

Learning Basic English in Overcrowded Classes for True Beginners

by
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Abstract

The higher educational institution where this study took place is located in the Dominican Republic. The purpose of this study was to provide insights to the effectiveness and impact of the instructional process applied in a Basic English class under overcrowding conditions, implementing an in depth interview to the faculty members and an eight-student focus group in each cluster (the experimental and control group) to interpret the instructional process when implementing a blog page and cooperative group work activities to improve the students' proficiency.

The quantitative research findings were obtained from the pre and posttests to compare the experimental group in relation to the control group. *T*-tests were used to obtain the results in the pre and posttests, in order to determine if there were significant differences between the experimental and the control group. Whereas, the qualitative data were accessed through two focus groups with the students and an in depth interview with the professors. The participants' opinions were used to compare the instructional process when implementing a blog page and cooperative group work activities.

Findings showed a holistic view of the instructional process under these conditions. The implementation post-test outcomes show the two-tailed p -value $0.0017 < 0.05$ of the Alpha level, which means that this difference is considered to be very statistically significant and the qualitative data analysis confirmed that there is evidence that the use of the instructional techniques improves the students' proficiency under overcrowding conditions that could not be avoided due to the lack of budget and space

ERIC Descriptors: Learning, Overcrowded Classes, Large Classes, True Beginners, False Beginners, Educational Research

Introduction

Learning to communicate in English is of great importance for the students of the modern language program at the University in which this study was conducted. However, the amount of students enrolled in the institution surpasses the facilities and resources available, generating overcrowding conditions in a number of programs and courses. The excessive number of students is detrimental to the learning process, specifically, in the basic levels in which the students should develop the basic skills to master a language. This research considered the effects of overcrowded classes in the learning process and searched for viable solutions to improve the English language learning. The application of instructional strategies (the use of a blog page and cooperative group work activities) under a controlled process as well as two focus groups and in depth interview revealed useful and dependable information to improve the proficiency of the students in Basic English classes with overcrowding conditions that could not be avoided due to the lack of budget and space.

Nature of the Problem

This educational institution is one of the public universities of the Dominican Republic. It has faced an increase in enrolment of new students every year since 1995 due to the fact that getting a degree is a requirement for social advancement and a better life in Dominican society (Brea, 2004). Students in the country choose this university for a number of reasons, such as prestige, tradition, low tuition, and the availability of different campuses all over the country. These characteristics make it very attractive for most Dominicans at the moment of choosing a higher education center to study. As a result, the number of students has surpassed the institution's real working capacity. The Language Department is one of the most affected units by this trend, as the professors have to work with classes that range from 35 to over 50 students. The population in these classes is mainly composed of Dominican students of both genders between 18 and 40 years old who have little or no previous knowledge of the English language.

The over crowdedness has made the instructional process difficult, making learning English more difficult for these true beginners. Electronic possibilities through the internet could be used as a form to decrease class size, but the lack of resources also makes that kind of option impossible. Hence, the only way is to search for other more humble options. Thus, students struggle to grasp the minimum knowledge of the English language and their communicative skills are greatly affected, making the normal process of language acquisition more difficult and demanding more time to fully develop.

Background and Significance of the Problem

In 1966, this educational institution became an open university, lowering entrance requirements to the minimum and maintaining a populist philosophy of favoring the poor (Cuello, Contreras, De Leon, De Pena & Kouri, 2007). This new trend allowed many more students to enter the highest level of the educational system. The open door philosophy and the need of getting a degree caused a significantly higher enrollment rate, allowing the student population to triple from 1995 to 2004 (Brea, 2004).

At present, the university offers 119 educational programs in different areas of knowledge. The amount of students enrolled represents 52% of the students participating in the whole higher education system. Making this institution the most populated in the country (The University of the Dominican Republic, 2011). The other public universities of the country maintain a relatively small number of students since they target specific populations (as in the case of the police, military and naval academies), and in other cases because they have a reduced number of academic programs.

The University of the Dominican Republic conducted a study in July 2010 that involved experts in teaching a second language. This study analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the language program. Among the strengths that were presented: (a) the fact that it has maintained a permanent student registration in the language program and (b) high quality professors. As for the weaknesses found in the study: (a) professors of the language school highlighted that they have such an academic load that prevents them from engaging in activities to improve their teaching performance; and (b) the teacher-student ratio was signaled as a problem. The number of educators is too low in relation to the number of students registered in the English courses.

This study pointed out that the language school environment was unsuitable for effective teaching, and consequently, for sustainable students' learning. In addition to that, the physical resources, space and equipment were inadequate. The results showed as well, that the language classrooms and laboratories were small and in disrepair, lacking didactic and audiovisual

resources.

