process required by this model unless the professors have experienced it themselves. Without reflection and awareness there is no opening to integration, collaboration, depth or creativity and therefore, no space for change.

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