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

JUAN J. RODRÍGUEZ & ROSE M. HERNÁNDEZ

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