The overcrowded situation of the University has also been recognized by the *Ministerio de Educación Superior Ciencia y Tecnología* (MESCyT) of the Dominican Republic in 2008. In its Strategic Plan from 2008 to 2018, the Ministry mentioned that the number of students per section on average at this higher educational institution is 60 students. They made the reduction of this average one of its goals. However, the funds that the government dedicates to the Institution are limited and incapable of solving this situation in the near future (MESCyT, 2008).

In the same tenet, the elected Rector (equivalent in the country to the President of the University), in his inauguration speech mentioned that the biggest problem that affects the quality of the instructional process in this educational institution is overwork. He explained that professors are required to work a full-time load of 40 hours a week with a number of students per class that on average is above 60 and usually could reach 80. The Rector also added that the university is home to over 50% of the students in the higher education system of the country. However, it only has 25% of the professors in the system (The University of the Dominican Republic, 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to provide insights to the effectiveness and impact of the instructional process applied in a Basic English class under overcrowding conditions, implementing an in depth interview to the faculty members and an eight-student focus groups in each cluster (the experimental and control group) to interpret the instructional process when implementing a blog page and cooperative group work activities to improve the students' proficiency.

Research Questions

The question that guides this research are as follow:

1. To what extent does the overcrowded class with experimental group treatment (application of a blog page and cooperative group work activities) score in comparison with the traditional control group overcrowded classroom (using the students' book, the workbook, and the board) in an English course delivered at a Dominican Republic university?
2. How do the professors and the students believe that the implementation of a blog page and cooperative group work activities improve the instructional process in an English overcrowded course delivered at a Dominican Republic university?

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research followed the mixed method approach. Creswell (2009) defines it as “a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to understand a research problem” (p. 513). As a result, it was used a triangulation for the resulting data. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2003) define triangulation as “the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behavior” (p. 112). This technique was used to obtain a holistic view of the research findings. Thus, the resulting data obtained from the application of both instruments was triangulated to obtain a clearer view of the instructional process delivered under overcrowded conditions.

Furthermore, this research is a quasi-experimental study because the classes were arranged in clusters in this Dominican public university. Creswell (2009) provides the following definition of quasi-experiment, “only a convenience sample is possible because the investigator must use naturally formed groups (e.g., a classroom, an organization, a family unit) or volunteers. When individuals are not randomly assigned, the procedure is quasi-experimental”

(p. 348). In the same tenet, Kerlinger, cited by Cohen et al. (2003) express that “quasi-experimental situations as ‘compromised design’, are an apt description when applied to educational research where random selection or random assignment of school and classroom is quite impracticable” (p. 214). Therefore, two overcrowded sections of this university were selected considering similar demographic student’s characteristics. These clusters were randomly assigned by the university administration, one for the experimental group treatment and the other one for the control group, following the traditional methodology.

The quantitative research findings obtained from the pre and posttests applications were used to compare true beginners’ performance in the experimental group (an overcrowded class with treatment) in comparison to the students in the control group (an overcrowded class without treatment). *T*-tests were used to compare the results obtained in the pre and posttests, in order to determine if there were significant differences between the experimental and the control group.

The qualitative data were obtained from two focus groups, with the students participating in both groups (experimental and control). Each group session was held for one hour approximately. Eight students in each group (experimental and control) were invited to debate specific questions on their instructional experience. Afterwards, these outcomes were coded and analyzed to ascertain participants’ opinions on their learning process. Whereas, the professors leading the experimental and control groups participated in an in depth interview, in order to understand their points of view related to the possible differences between the uses of the pedagogical strategies in the classroom, as the chosen topic of discussion. Therefore, this researcher attempted to find similarities in the students’ focus-group interviews and the teachers’ in depth interview data, triangulating these qualitative outcomes with the pretest and posttest quantitative results.

Participants

The participants of this study were selected through a convenient purposeful sampling considering similar demographic student’s characteristics. Thus, two 40-student overcrowded Basic English classes and their two professors were selected by the university administration. This administration assigned two faculty members, one for the experimental and another one for the control group. The faculty members administered the pre and posttest to the groups, facilitating the outcomes in a list without personal information, using a number to identify the order.

The students, as well as the professors participating in the interviews were presented an informed consent form asking for their agreement to engage in this research. This form showed a detailed description of the study that was conducted.

