

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN AN EST READING COURSE FOR REMEDIAL STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

One of the obstacles facing teachers of remedial EFL students in an EST reading course at the Simón Bolívar University is that of motivating students to read and become involved in the reading process as they often have low self-esteem with regard to their ability to read and understand scientific texts in English. As we believe students play a decisive role in their own learning process, students were allowed to choose the reading activities they considered most beneficial and as fear of traditional type reading tests was high among them, portfolios and contracts were also offered as an alternative form of assessment. At the end of the course a Student Perception Questionnaire was given to obtain students' opinion with regard to the evaluation system, the use of portfolios and contracts, as well as the effectiveness of their learning. In this study we will discuss the course, the theoretical basis for selecting the type of evaluation used, as well as describe the different types of activities done during the term. The results of the Student Perception Questionnaire given at the end of the term to obtain students' opinion of the will also be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

As teachers of remedial EFL students in the EST reading course at Simón Bolívar University in Caracas, Venezuela, among the problems we face is that of encouraging our students to read in the target language and practice the reading strategies explicitly taught in the classroom. Most of our students have failed the regular courses and many suffer from low self-esteem with regard to their ability to read in the foreign language. In an attempt to motivate our students and help them find their own inner potential, we turned to the research done in motivation, learner autonomy, learning styles and multiple intelligence.

Using this, along with our own personal experience with remedial readers over the last three years, we decided to implement a class room methodology which would focus on the explicit teaching of learning strategies, design and/or adapt activities which would cater to different cognitive and learning styles and allow the students to participate in their learning process by choosing the type of activities they would work on through contract and portfolio assessment. At the end of the year, a questionnaire was given to obtain students' opinion with regard to the evaluation system, the use of contracts and portfolios along with traditional type exams, and its effectiveness with regard to their language learning.

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND STUDENT PROFILE

Due to the importance of English in the scientific world today, all engineering students entering the Simón Bolívar University in Caracas, Venezuela are required to take a three-term reading course whose main objective is to develop accuracy and speed in reading texts on topics in science and technology using the most appropriate reading strategy. The texts are selected based on the predominant rhetorical function associated with technical writing that is reflected in the article. As a result, students are exposed to texts that reflect functions such as description and definition, comparison and contrast, chronological order and process, cause and effect, hypothesis and argumentation. Students are taught to recognize the signal words as well as the grammatical structures that indicate these functions. Emphasis is also placed on recognizing and understanding the coherence and cohesion patterns found in the text and the teaching of reading strategies.

Students are evaluated through two departmental exams that are made up of 25 multiple-choice questions each for the first two courses and 20 questions for the third. These questions, which have been statistically validated, are selected by the Exam Commission of

the Language Department, and comprise 50 % and 40% of the term grade respectively, with the remaining percentages being divided among quizzes, laboratory and class and homework assignments. Students who fail the respective course or who do not register for it in the period in which it is given, can do so the following term in the parallel course which covers the same objectives albeit the use of different reading materials.

Almost all of the students who register for the parallel courses are conscious of the fact that their main problem is a lack of sufficient vocabulary. The vast majority have failed the departmental exams, which they consider to be the yardstick for measuring their proficiency in reading. As a result, they enter the parallel program with very low self-esteem and very little confidence in their ability to read and understand texts in English without the help of a dictionary or an electronic translator.

The majority of the students are also unaware of the cognitive reading strategies they possess and which can be transferred from their L1 (Spanish) to the target language. (Gonzalez and St. Louis, 1999). The challenge facing us as teachers in the parallel reading program is therefore two-fold: on the linguistic level, helping students improve their vocabulary and grammar, teaching reading strategies, working with the structure of the text and psychologically, building the students' self esteem and motivating them to read and practice the techniques taught in class.

LANGUAGE LEARNING/TEACHING BELIEFS

In order to select the appropriate teaching approach, design materials and select the activities we considered useful for achieving our main goal, we reflected on the learning process in itself. Is learning the simple transmission of information from one source, in our case, the teacher to another, the student? Or do students have a decisive role to play in the

learning process, constructing their own reality, taking responsibility for their learning, choosing the activities they believe will be the most beneficial. (Benson and Voller, 1997).

