Theme: Best Practices in Higher Education

Team-UNA Amistad: UNA Students Serving the Community

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Abstract: Team-UNA Amistad is an academic project from Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension that provides the high school community with free English tutorials. These previously selected university students’ utmost objective is to prepare senior high school students to pass the National Standardized English Test (NSET) by participating in weekly tutoring sessions. This national examination measures students’ language proficiency through a reading comprehension paper-and-pencil test. Thus, the nature of this test draws the methodology implemented in these sessions which reinforces reading skills mainly. Professors and students from the English Teaching Major involved in this project are aimed at both assisting senior high school students’ English learning and strengthening teacher-students’ language instruction skills.

Key words: reading comprehension, linguistic ability, standardized test, tutorials

I Introduction

The English teaching major at Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension (UNA-SRB) entails students’ deep-rooted commitment, skillful ability, considerable encouragement and active cooperation. Once students start learning this second language, those elements help them grow and achieve success to become proficient and effective teachers in the future. During their gradual progression in their second language learning and teaching process, they realize that their target goal requires more than attending lessons every weekday. Little can they attain if they overlooked what

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being enrolled in this major really means. As a matter of fact, majoring in teaching interweaves
linguistic skillfulness as well as teacher-students’ classroom experiences.

Remarkably, university instructors are key agents in this process. Besides the fact that they
impart and share their knowledge with pupils, they promote educational principles founded on
cooperative learning. This approach aids professors to empower learners in order to encourage their
active involvement in every academic activity planned to assist their own and others’ learning. From
Larsen-Freemans’s viewpoint (2000), cooperative learning “essentially involves students learning
from each other in groups. But it is not the group configuration that makes cooperative learning
distinctive; it is the way that students and teachers work together that is important” (p.164). This
assumption exemplifies how team work composed of teachers’ and students’ contribution facilitates
language development and professional growth.

Summing up, this project promotes higher education partnership with the local community by
implementing service learning as a tool to enhance the instructional process. Therefore, both high
school students and teacher-students at UNA are given the opportunity to be engaged in their
learning process by participating actively in a cooperative team work that envisions successful
language competence and teaching skills.

II Literature Review

2.1 A Quick View of the Beginnings of English Teaching in Costa Rica

During the last decades, the English language has reached prestige as a lingua franca and expanded
around the globe as the language for international communication. Due to this matter, the emerging
economies have struggled to enter the globalization movement by empowering their citizens to
become competent individuals. This objective has been attained through the establishment of
educational policies to ensure their fast and efficient impact. In Costa Rica, this issue has not been
an exception. In fact, Costa Rican government formulated the Educational Policy “Towards the 21st
Century” that postulates as one of its goals
To improve the productivity and economy of society. Achieving sustainability in those two areas represents a challenge for education. The country needs qualified people in order to increase productivity and improve the spirit of competitiveness. There is also a need to integrate the country more effectively into global economy. (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2005, p.17)

Learning English results in a powerful weapon to respond to this country’s urging need. Although the teaching and learning of English dates back as a subject matter in the secondary school curriculum since 1825 in the “Casa de Enseñanza de Santo Tomás” (Quesada, 1993, p. 22), teaching English from the very early stages of the educational system seems to alleviate this growing demand in a more effective fashion. On this account, the teaching of English in the I and II Cycle of the Basic General Education started on July 18th, 1994 in twenty seven public primary schools. On May 8th, 1997, English was declared a compulsory core subject in public education. A year later, in 1998, a pilot project started to incorporate English in the kindergarten stage (Córdoba, 2005, np).

Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension has also responded to the global and local demands by opening programs and majors in the teaching and learning of the English language. In the year 1997, Universidad Nacional, Brunca extension initiated the English teaching major. Years later, in 2008, this state university started the Associate’s program in English and a bachelor’s degree in Business Management and Sustainable Tourism³. Actually, the main participants of this project are all volunteered students from the English teaching major.

To the present, all levels of the Costa Rican educational system have been reached by the Educational Policy “Towards the 21st Century,” and have incorporated the teaching and learning of the English language. This tendency for the implementation of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning according to the Ministry of Public Education (2005) “will allow students to develop communicative competence, to gain knowledge of a new culture, new beliefs and attitudes as well as

³ Information provided by UNA-SRB Registrar’s Office
to develop their full potential in order to become productive members of Costa Rican society” (p.18).

Later, other government projects were developed to promote the expansion of English learning throughout the country. For instance, upon the foundation of the initiative “Costa Rica Multilingue” the teaching and learning of the English language resulted in an accelerated process. Its goal is the development and promotion of activities to improve the linguistic skills of the citizens and their development in general through the improvement of job opportunities (La Gaceta, 2008).

