



Blended Tutorship Sessions as an Aid For Students in Risk of Failing their Last Opportunity English Exam

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Abstract

The educational model of the University of Veracruz is divided into four main areas: The basic formation area, the area of free choice, the disciplinary training area, and the final formation area. Within the basic formation area, the courses of English level 1 and English level 2 are mandatory for all the careers. Students have two opportunities to accredit each course. If a student is not able to pass the courses in these two opportunities, he/she will have to take a last opportunity exam. If this exam is failed by the student, he/she will be dismissed from school.

To help students in this situation, we have implemented a remedial program of support called PAFI (for its acronym in Spanish Programa de Apoyo a la Formación Integral) for "last opportunity students".

This paper presents the implementation of two remedial PAFIs for students in risk of failing their last opportunity exam. The first one consisted of 10 sessions of two hours where students worked 1 and half hour in a face-to-face modality and half an hour with materials on line. The second one consisted of 12 face-to-face sessions of two hours.

After comparing the results for both PAFIs, we found that the group working with blended sessions performed better than the group that worked with the face-to-face modality.

1. Introduction

There are different ideas, facts and opinions about language learning: It is commonly said that people learn languages through imitation and that people with high IQs are good language learners. Another popular saying states that: the earlier a second language is introduced in school programs, the greater the likelihood of success. And it is also said that lack of motivation is an important factor in the failure of foreign language acquisition [1].

Lack of motivation might be the major reason in failing not only to learn a second language, but other subjects as well. However there are some other factors affecting language learning such as: lack of practice opportunities, bad study habits and even poor teaching methods [2].

Our role as language teachers does not only consist of teaching the school program, we must advice students on adopting good study habits involving attendance and good concentration in class, but we also need to have interesting and innovative teaching methods so we can catch their full attention and of course enhance a variety of practice opportunities for using the target language in real contexts. So, we also have the role of tutors, and as tutors, we must focus on those students experiencing serious problems to learn.

According to the Oxford dictionary [3] a *tutor* is a private teacher, typically one who teaches a single pupil or a very small group. The Webster dictionary [4] defines *tutor* as a teacher who gives individual instruction to a student: private teacher or a person who gives remedial o supplemental instructions to another

Tutorship has been recognized long ago in history in different areas, from teaching a craft in a workshop or studio, to personalized tutoring at schools.

There are well known successful experiences of institutional tutorship. Such is the case of Plan Dalton, an educative project for basic education in the USA. There are similar projects in England, Japan and Scandinavian countries. In higher education, tutorship has a very long tradition among European and American universities. In Mexican universities the practice of tutorship is more recent and started at postgraduate level [5].

Thereby, the University of Veracruz has adopted an Institutional Tutoring System (SIT for its acronym in Spanish: Sistema Institucional de Tutorías) to accompany its students along their academic trajectory. Within this tutorial system we can find the Tutorial Teaching, which is defined by Beltran (2003) as *a tutoring support given when students face difficulties related to subject contents or lack of the necessary abilities to learn those contents*. The Department of Academic Development of our University defines Tutorial Teaching as *teacher's personalized attention to help students who need to reinforce the learning abilities and processes related to a subject or educative experience from their*



curricula, through a special program of support called PAFI (for its acronym in Spanish: Programa de Apoyo a la Formación Integral).

In this context, this paper describes the implementation of two remedial PAFIs for students who failed in passing the *English level 1* course in two opportunities. The first one consisted of 10 sessions of two hours where students worked 1 and half hour in a face-to-face modality and half an hour with materials on line, and the second one consisted of 12 face-to-face sessions of two hours each.

Firstly, we present a background where the history of PAFIs and its implementation at the Poza Rica Language Center is described, as well as the remedial PAFIs for “last opportunity students”.

Secondly, we explain the methodology chosen for the implementation and evaluation of both PAFIs.

Then, we introduce the results which include students’ grades in their last opportunity evaluation.

Finally, we present our conclusions.

