

**LANGUAGE CENTER IN POZA RICA IMPLEMENTING THE
"PROYECTO AULA" IN AN ADVANCED LEVEL OF ESL**

Tch. Higinio Fernandez Sanchez
Language Center of the University of Veracruz
Poza Rica, Veracruz Mexico
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email: hifernandez@uv.mx

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Abstract: A competent professional is what many universities across the nation and the world are aiming to produce by the end of the student's school years. The "proyecto aula" is a project taken through by the University of Veracruz in its attempt to promote self-learning, critical thinking, real life problem solving and the use of ICT (information and communication technologies). The incorporation of such program allows professors of all areas of study to give a student-centered education. The Language Centers of the University of Veracruz couldn't have been left behind and are constantly working vigorously to design complex assignments keeping in mind the methodology of the "Proyecto Aula". The following research project describes the complex assignments applied during the Fall semester (August-November 2011) to an advance English Level (8) and the results obtained in which high performances were observed in the students of the Language Center, campus Poza Rica.

Key Words: Poyecto Aula; critical thinking; complex assignments; ESL; Advance English.

Context

The Language Center of the University of Veracruz, campus Poza Rica, has been playing a major role in the implementation of the "Proyecto Aula". Allowing language professors of all English levels to use this methodology through the course. The following methodological interventions were applied to students as young as 16. Most of whom were either high school students or university students. The educational experience in which the students were enrolled in was Level 8 (Advance English Level), during the Fall semester of 2011, on Saturdays from 9am to 2pm.

This educational experience eases the possibility for the analysis of the cultural content, values and intrinsic ideas in the learning of English as a second language. The working strategies can be seen by the development for the self-learning of the students, throughout the cultural abilities and linguistics: listening comprehension; oral expression; reading comprehension and written expression, all which gives the students the opportunity to communicate in an advance level.

Description of the Interventions

The philosophy of the new and innovating project "Proyecto Aula" was introduced to the third generation of professors of the Language Center in Poza Rica before the Christmas break in 2010. During the 30 hour course, which was given by former professors of the Language Center in Poza Rica, and who made part of generation two of the "Proyecto Aula", theory and components were given in order to design complex assignments for Basic and Intermediate English levels. A yahoo group account was made by the course instructors to keep everyone taking the course in touch and to receive any updates regarding the "Proyecto Aula".

Returning from Christmas break professors formed groups in order to complete three complex assignments per level. After having completed the assignments the professors were instructed to email the assignments to all the other professors in order to receive constructive feedback to better each assignment. Unfortunately there were no complex assignments created for advance levels, therefore professor Higinio Fernandez Sanchez had to make three more complex assignments for the level 8 in order to be able to apply the "Proyecto Aula" in the spring semester.

During the Spring Semester (Feb.-May 2011), the professors who participated in the "Proyecto Aula" course had the opportunity to apply the assignments, taking into account the level of English required for every specific course. Since this was the first time the third generation of "Proyecto Aula" professors would apply it there were many floating doubts and concerns about the proper procedure of implementing these complex assignments and mostly with time issues.

In the Fall Semester (August-November 2011), the same complex assignments were implemented to another level 8 group. This time around with the experienced acquired from the application of the complex assignments the first time, there were a few things modified in order to have a more successful outcome. These changes were made based on the professor's observation and the student's comments about the complex assignments.

The main objective for the complex assignments was also modified to practicing the four English abilities (speech, writing, reading, listening) in each complex assignment, rather than just one or the other. All this according to what it is expected for an advance English level student.

The first complex assignment's objective was to take to practice the four English abilities (speech, reading, writing, listening) by doing a "How to" presentation. In this complex assignment the students were asked to choose a topic where they would be able to teach other people how to something. The students had to present it to the class prior to presenting it to another English class, where not only the professor but their classmates gave feedback on how to improve their overall presentation. They were responsible for choosing the English class where they wanted to present their work, whether it was at the Language Center or any other English school. The only requirement was that the English class where they had to present it had to be an advance English class. Each pair of students had the opportunity to choose any "How to" topic and do research to also be able to show the importance of knowing how to do that one thing. They had a period of four weeks to chose a topic, design either a poster or actually bring in what they were going to demonstrate in the class, and do their presentation in the classroom. On the fourth week the students presented in the classroom, suggestions and observations were given to them by the professor and their fellow classmates. They then had a week to present it to their chosen English class, were in advance they had gotten permission from the professor in charge of the group. They were given an evaluation sheet that checked for the following aspects; confidence, quality, clarity and organization and were each evaluated in a 1-4 scale (1-needs improvement, 2-good, 3-very good and 4-excellent). At the end of the evaluation sheet there was a free space for any further comments the professor thought were important to mention as well a space for their name and signature. This complex assignment not only gave the students in an advance English level to take into practice their four English abilities (speech, reading, writing, listening) but also gave them the opportunity to enhance their interpersonal relations with others. Public speaking is one of the most common tasks to do in a professional life but it is also one of the hardest to do, and what this complex assignment did was challenge the student's full potential in an innovative learning-teaching technique.