Instruments

The qualitative research findings were obtained through two focus groups with the students in the experimental and control group. These focus groups sessions were held at the end of the instructional process. Cohen et al. (2003) explain that in these groups “the participants interact with each other rather than with the interviewer, such as the views of the participants can emerge” (p. 288). The researcher assessed the professors’ perceptions on the intervention using an in depth interview to establish if there were differences in the instructional process between the experimental and the control group.

The quantitative outcomes were collected through a pretest to identify students’ level and determine whether these students were true or false beginners. This pretest was designed following the textbook and University syllabus of Basic English I; whereas, a post test was used to show the students’ level at the end of the process. These data showed how true beginners in

the experimental group performed in comparison with the students in the control group under overcrowded class conditions.

The pretest and posttest were validated through the technique called content validity. Litwin (2003) states, “the assessment of content validity typically involves an organized review of the survey’s contents to ensure that it includes everything it should and does not” (p. 33). Seven senior professors of the university that regularly teach the English subject courses acted as the panel of experts to revise not only the relevance but also the pertinence of the contents that were assessed.

In the pretest, the panel of experts agreed that the 20-item exam summarized Basic English I requirements to determine if the students were true or false beginners. The pretest was designed to be a short exam that students could complete in less than 45 minutes in order not to make students feel too much pressure and anxiety during the first week. This brief exam could elicit if the students had a previous knowledge or not of the English language.

Whereas, in the posttest, the skills evaluated were listening, reading, and writing as well as vocabulary and conversation strategies. The panel of experts that validated this instrument agreed on which skills and strategies were assessed in the test to determine if students minimally internalized Basic English skills in this University in order to make the comparison between the true beginners in the experimental group and the students in the control group.

Reliability in the pretest and posttest was assessed through test-retest and internal consistency. After the expert validity, in the pretest was selected a sample group of 31 students in their second week of Basic English I. In the post test was performed a pilot examination with a randomized sample of 15 students out of 55 who took Basic English I, following the traditional teaching methodology of the university. These students were taking Basic English I and II during the second and third week of these levels.

Litwin (2003) states “survey researchers test a survey instrument by having the same respondents complete the instrument at two different points in time to see how stable their responses are. They, then, calculate correlation coefficients or r values” (p. 8). The retest data were collected a week later in order to avoid the practice effect in this stage, following a type of alternate-form reliability. This author expresses that “one common way to test alternate-form reliability is simply to change the order of response set” (p. 13). He also declares that “changing the order of the response sets is most effective when the two time points for administration of the items are close together” (p. 15). The correlation coefficients were obtained using Statistical Product and Service Solution (SPSS) version 19. The results were .99 for the pre-test and .99 for the post-test, indicating high test-retest reliability in both instruments.

Moreover, Litwin (2003) states, “the internal consistency coefficient is an indicator of how well different items measure the same issue” (p. 20). This author emphasizes the internal consistency’s importance because the items in a test have to be focused on the variable that they should measure. The internal consistency coefficient alpha for the pre-test is .93 which means a high reliability. Whereas, the Cronbach’s alpha for the post-test is .79, suggesting good reliability. These measures were as well obtained through the program SPSS. Therefore, the internal consistency reliability assessed in these instruments showed good performance in the population to be analyzed.

Procedures

The implementation phase of this study lasted 18 weeks. During this phase, the data were collected in the following way:

The experimental group was composed of one overcrowded section which was taught

using the treatment or techniques to teach overcrowded classes. These techniques were:

1. A blog page in the Internet that allows the students to practice the English language.
2. Cooperative group work activities in class.

As a result, the educator facilitating the experimental group participated in three workshops to discuss issue related to the intervention process. The first workshop was an introductory, and the two remaining workshops were held to discuss topics related to the set techniques and the educator's perceptions. Whereas, the professor facilitating the control group participated in a workshop to understand how the research took place and his or her role during the intervention process.

During the 17th week, the researcher visited the educators facilitating the experimental and control group individually. They were informed about the in depth interview purpose. After signing the informed consent, this meeting took place and lasted an hour approximately. The principal investigator used the questionnaire in depth interview with the professors. This questionnaire consisted of four open-ended questions to elicit faculty members' opinions and perception about the instructional process.

In the first phase of this mixed method research, the students participating in both groups (experimental and control) were applied pre and posttests, perceiving those exams as part of the instructional process. These quantitative results were used to determine if there were significant differences between the experimental and the control group.

In the second phase of this mixed method research, the researcher met all the students in the experimental and control group during the 14th week to explain in detail the study and the purpose of the focus group, then the first eight students in each group who volunteered to sign the informed consent were selected to form a focus group, which lasted an hour approximately. This meeting was held in a closed and comfortable room to avoid noise and interference.

