

Proyecto Aula, English Learning Through Complex Tasks

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Abstract

The role of the universities in Mexico, as well as in the international context, is being revised constantly due to the continuous changes in society. For this reason the University of Veracruz (Universidad Veracruzana) has started different processes of transformation. The latest one, called "Proyecto Aula" (Classroom project) mainly aims at achieving that all their professors incorporate the educative ideals centered in the student, the problem solving and the application of tasks which promote the complex learning, research, and the use of the ICT (Information and Communication Technologies). The Language centers in this institution have been working in the design and application of tasks based on complex learning. This paper presents the design and application of three complex tasks to students who were coursing the subject English 1 as a foreign language. Findings suggest a high level of performance in the students' oral production and final grades.

1. Introduction

About eleven years ago, the University of Veracruz (UV) started a transformation process based on the next aspects:

- a) The design of a new integral and flexible educational model, which may be centred in the student.
- b) The intensive use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for delivering learning courses and materials.
- c) The implementation of a competence-based approach to training;
- d) The restructuring of the superior education cycles (degree, master's, PhD) in periods of three, two, and three years respectively^[1].

The UV as a whole accepted this transformation process; however, a considerable number of professors and directors consider that the institutional culture is still traditional. For this reason, the University implemented a new educational model called "Proyecto Aula" which mainly aims at promoting a task-based learning where teachers and students use complex thinking, research, and ICT as main tools [2].

These tasks or projects have being put into practice at all the faculties and centres of the UV, including the Language Centres and Self-access Centres in the State of Veracruz. At the Language Centre located in Poza Rica, the tasks were put into practice with college students from different faculties, who were studying the subject English 1 as a foreign language, from august 2009 to February 2010. Most of them were in their freshman year and had a very low knowledge of English.

The English 1 syllabus at the UV belongs to the basic area. Students cover this subject in 90 hours per semester (75 in the classroom and 15 in the self-access centre (SAC).) It promotes the analysis of cultural contents, values and intrinsic ideas with the main purpose of making students sensitive to the language learning. Another important quality consists of the promotion of learning autonomy through the speaking, listening, reading and writing skills, which will help students to communicate at a basic level.

2. Methodology

In early July, 2009, a group of teachers from the different language centres of the UV gathered for the first time to know about "Proyecto Aula". Teachers studied and discussed the theory and philosophy of the project as well as the instructional design that best fit competence-based learning tasks. As a result, a very detailed process and methodology was built. Later, in August, teachers started designing multiple complex tasks for the basic level English 1 and English 2 subjects. The next step consisted of a revision of tasks, which was carried out during a second meeting with the English instructional designers [3]. All teachers participated giving recommendations and opinions to improve the different designs. The designs included scaffolding for students, which was the base for the learning tasks. Once the designers get a really good level of expertise, they worked with a second group (cascade training) so that different groups of work started to produce new tasks. There should be a repertoire of tasks than can be taken and used by different teachers at anytime, anywhere.

2.1 Tasks design and scaffolding

The tasks must be careful designed in order to achieve the student's competence of communicating in English at a basic level. The design included a main unit of competence which describes what students will be able to do at the end of the semester. It also contains a description of the subject (English 1). Then, it describes the "product" each student or group of students will hand in or submit for revision (one for each task), the task complexity, the kind of research students will carry out, and the use of ICT. Then, a sub-competence is written for each task, describing its actions and its purpose, and including a context where students will use the language (a real-life situation) [4]. Next to the sub-competence, a list of performance objectives are written to describe the types of specific actions students will carry out (recurring: when students think and make decisions, not recurring: when students follow instructions and recurring automated: when students need to practice) to acquire the competence. Finally a set of very precise and specific instructions is written for the students to do their complex tasks. This process is called scaffolding.

Once the tasks were ready to put into practice, the teachers piloted them in different groups at the different campus of the University.

At the Language Centre located in Poza Rica the task based learning approach was only applied in a group of students who were coursing the subject English 1. The main purpose of the tasks was focused on the oral and writing production.

The first task consisted of an oral presentation in which students talk about a famous person. Individually, they presented personal information they searched on the net and other sources about the chosen person. The task complexity was mainly based on the oral production of the "verb be" and "simple present tense" structures. These are the main grammar structures students learn in the first part of the program, which in this occasion was divided into three parts. A weblog was created for students to post their scripts for teacher's revision. Students were videotaped during their presentations in order to keep an electronic file of performance evidences.

In the second task, students elaborated a poster, which described a relative's daily routine and his/her house. They worked in pairs dividing the poster in two halves, one for each relative. The complexity in this task consisted of the writing production of simple present structures in affirmative, negative e interrogative forms and the organization of the information in the poster, as well as an interview to their relatives.

The third or final task was called "integrative task", because it includes the previous tasks and the rest of the contents in the program. It consisted of an oral interview to a person whose job involves the use of the English language. The task was really complex because students had to prepare the questions for the interview using all the subjects and grammar structures they learned during the semester (personal information, daily routine, hobbies, abilities, likes and dislikes, among others). Then, they had to find a suitable person for the interview (an English teacher, a hotel receptionist, an interpreter). They also had to find and watch on the web different interviews to famous people and used them as a guide. Finally, they had to videotape it and hand it in as evidence. It is important to state that some students were not able to interview a person with the characteristics mentioned above, because of lacking in time, so, pairs acted the interview. This is a good chance to review the context of students, so that we can redesign the task to a certain situation that may be feasible to do for them.