The second complex assignment's objective was to also take into practice the four English abilities (speech, reading, writing, listening) by doing a role play in where the students demonstrated the Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) life-saving technique. CPR is a lacking culture in our community that should be taken up by everyone, and what a better way than to show it's importance by role playing it at the Second Multicultural Event at the Language Center in Poza Rica, Ver. In this complex assignment the students were asked to research about CPR technique using trustful sources like the American Heart Association. After they had a strong background about the technique they were given a 5 hour CPR course, where they had the opportunity to learn anything they hadn't done while doing their research. They also had the opportunity to simulate the technique among each other. The class was then divided in two groups and based on their CPR knowledge they had to make up a scenario where CPR would be needed. They made their own acting dialog and had the chance to practice in class several times. More than that, they had to make posters with the CPR steps that someone would be holding up at the time of the CPR demonstration. The use of the four English abilities was manifested at the end when their final performance was evidence of how much they understood about CPR and the message they got across to the public who joined at the Multicultural Event.

The third and last complex assignment's objective was to none the less practice the four English abilities (speech, reading, writing, listening) by doing a mini-research project. Here the student's partnered up in groups of three to put together all the previous assignments accomplished during the semester with a brief description of what had to be done in each assignment and also write a presentation page, a table of contents, an introduction, a theory framework, a body, a conclusion and a bibliography. The student's were given everything their project should contain step by step and prior to that they were asked to do some research of the content a common research project should contain. The presentation page had to have the university's name, the campus, a title, the student's

name, the level of English they were in, the period they were in, their professor's name, and time and place. The table of contents had to include titles and page numbers of everything in the project. The introduction was asked to be written with a number of questions they were asked to answer in the future tense, it had to include a thesis statement and each paragraph had to have a topic sentence, minimum page long. In the theory framework the student's had to research about teaching-learning strategies in ESL classes. In the body the students were supposed to include a copy of all their previous assignments done during the semester and with each a brief description of what had to be done. In the conclusion the student's were asked to also answer some questions about their experience in the course, it had to be written in the past tense, using connectors and a minimum of one page long. At last the student's had to put together a bibliography of not only the sources they used for this complex assignment but any bibliography they had used during the semester while completing

Methodology

A (yes/no) questionnaire written by Professor Guadalupe Torres and translated by Professor Higinio Fernandez was applied at the end of the semester as a way to give feedback about the Proyecto Aula. The questionnaire was divided into three sections.

The first section gathered responses about the assignment's level of complexity, with the finality of improving the teaching-learning process; research and technology. It consisted of the following questions;

1. We, the students have the required level of English to complete the complex assignments.
2. The number of assignments that were assigned was reasonable and appropriate.
3. The complexity level of the assignments was appropriate.
4. The instructions for each assignment were clear and precise.
5. The assignments promoted team work.
6. The assignments raised my interest for the class.
7. The assignments helped me improve the learning of the language.
8. The integrated assignment helped me to better understand the language.
9. In general the assignments of Proyecto Aula covered my expectations.

The second part asked questions about the design of the assignments and teacher's participation. It consisted of the following questions;

10. He/she promoted participation among the students.
11. He/she showed enthusiasm while implementing the assignments.
12. He/she has the advance knowledge for the course.
13. He/she communicated in a clear way.
14. He/she used useful examples to explain the assignments.

The third part consisted of comments and general opinions about the complex assignments done during the semester. It consisted of the following questions;

15. What is your overall opinion about the assignments of the Proyecto Aula.
16. Suggestions to improve the complex assignments.

Representative graphs were made to show the student's responses to the questionnaire, all with their description.

Pictures of the Multicultural Event were taken as part of evidence.

A recorded CD is available of the global assignments.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Complex Assignment I; Pictures of the students of Level 8, Advance English, during the Fall Semester 2011..