2.2 The Ministry of Public Education English Syllabus

The demand for the learning of the English language has led Costa Rican government to incorporate the teaching of this language in all levels of the educational system. The Ministry of Public Education has developed syllabuses to stipulate the way this language has to be taught since the I and II Cycle of the General Basic Education until the III Cycle and the Diversified education. In these syllabi the English language “is conceived as a linguistic and cultural tool for communication, which complements education as a whole” (idem). The syllabi establish that in the I Cycle, the foci account for the aural and oral skills, namely, listening and speaking; reading and writing are gradually introduced in the II Cycle. For secondary education, the English syllabus establishes the following:

The first levels 7, 8 and 9 belong to the III Cycle of the General Basic Education and are the basic levels where students are learning the main features of the English language as well as some relevant sociocultural features learned through the development of the four basic linguistic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Higher levels, 10 and 11, have the opportunity to learn more about the language and culture they are learning and their level of performance is also high. (Ministry of Public Education, 2005, p.33)

The methodology suggested to teach the language is the Communicative Approach. Based on an analysis of the National English Plan of 1991, the implementation of this approach to teach English in primary and secondary school originated with the project called LEARN (Learners’ Expectations of Assessment Requirements Nationally). This project modified the whole curricular
structure for this subject in the Ministry of Public Education twenty one years ago (Quesada, 1993, np).

2.3 Teaching Reading in the III Cycle and the Diversified Education

The integration of the four skills in the English syllabus seems to be the answer to the pursuit of the formation of competent citizens in this economy-driven society. Nevertheless, secondary education students are highly prepared to excel in a multiple-choice standardized test which is merely based on sixty reading comprehension items and that represents the ultimate passing achievement for students to obtain their high school certificate (Barboza, 2008, para. 5).

Due to this mismatch, reading has been widely stressed in the English lesson plans since it has been acknowledged as a matter of great concern not only for students but also for parents and governmental statistics as well. Thus, the academic lessons imparted in high schools are loaded with reading comprehension exercises to help students fulfill this last step in order to graduate from high school. In most cases, English lessons seem not to satisfy the students’ expectations to pass the test; as a result, they decide to seek for professional help and attend classes outside the high school to accomplish their utmost goal.

Grounded on this need, Team-UNA Amistad originates and departs from the idea of aiding high school students to pass the standardized national test by providing free English tutorials.

2.4 UNA-SRB Interweaving Ties with the Community

Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension (UNA-SRB) is a prestigious public university acknowledged as the “universidad necesaria” (the necessary university) since its beginnings in 1973. Its approach and orientation has always been to guarantee accessible education to the less privileged citizens of society. The very nature of this university delineates the principles and guidelines of its pedagogical model. These principles are enrooted in a humanistic philosophy and set the proper footing for Team-UNA Amistad to grow and expand. One of these principles is to form supportive professionals highly committed with the well-being of the rest of society (Modelo Pedagógico).
Based on this, the volunteered students assisting the project are aware of this conception by aiding the target population to improve their English level through free weekly tutorials. Besides, another principle of this model accounts for the creativity that allows innovation and the use of means, strategies and teaching resources in the processes of pedagogical mediation (idem). These principles encrypted in Universidad Nacional’s essentials constitute the foundation upon which Team-UNA Amistad project operates.

2.5 Team-UNA Amistad Project Pillars

Universidad Nacional is a committed state university whose vision and mission are centered on the academia’s immediate needs as well as the demands of the community where it is based. That is why, Team-UNA Amistad Project is underpinned by the following fundamentals:

2.5.1 Cooperative Learning

Volunteered students members of this project are familiarized with this type of learning. They are aware of contributions they make to the community, and in turn, to themselves when teaching others cooperatively. Actually, they strengthen both their basic interpersonal communication skills as future teachers and their academic language proficiency as well by participating in this project. These university students get together to plan the material for their tutorials and learn from each other. On this account, the most important principles of Cooperative Learning are tackled in this phase as pointed out

   In small groups, students can share strengths and also develop their weaker skills. They develop their interpersonal skills. They learn to deal with conflict. When cooperative groups are guided by clear objectives, students engage in numerous activities that improve their understanding of subjects explored. (“What Are Cooperative and Collaborative Learning?” n.d.)

2.5.2 Tutoring
Tutoring stands for one of the techniques of Cooperative Learning. This type of work guarantees the pursuit of a goal through the building up of a relationship of trust between the tutor and the learner. According to the article “Cooperative Learning Series,” “a tutor provides expertise, experience, and encouragement. They do not provide "answers," but rather assist in problem solving, in getting answers. The challenge is to focus on assignments within the context they are assigned” (para. 1).

UNA students of the Teaching Major participating in the project get accustomed to dealing with the classroom setting and all its dynamics through the teaching of the tutorials. This is what they are getting prepared for. Then, they are benefited from teaching high school students even before being enrolled in the teaching practicum and graduated.