2.2 Tasks monitoring

The monitoring of the three tasks consisted of three aspects: observation, student's performance evidences and final grades ^[5].

For the observation process, a notebook was used in order to keep record or document students' performance during the elaboration of the tasks and the presentation of the final products. It mainly covers aspects about how the use of tasks reinforces the teaching-learning process, the student's research process and the use of ICT. We also took notes about the instructional design elements and teacher's general reflections and comments.

All the student's performance evidences are published at <http://proyectoaulaiidiomaspr.blogspot.com> where everyone can revise student's final products. Finally, student's final grades were published at the Language Centre

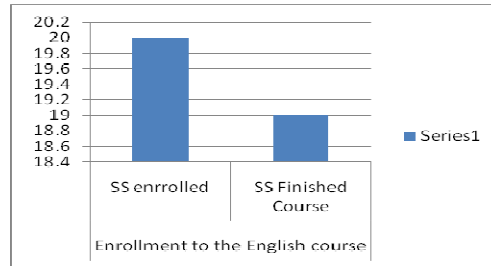
3. Results and conclusions

In the first task, all students (20) carried out their oral presentation. Two students refused to be videotaped because they argued it affected their performance, so, the teacher only took notes of their presentation. The other eighteen students agreed to be videotaped. Even though the product consisted only of an oral presentation, some students used posters with some key words or pictures of the famous person they talked about. Others didn't use any aid. All students made common grammar mistakes, but most of them were able to communicate in the target language successfully.

In the second task, students worked in pairs to elaborate a poster which described the daily routine and the house of a third person. Only fourteen of the twenty students presented their posters to the group on time. There were seven posters. Most of them contained minor grammar mistakes, but the lack of research and collaborative work was noticeable in a few of them. The pair which was not able to present their poster on time had the opportunity to deliver it at a later deadline, but they did not present it to the group.

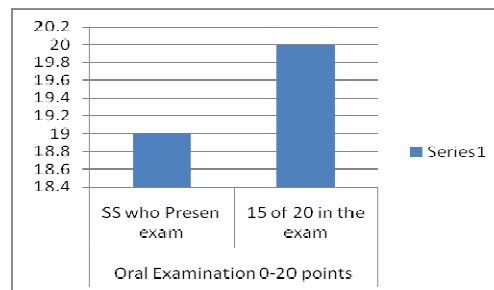
The integrative task (a videotaped interview to a person using the English language in his/her job) was only submitted for 15 students. Only one pair interviewed a receptionist at a hotel. The other 13 students videotaped themselves having a conversation. They argued they didn't have time to find a suitable person for the interview due to the big amount of assignments and activities in their faculties and the final exams. In the videotape submitted for the students who interviewed the receptionist, it is possible to observe that one of the students is reading from a script; however, they were able to ask questions in a successful way. The other videotapes showed students having conversations or interviewing each other observing an average performance. It is also possible to observe that one of the videos was frequently paused and edited.

The implementation of "Proyecto Aula" at the Language Centre in Poza Rica was an important support for the students because 19 from 20 enrolled students passed the course. Only one student didn't finish the course and didn't present the final examinations.



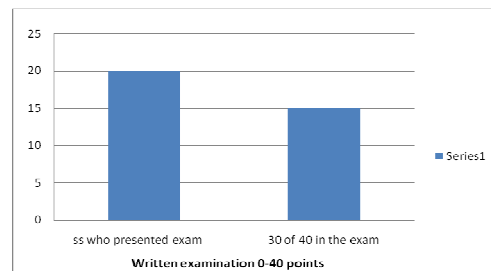
Graphic No.1: Number of students who finished the course.

The final oral examination has a worth of twenty points. 15 of the 19 students who presented this examination obtained above 15 points.



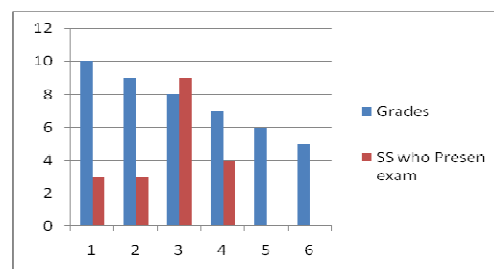
Graphic No. 2: Number of students who got 15 points in the oral examination.

The final written examination was divided into three sections (reading, writing and listening). It has a worth of 40 of a total of 100 points. 15 of the 19 students who presented this exam obtained above 30 points.



Graphic No. 3: Number of students who got 30 points in the written examination.

When we observed student's final grade for English 1, it is relevant to stand out that 3 students obtained the highest (ten), 3 students obtained nine, 9 students obtained eight and 4 students obtained seven. It means that 78% obtained a grade above eight. 0 students obtained six and 0 students failed.



Graphic No. 3 Grades



In conclusion, the use of complex tasks benefitted the student's acquisition of the competence to use the language in different contexts, which means they learned in a significant way.

The inclusion of oral presentations in the complex tasks increases the ability to communicate in the target language developing the four skills: speaking, reading, writing and listening.

It is really important to continue implementing the "Aula" philosophy at the Language Centre in Poza Rica in order to promote the complex thinking, the research, and the use of ICT in our students, which will help them to develop their learning autonomy.

References

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