During the focus group implementation, the researcher used the questionnaire focus group interview with students. Thus, students debated six open-ended questions about their instructional experience. The researcher took notes using a notebook and a pen. To protect privacy and ensure confidentiality the researcher replaced students' names with a code.

Discussion

Discussion of Research Question 1

To what extent does the overcrowded class with experimental group treatment (application of a blog page and cooperative group work activities) score in comparison with the traditional control group-overcrowded classroom (using the students' book, the workbook, and the board) in an English course delivered at a Dominican Republic university? The pretest used in this study was a 20-item questionnaire to assess student level early in this study. Both groups had similar demographic characteristics ($N=40$) in each cluster, and 100% of the participants were assessed thru this test. The quantitative findings were analyzed through a paired t test, which confirmed that there was not any statistical difference between the two clusters at the beginning. This result can be inferred from the two-tailed p -value $0.7790 > 0.05$ of the Alpha level, and that the experimental group SD 21.30 in comparison with the control group SD 22.41 are too close. Therefore, both groups were similar to assess the instructional technique effectiveness to improve the students' proficiency under overcrowding conditions that could not be avoided due to the lack of budget and space.

The faculty member in both clusters administered the posttest at the end of the semester. This posttest evaluated the university class program based on listening, reading, and writing as

well as vocabulary and conversation strategies to measure the students' level on these skills. The students tested in the experimental group ($N=40$) for 100% without attrition, and in the control group ($N=35$), representing 13% of attrition. These research findings led to an unpaired t test, presenting the two-tailed p -value $0.0017 < 0.05$ of the Alpha level. The data, overall, showed that the implementation of the two instructional techniques were effective in the students' proficiency in the experimental group after the intervention because this difference is considered to be very statistically significant between the two clusters.

Table 1

Score based on the pretest exam

Groups	N	Mean	SD	SEM
Experimental	40	52.38	21.30	3.37
Control	40	50.93	22.41	3.54

Note. The two-tailed P value equals 0.7790.

Table 2

Results of the paired t test for the pretest

Groups	Paired Differences							
	M	SD	SED	95% Confidence Interval Of the Difference		t	df	p-value (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Experimental	52.38	21.30	5.132	-8.93	11.83	0.2826	39	0.7790
Control	50.93	22.41						

Note: $N=80$, experimental group ($N=40$) and control group ($N=40$).

Discussion of Research Question 2

How do the professors and the students believe that the implementation of a blog page and cooperative group work activities improve the instructional process in an English overcrowded course delivered at a Dominican Republic university? Both the faculty member and the students in the experimental valued the blog and cooperative group activities as excellent and valuable in the instructional process. Students emphatically expressed that this methodology is different to what it is regularly presented in English classes because these techniques improve listening and speaking skills, motivating the students to participate in spite of the overcrowding

conditions.

Although, only two students, representing 5%, in this group had some limitations while using the blog because they did not have internet access at home, all the students agreed with using the Internet through the blog, as this technique is preparing them for this technological society from the beginning of their English educational training. Thus, Universities need to engage in processes to offer better quality, which means that the teaching field should be involved in innovation processes for ICT (Salinas, 2004a).

The eight-member experimental focus group also agreed that they were working closer to the professors' instruction and guidance. As a result, there were a lot of teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction, for the students were not passive just receiving the faculty member's lecture. Consequently, these results confirmed that blended methodologies foster student-centered instruction, offering a great opportunity to personalize the instruction at the university level in accordance to the students' needs; and ICT techniques at the university level also enhance teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction, allowing to meet learning goals effectively (Kerr, 2011).

The survey results to the participants in the experimental group show that false beginners in cooperative group activities are willing to help less skillful students to overcome new structures, fostering class engagement and friendship. These research findings have strong correlation to Kozar (2010) who found that collaborative group work is not a competition among students, but a fun process so that students can work together to build their knowledge. The participants after the intervention discovered that students' interaction in their cooperative groups fostered the use of the four language skills in a real social context, promoting the use of the English language for communication. Conversely, some studies confirmed that collaborating techniques help teachers as well as students to empower themselves in ongoing learning process development, producing a motivational effect in professional development (Murray, 2010).