2.5.3 Team Work and Leadership Skills
By fostering the art of working together to achieve a common goal supportively, UNA students become more committed, accountable and efficient leaders of the community. Indeed, “in a teamwork environment, people understand and believe that thinking, planning, decisions and actions are better when done cooperatively. People recognize, and even assimilate, the belief that “none of us is as good as all of us” (Heathfield, n.d., para. 2). This assumption demonstrates how Team-UNA Amistad teacher-students execute the project. It is only under this philosophy that the project runs to outreach students from high schools around the university and beyond.

III Description of the Project
The main objectives of Team-UNA Amistad are to develop meaningful service learning in order to empower UNA students to become skillful EFL teachers and cooperative members of their community and to offer the community free reading comprehension tutoring sessions for high school students taking the National Standardized English Test (NSET).

3.2 Methodology
Team-UNA Amistad is a service learning community project that is developed at Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension, Perez Zeledon Campus. Focusing on upholding EFL teaching students’ skills while offering the community free English tutoring sessions, this project integrates high academic expectations and community service. It is directed specifically toward high school students taking the NSET. These two-hour tutoring sessions are held at the university campus on Saturdays with a morning or afternoon schedule for students’ convenience. Due to the fact that the national evaluation system concentrates on a reading comprehension paper-and-pencil test, these classes focus on reading comprehension skills only. Sessions start the first week in May and finish the third week in October with a four-week recess in July. Students attend a total of twenty sessions. Each session develops a specific target content which is taken from the syllabus. Some of the topics to be covered are: Sports, Democracy, Media and Minority Groups. One booklet is designed for each session; all of them include a grammar topic and four readings with their corresponding comprehension exercises. The coordinator and the tutors revise and improve the booklets every month. Regarding evaluation, tutors conduct close observations to monitor students’ performance every week; additionally, the last two weeks are devoted to administering mock tests so that students get familiar with the procedures of the NSET. These mock tests are available on the Ministry of Public Education’s webpage.

3.3 Participants

Three key agents ensure the success of this project. First, a professor from the English Teaching major coordinates it. Second, teacher-assistant students from this same major are the tutors of the project as well as any student in the major who is interested in being part of the team. To be part of this project, students should have shown certain characteristics during their school life such as responsibility and commitment with the university. Third, any high-school student from a public institution can attend these sessions.

3.4 Budget
Currently, the project does not have any economic support; however, the UNASRB teacher-assistants participating in the project as tutors of the project get a monetary reward every month from the scholarship office (Vida Estudiantil). Fortunately, UNA provides the project with two fully-equipped classrooms for the sessions, the teacher-assistant students and the coordinator. Each student attending the tutorials is responsible for copying the booklet every week.

3.5 Statistics

One of the most serious obstacles this project faces is a high drop-out rate. The reasons behind this phenomenon are of great concern and still under research. The next chart shows the number of students who enrolled in the program at the beginning of the year and the number of students who finished the program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>2010</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students enrolled</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students finished</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>15</td>
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Table 1: Number of students in the program.

In 2011, students’ achievement was measured through two mock tests which were administered during the last two weeks. Grades obtained in those tests evidence students’ difficulties. In the first test, only 40 % of the students got a grade above the passing grade that is 65 (see graph 1) in contrast with 60% who obtained a lower grade. It was concluded that even though students attended extra English reading classes, they were still not ready to succeed in the National Standardized English Test. A similar situation took place in the second mock test. The majority of the students, that is 54 %, got a grade below 65 (see graph 2). However, in spite of the serious drop-out rate and the low grades in the mock tests, in 2011 all the students who attended all sessions passed the NSET.
In order to identify the reasons behind the high dropout rate, a series of personal interviews was conducted. Students argued that they quit the project because they were having more serious problems with other school subjects such as mathematics and chemistry, so they needed to devote more study time to those subjects. Another reason was monetary difficulties. Many participants lived in rural areas far from the campus where sessions were held; consequently, they had to bear the cost of their bus tickets and copies. Another reason was that the schedule was not convenient at all for them. Neither were the tutors able to find a solution to any of these problems nor the coordinator of the project in 2011. By 2012, the coordinator will be working on a grant winning process with a non-profit private organization.

IV Conclusions

Team-UNA Amistad started as an action initiative of UNA to promote partnership with the local community. To that end, this primary goal was achieved. Additionally, the benefits of this service learning partnership have three directions. First, participants (high schoolers) who participated were directly benefited by passing the NSET. Second, teacher-students at UNA had the chance to build their own expectations by using their teaching skills in real-life experiences. Third, by conducting this project, Universidad Nacional, Brunca Extension fulfilled its mission which is to develop humanistic and social outreach projects aiming at satisfying regional needs. There is clear evidence of the positive effect of attending the weekly sessions since all students who did so obtained a passing grade in the NSET. This project can deem a success in future years only if the university,
working in concert with authorities in public high schools, moved forward to find solutions to diminish dropouts.

V References


http://www.studygs.net/tutoring.htm


San José: Editorial Costa Rica.


Modelo pedagógico. Universidad Nacional, Sede Regional Brunca.


Biographies:

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