Picture 1



Picture 2



Source: Direct

Description: In these two pictures pairs of students can be observed doing their first complex assignment. The place and the topic of the presentation differs since it was a free topic and the presentation had to be done in any other intermediate or advance English class.

Complex Assignment II; Pictures of the students of Level 8, Advance English, during the Fall Semester 2011.

Picture 3



Picture 4



Source: Direct

Description: During the Multicultural Event at the Language Center of Poza Rica, two students taught the CPR-technique to the public, while two other held signs both in English and Spanish of the steps to follow to perform the technique.

Global Assignment; Parts of the global assignments from the students of Level 8, Advance English, during the Fall Semester 2011.

Part 1

Introduction

We, as students of the 8th level think that our "English level" maybe is not as it must be, but it is good enough to be in this level.

It is mainly because, English as a second language, is not really necessary in our daily life so we have never been worry about improving our vocabulary.

In addition we have never had the opportunity of traveling abroad (therefore) we have not used in real life, because it is different to practice English in class instead of doing it with someone who even can't understand Spanish, our mother language.

Therefore we expect of this course to improve our pronunciation and vocabulary and also learn to speak English more fluently, we hope a more dynamic class too, that makes it different of a common theoretical class, to learn new things about grammar and daily life expressions because these could be useful if one day we move out of the country to somewhere, where the people speak English and we think like in our language they have expressions that we can't find in books but we can learn them watching movies, which at the same time is a really good learning strategy.

In other side, we expect a dedicated professor who'll be attentive of the class and that he makes an effort of having the class interests in the subject. At the same time we expect him to be an understanding person when we make a mistake or when we couldn't be able to do an assignment.

Another of our expectations is that when we have a doubt the teacher would be able of giving us a clear answer and that doesn't be like other teachers who speak a lot with any meaning which make us feel confused

We also await from him to be kind and doesn't bring his personal problems to the class, because it is really annoying for us like students when the teacher arrives in a bad mood and his or her behavior is very rude and the students perceive this and they feel uncomfortable and they abstain of participate or ask about a doubt.

This project will be about all the assignments that we are going to do during the course and we are going to included some strategies of learning English an how important it is.

Part 2

Conclusion

When we started this semester, we were not aware of what we were going into. This semester we have lived the full experience of being a university language student. We were pushed to test our personal limits of what we thought were our limits, but we were mistaken, we were capable of doing a lot more.

If our teacher hadn't been so pushing, we may had never been aware of the great things we could do, we are grateful to him as well as we know that more of just having a new teacher we ended having a new friend.

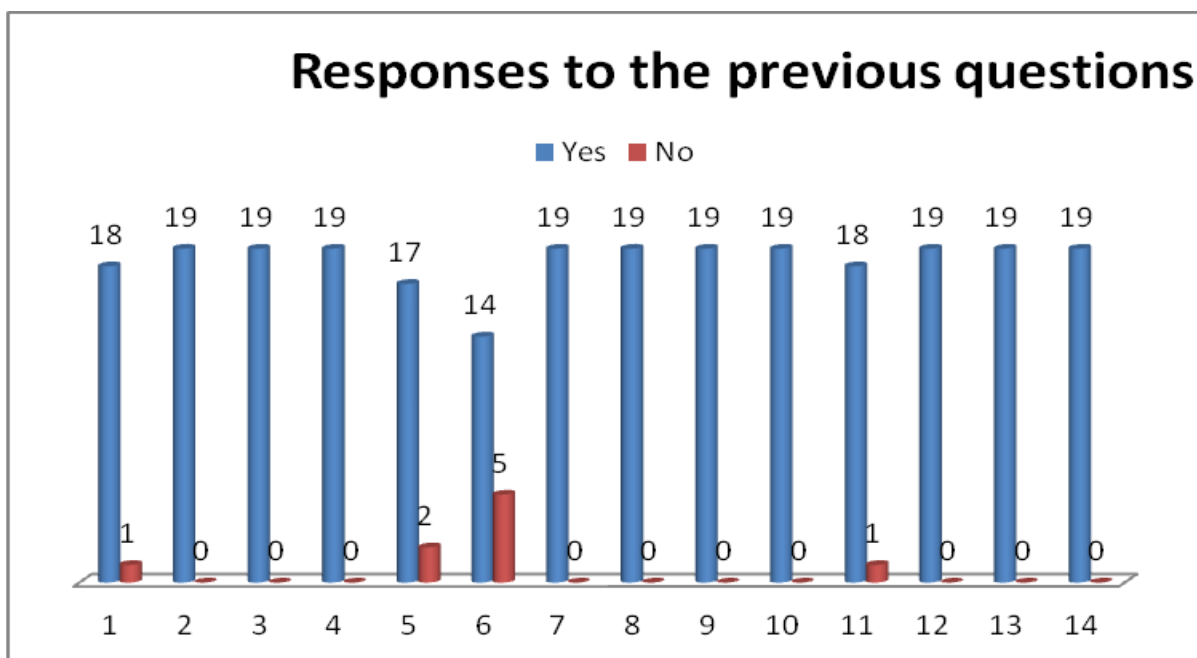
We are happy to know that our effort will be rewarded someday when we have conquered this, and why not, many other languages.