Conversely, the professor leading the control group and the students in the focus group from this cluster expressed similar opinions. The surveys' outcomes show that the educational environment is not the best instructional environment because of the economic constraints and the amount of students per class in this university, so dedicating too much time to practice listening and association vocabulary activities would shorten the class time to fulfill the program due to the amount of students in the classroom. Consequently, the class was totally based on the book, without an effective reinforcement due to the overcrowding classroom conditions. The educator's explanations were lectured to the class with a board demonstration once in a while. Thus, research findings present that overcrowded cohorts at the university level are regularly taught through lectures because of the space limitations (Saunders & Hutt, 2015),

Table 3

Score Based on the Posttest Exam

Groups	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>S D</i>	SEM
Experimental	40	76.55	8.85	1.40
Control	35	69.29	10.42	1.76

Note. The two-tailed *P*-value equals 0.001.

Table 4

Results of the unpaired t test

Unpaired Differences								
Groups	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SED</i>	95% Confidence Interval Of the Difference		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	p-value (2- tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Experimental	76.55	8.85	2.226	2.83	11.70	3.2636	73	0.0017
Control	69.29	10.42						

Note: $N=80$, experimental group ($N=40$) and control group ($N=35$).

Relationship of Findings to the Literature

Traditionally, over-crowdedness is one of a problem at the university level in most developing countries (Yelkpiri et al., 2012) and the need of a high education degree is enhancing this issue in most of the university around the world (Ayse et al., 2013). As a result, this research analyzed the effectiveness of implementing a blog page and cooperative group work activities to improve the students' proficiency in overcrowded Basic English classes in a public Dominican university.

The research findings through the in depth interview and the focus group in the experimental cluster show that these instructional techniques improve students' performance through motivation, class engagement, and high self-esteem among the participants. These findings were also confirmed through the unpaired *t* test after the intervention with 13% of attrition in the control group for a population of $N=75$, in which the two-tailed p -value $0.0017 < 0.05$ of the Alpha level shows the intervention of the instructional techniques is considered to be very statistically significant between the two clusters.

The study outcomes were consistent with other researchers, such as Foley and Masingila (2014), who state that it is possible to deliver an overcrowded class in spite of the challenges, using ICTs. Thus, technology is changing higher education, employment needs, and social life in relation with the new life trends (Brown & Stevens, 2011; Escudero 2008; Salinas, 2004a). Furthermore, the present study results correlate to Knobel and Wilber, cited by Brown and Stevens (2011), who states, "On the Internet, learning is socially constructed. ICTs, such as blogs, promote participation, collaboration, and the distribution of expertise and knowledge" (p. 34).

Finally, in relation to cooperative group work activities' results, researchers confirmed that these teaching activities enhance learning outcomes through students' engagement. As a result, creating small group activities within large classes is positively accepted by the students engaging in the activities assigned by the tutors, improving the learning outcomes (Ayse et al., 2012).

Limitations of the Study

Some of the constraints that could be encountered, hampering the validity and reliability of the research are:

1. The students might have been nervous at the moment of taking the pre-test because this type of diagnostic evaluation is not regularly used in the higher educational institution in which the study took place. This issue might have altered students' performance to determine their English level.
2. Missing students during the first week caused a type of interruption taking the pretest exam a week later.
3. Five students in the control group dropped out of the program due to personal matters. This varied the number of participants in the control group (N=35) at the end of the class program.
4. Only faculty members and students in Basic English I participated in this study.
5. The population under study might have been too small to generalize findings.
6. The findings are limited to this type of conditions and population.
7. Replicating studies might be needed to draw generalizations.

Implication of the Findings

This research study represents the first scientific educational research in the university in which it was conducted. The outcome implication for the Dominican instructional environment will help improve the students' proficiency under overcrowding teaching environments. These research outcomes show that the use of a blog page and cooperative group work activities promote classroom interaction and students' engagement, improving the Basic English students' proficiency at the university level. Moreover, the implementation of these techniques fosters motivation and high self-esteem, making students use the English language communicatively under overcrowding conditions that could not be avoided due to the lack of budget and space.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study focused on implementing an in depth interview to the faculty members and an eight-student focus group in the experimental and control group in a Basic English class under overcrowding conditions to interpret the instructional process when implementing a blog page and cooperative group work activities to improve the students' proficiency of the instructional process. Consequently, there are some recommendations for future research:

1. The Language school administration should provide faculty members with teacher training courses and more modern materials, such as video lessons and the equipment to teach English classes, test generators to ease examination process, and other types of educational materials to improve the English language teaching.
2. The University administration should recognize that creating any teaching blog page is time consuming representing an overload for the faculty member. Thus, it should be fostered and rewarded this technological teaching practice.
3. The university classrooms should be provided with Internet access as well as better classrooms conditions to improve the instructional process.
4. This study should be replicated to intermediate and advanced English levels under overcrowding conditions to generalize the study outcomes.

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