In the last decade, the shift in language teaching methodology has gone from teacher-centered classrooms toward more open student-centered and student-oriented learning. (Nunan, 1988; 1999). However, in some cases both teachers and students feel uncomfortable with their new roles and are somewhat unwilling to give up the “comfort zone” inherited from traditional methods. We, however, believe that learning is an active but personal experience and agree with Van Lier (1996) when he says that learning has to be done by the learner, it cannot be forced but should be encouraged and guided. Our role as teachers is to help students become aware of their own potential, to find and exploit their unique learning style, to take responsibility for their own learning, to set goals and work toward achieving them and the best way to do this would be through the methodology and materials used in the classroom. We therefore needed to design and select activities, which would help our students, achieve the objectives of the course by exposing them to a wide range of different activities, which would appeal to their different cognitive and learning styles.

The main problem students in the parallel courses identified was the lack of sufficient vocabulary and we knew from experience that our students needed to be exposed to a large amount of authentic material in the target language as this is one of the best ways to acquire, if not a productive vocabulary, at least a receptive one. Our goal was to find ways of encouraging our students to read texts, which reflect the rhetorical functions found in the syllabus and at the same time allowing them to practice the reading strategies required.

Researchers who study the effect of text interest on memory are of the opinion that readers tend to remember more details of a fascinating and interesting text than one which is not (Schraw and Dennison, 1994) and so we decided to let our students select the texts they

wanted to read as long as the topics fell into the area of science and technology. If one of our objectives was to help them become autonomous learners, then we would also have to allow them, at a certain point in time, to choose the reading activities they considered most beneficial. It was decided that this would be done in the final course (ID1-113) through a contract between the teacher and the students at which time the latter would have some degree of control and to some extent decision making, with regard to their own learning process and the activities they wanted to be assessed.

EVALUATION: TESTING OR ASSESSMENT?

We then turned to the type of evaluation to be used with our course: testing or assessment? According to Aebersold and Field (1997) many people tend to associate testing with assessment but for these authors, assessments are not always tests as the former is an ongoing process while the latter tests one or more aspects of the student's learning through an instrument given at a specific point in time. Most of our students were used to traditional type evaluation systems, with Departmental exams and quizzes accounting for the majority of their grade. However, if we believe that learning is a process through which new information is combined with that already held in the learner's cognitive system and is then reorganized and restructured (Cheng, 1985; in McLeod and McLaughlin, 1986), then evaluation of learning, and in our case reading comprehension, should be through ongoing assessment.

We also had to consider the role that evaluation plays in learning. Genesse and Upshur (1996) consider it to be concerned with “..improving instruction so that learning is enhanced..” From a teaching point of view, assessment is the medium through which teachers can collect and interpret information that would indicate what students can or cannot do, (Nunan, 1999) and it also is the basis for making inferences and decisions about individual students

(Alderson, 2000). So, through a more continuous type of assessment the student would be able to see the progress being made and be in a position to work on problematic areas before facing more traditional type exam situations.

However, we were also aware that traditional type tests could also be valid indicators of the degree of mastery of certain skills. In the case of reading comprehension, multiple-choice questions, quizzes with open ended or True and False questions and close exercises are some of the most common methods of testing (Nuttal, 1998). Although we do not believe that the exclusive use of multiple choice type questions is the best way to evaluate reading comprehension, we needed to have at least one type of evaluation that was objective and constructed using items, which had been tested and validated, over a period of time. These were to be found in the Language Department's Item bank.

On the other hand, we also know that this exam is a psychological burden for most students so the weight of this particular test was reduced. We decided on an evaluation plan which would include both quantitative and qualitative measures: departmental exams and quizzes would account for 50% of the total grade, 40% would correspond to the assignments done by the student during the term and the final 10% would be left to the laboratory sessions.