Source: Part of the student's Global Assignment

Description: Here an introduction and a conclusion can be viewed, only as part of the Global Assignment. A CD is available with the complete works of the all the students.

Responses to the "Proyecto Aula" questionnaire from the students of Level 8, Advance English, during the Fall Semester 2011.

Graph 1

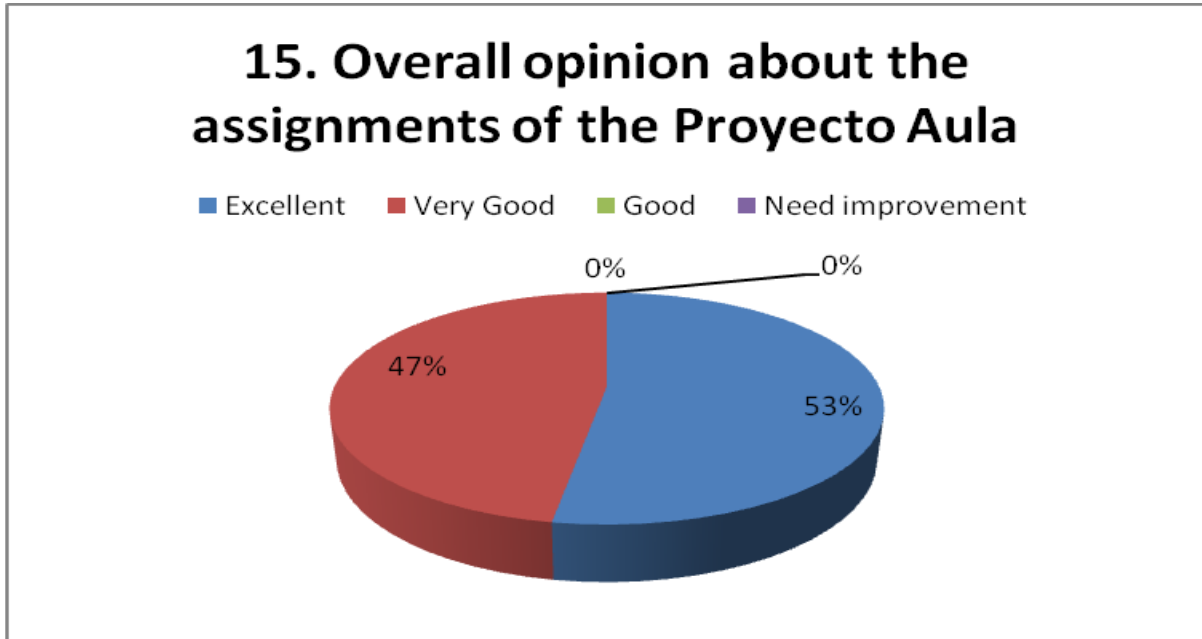


Source: Direct

Description: On question one; We, the students have the required level of English to complete the complex assignments. 95% of the students responded "yes" to the question and 5% responded "no", question two; The number of assignments that were assigned was reasonable and appropriate. 100% of the students responded "yes", question three; The complexity level of the assignments was appropriate. 100% of the students responded "yes", question four; The instructions for each assignment were clear and precise. 100% of the students responded "yes", question five; The assignments promoted team work. 89% responded "yes" and 11% responded "no", question six; The assignments raised my interest for the class. 74% responded "yes" and 26% responded "no", question 7; The assignments helped me improve the learning of the language. 100% responded "yes", question 8; The integrated assignment helped me to better understand the language.100% responded "yes", question 9; In general the assignments of Proyecto Aula covered my expectations. 100% responded "yes", question 10; He/she promoted participation among the students. a 100% responded "yes", question 11; He/she showed enthusiasm while implementing the assignments. 95% responded "yes" and 5% responded "no", question 12; He/she has the advance knowledge for the course.100% responded "yes", question 13; He/she communicated in a clear way. 100% responded "yes" and question 14; He/she used useful examples to explain the assignments. 100% of the students responded "yes".