2. Background

In 1999, The University of Veracruz (Universidad Veracruzana) started a transformation process in its curricular organization from a traditional educative model to a flexible model. This flexible model aims at developing an integral formation on students, focusing on four main aspects: Intellectual, human, social and professional development. Within these aspects, the new educative model also intends to give students autonomy, so they can make decisions about their academic trajectory. In this context, a tutorship program represents a great tool to help students make good decisions.

The University Tutorship System’s main objective focus on helping students solve academic problems, promote an integral formation, become more autonomous, and contribute to improve their academic performance by means of individual or small group tutoring [6].

This System has adopted two modalities of tutorship: Academic Tutorship and Tutorial Teaching. The role of the professor-tutor in the academic tutorship consists of helping students during their school trajectory with special guidance about the construction of their professional profile. In the tutorial teaching, the professor-tutor’s job consists of implementing remedial strategies which are necessary to attend students’ problems in different areas [7].

As it was previously stated, Tutorial Teaching focuses on supporting students who need to reinforce their learning processes related to a special subject or students who want to go further from class, through special programs designed for volunteer teachers which are called PAFIs.

All teachers who are willing to implement a Tutorial Teaching program through the design of a PAFI must consider the next characteristics:

- It must address problems related to theory or practice of a subject.
- It must be worked individually or in small groups according to students’ needs.
- It must be considered an extracurricular activity (no credits for students).
- It must be developed under a flexible educative process with a personalized teaching [8].

The design of a PAFI implies original proposals to help students in various learning abilities. It is different from a regular course program because it is shorter and focuses on a special process or ability.

So, it is necessary to carry out a comprehensive diagnostic in order to find the areas where students face learning difficulties, taking into consideration the course syllabus to provide a more precise PAFI design connected to the previous and post contents from the curricula.

Once the PAFI has been planned and designed, the professor must present a copy of the document to the coordinator of the Academy for its revision and approval. After that, the professor can start implementing his/her program. When it concludes, he/she must write a report including the students’ performance and a list of attendance signed by them which will be presented to the School Technical Board for its validation.

PAFIs can be implemented in any of the areas in which the educational model of the University of Veracruz is divided: The basic formation area, the area of free choice, the disciplinary training area, and the final formation area. The courses of English level 1 and English level 2, which are mandatory for all the careers, belong to the basic formation area, and different PAFIs have been designed to help students acquire the language in basic levels.

PAFIs related to pronunciation improvement, oral exam training, grammar practice, listening comprehension, among others, have been implemented at the Poza Rica Language Centre, but around 2011, the first PAFI for “last opportunity” students was designed and implemented after detecting a student who failed to pass the English level 1 course in two opportunities and was in risk of being dismissed from school if she failed her “last opportunity” exam.



The Institutional educative model concedes students two opportunities to pass the mandatory courses of English. If a student is not able to pass the courses in these two opportunities, he/she will have to take a “last opportunity” exam. If this exam is failed, he/she will be dismissed from school.

This remedial PAFI has been implemented in several occasions helping most students to pass their “last opportunity” exam. That is why we are in position to present the experience we had with two different groups using the same PAFI in two different modalities, as it will be explained in the section of Methodology.

3. Methodology

3.1 PAFIs Design

The PAFI for “last opportunity” students was redesigned for those who failed the English level 1 course in two different opportunities. Its main objective consisted of helping students with an intensive training in grammatical structures, vocabulary review and writing and oral production in order to have good results in their “last opportunity” exam and get better language basis to face the English level 2 course.

The first PAFI, called “Blended PAFI” was implemented in 10 sessions of two hours where students worked 1 and half hour in a face-to-face modality and half an hour with materials on line, during the summer period of 2012.

The second one, called “In-person PAFI, consisted of 12 face-to-face sessions of two hours during the winter period of 2014.

Both PAFIS included the reinforcement and practice of the same functions:

- Greeting and introducing oneself and others (formally and informally).
- Exchanging personal information (name, nationality, age, language, occupation, address, phone number and e-mail)
- Writing short texts and e-mails about personal information.
- Describing weather conditions.
- Identifying the location of objects.
- Describing rooms and houses.
- Talking about talents and abilities.
- Telling the time.
- Talking about current activities.
- Talking about spare time activities.
- Talking about daily activities.
- Understanding general information from simple texts and dialogues.