Responses to question 15 from the "Proyecto Aula" questionnaire from the students of Level 8, Advance English, during the Fall Semester 2011.

Graph 2

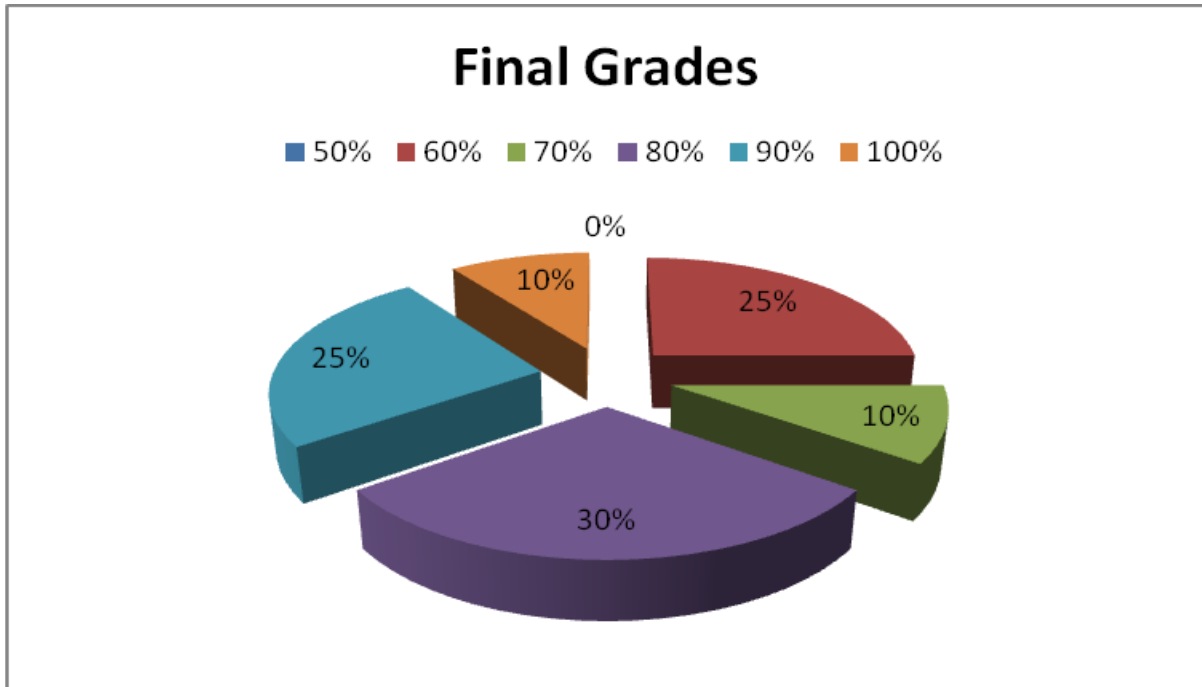


Source: Direct

Description: Responses from two different students to question 15; Suggestions to improve the complex assignments: response A. Well, I think that the project was a very good option because we were able to use all of our skills, and response B. That the instructions were not very clear at times.

Final grades from the students of Level 8, Advance English, during the Fall Semester 2011.

Graph 3



Source: Direct

Description: For the final grades 2 students got a 100%, 5 students got a 90%, 6 students got an 80%, 2 students got a 70%, 5 student got a 60%, and 0 students got a 50%. This shows that more than half of the class got above an 80% in the class.

The above information represents the success regarding the benefits that the students acquired during this new and innovating way of teaching-learning process.

Having the methodology of the "Proyecto Aula" implemented on the students of Level 8, Advance English, gave them the opportunity to work in a critical thinking environment, having this reflected on their outstanding performances during the course and by the final grades achieved at the end of the semester.

It is of great importance to continue applying the "Proyecto Aula", with the objective of discovering new ways to make it better. In order to form competent students for tomorrow's world, similar research work has to be done on how to improve the "Proyecto Aula".

In conclusion it isn't less to say that being the applicator of these assignments wasn't an easy duty yet a magnificent experience. Not only the professor in charge's work but also the students who were all willing to work together with this new model, and the guidance of our coordinators.

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