The sources of information were the students’ course book [9], and the Self Access Center (SAC) web page material for English level 1 available at: <http://www.uv.mx/pozarica/cadi/material-de-apoyo/escolarizados/> for the blended PAFI, and only the New Interchange Intro course book for the in-person PAFI.

3.2 PAFIs Implementation

“Last opportunity” students must ask the Language Centre Coordinator for the administration of their “last opportunity” exam, which is always at the end of each semester. These students have the chance to attend as “listeners” in a regular course, or choose an intensive training through a PAFI.

In the summer of 2012, the school Coordinator enrolled 7 students in our blended PAFI. These students attended 10 face-to-face morning sessions (half an hour each one) from June 18th to June 29th. In these in-person sessions, students reviewed and practice the functions previously described through role-plays, presentations, modelling, simulations, class discussions, listening and writing exercises. The grammar exercises were mostly worked during the on-line session, where students had to visit the SAC web page to study the materials and do the grammar exercises.

In the winter of 2014 the school Coordinator enrolled 7 students in our “In-person PAFI. These students attended 12 face-to-face morning sessions (two/two and a half hours each one) from January 6th to January 22nd. In these in-person sessions, students reviewed and practice the functions previously described through role-plays, presentations, modelling, simulations, class discussions, listening and writing grammar exercises. This time it was not possible to use the SAC web page materials because they were not available.



4. Results

4.1 Blended PAFI

After finishing the blended PAFI, students took the “last opportunity” exam which consisted of a written evaluation including the reading, writing, and listening abilities and an oral evaluation including a teacher-student interview and a student-student conversation. The final results for this exam were as follows:

STUDENTS' NUMBER	FINAL GRADE (Range: 0-10)
1	8
2	6
3	8
4	7
5	7
6	8
7	6

Table 1 Blended PAFI final grades

Table 1 presents the final averaged results of the “last opportunity” exam belonging to the 7 students who attended the blended PAFI. All these students passed their exam and were promoted to the second mandatory course “English level 2”. The range of grades in all final tests fluctuates from 0 (minimum) to 10 (maximum). Failing grades fluctuate from 0 to 5. Passing grades fluctuate from 6 to 10. None of these students obtained the maximum grades (10 and 9), three obtained 8, two obtained 7 and the other two obtained the minimum passing grade (6).

4.2 In-person PAFI

After finishing the In-person PAFI, students took exactly the same “last opportunity” exam than students from the blended program. The final results for this exam were as follows:

STUDENTS' NUMBER	FINAL GRADE(Range: 0-10)
1	5
2	9
3	5
4	6
5	8
6	7
7	7

Table 2 In-person PAFI final grades

Table 2 presents the final averaged results of the “last opportunity” exam belonging to the 7 students who attended the In-person PAFI. The range of grades is exactly the same than the one presented on table 1. In this case, only the 5 students with passing grades were promoted to the second mandatory course. One of these students obtained a 9, one obtained an 8, two of them obtained a 7, and one obtained the minimum grade (6). Unfortunately, there were two students who were not able to pass their “last opportunity” exam because they obtained a failing grade (5).

5. Conclusions

If we compare the final results for both of the PAFIS it is noticeable that students who attended the blended PAFI performed better in the “last opportunity” exam than students who attended the in-person PAFI, based on the passing results, which were the main aim of these two support programs.

Even though this paper was not based in a formal research methodology, it is important to keep helping students in risk of failing their last opportunity exam with blended sessions and it is also necessary to improve the quality of the materials available on the SAC web page.

Most importantly, it is urgent the designs of PAFIs in order to help students in risk of failing their second opportunity course to prevent them from ending as risky or “last opportunity” students.

So, we propose an early diagnosis at the beginning of each semester or right after the mid-term exam to detect students with learning problems.



We also propose a preventive program where students were able to practice and reinforce what they saw in class since they are coursing their first opportunity, so that they can pass the first English course and avoid the second opportunity.

References

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