TEACHING METHODOLOGY

The first day of each term, we discuss reading, the reading process and the strategies our students use when reading in their first language (Spanish) and the way in which these can be transferred to the target language (English). These strategies are constantly practiced and reinforced in activities during the term. Another important activity on the first day is finding each student's individual learning style. Students are given a Learning Style (Richards and Lockhart, 1994) and/or a Multiple Intelligence questionnaire (Christensen, 1998) and are

asked to what degree the information obtained from the questionnaire corresponds to the way they believe they learn in general. This information is then used in the design and selection of reading activities. Finally, students are asked about what they consider to be their problems in reading in English and the ways in which these problems could be overcome. The objectives of the course are then discussed with the students and the evaluation plan presented. An attempt is made to show the link between the course objectives and the aims of the activities carried out inside and outside the classroom.

The following are a selection of activities used in our reading program and evaluated through on-going assessment. These activities are aimed at helping our students achieve the objectives of the course in a practical way through various mediums that take into account their individual learning styles. Each of the activities attempts to give the student a certain amount of decision making with regard to the learning process.

Projects (First term activity)

At the beginning of the term, students are asked to choose a topic of their choice to be developed during the course of study. The aim of the activity is for students to research areas of their interest, recognize the signal words for the rhetorical functions that appear in the texts extract and summarize the most important and relevant information in a short paper using the appropriate signal words.

For example, during the first term the rhetorical functions taught are definition, description, classification and comparison and contrast. A student may choose the helicopter for his project and as each function is discussed in class, he in turn researches the topic and extracts the relevant information. After discussing and working with texts in the classroom which reflect the predominant use of definition and description, the student would hand in his draft with the definition and description of helicopter. With the submission of each draft, the

teacher evaluates the students' ability to recognize the rhetorical function and to use the signal words appropriately in the summary.

Students are also asked to present the information graphically; either through charts, diagrams, pictures or drawings so there is a transfer of information from one medium to another. This part of the activity tries to encourage those who are visual or artistic to make use of these talents as showing comprehension of a text does not only imply answering questions. Students are also encouraged to write in English and there is no penalization for incorrect grammar as teachers work with students to correct this part of the draft. At the end of the term the student submits his paper on the helicopter, written in his own words, with the appropriate signal words and complete with tables, graphs, pictures and drawings as well as a copy of the original source and any additional bibliography used.

This type of activity is also meant for students to see language as a whole, a medium for communication, where the student is both a receiver of information when he reads a text, as well as a transmitter through his own writing. It encourages students to read in English because they are researching a topic of their choice and it is also a practical way for them to see how texts are created. It is no longer just recognizing, learning and automatically circling certain signal words in a text, but actually seeing how these words function when the student himself has to write a text. There is a conscious awareness on the student's part when he has to decide on the correct signal words to be used in a given situation and this conscious awareness facilitates learning (Schmidt, 1990). There is also an increase in both receptive and productive vocabulary as, on the one hand, students begin to lose the fear of reading in the foreign language and on the other, they incorporate the new words into their writing. The fact that the project is corrected through drafts also helps the student to gain confidence, as he knows that any mistakes made can be corrected before the final paper is submitted.

Portfolio and contracts

Extensive use is made of portfolios during the three courses. Portfolios are "...a purposeful collection of student work that is intended to show progress over time.." (O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996). In our course, we use collection portfolios where students keep all of the work they have done during the term. At the end of the first and second courses, the student submits his portfolio with an introduction to each one of the sections, the work in each section and what he has learnt. Many students are surprised at the amount of work they have done during the term and through the portfolio are able to see the progress made.

In the final term, however, the student is given the freedom to choose the activities that he wants to be evaluated through a contract defined in Dickinson (1987) as "...an agreement between the learner and the tutor or between the learner and himself.." The student is given a list of activities, with the criteria for evaluation and the submission dates and is free to choose the activities that he considers beneficial to him. All of the activities are graded by the teacher and returned to the student who, at the end of the term, selects the best pieces of work to be submitted according to the contract signed. As these are activities that have been done throughout all of the courses, the students are already familiar with them. However, changes can be made to the contract up to week 6.

Portfolio and contract activities

Some examples of activities done during the program and included in the portfolio and contract are: Reading logs, Note taking and note taking question, Vocabulary sheets /Glossaries, Final Unit Tasks, Class preparation activities, On-line bibliography and class worksheets.

Reading Logs, Note taking and Note taking question

The aim of the reading log is to encourage students to read texts outside of the classroom and to practice their reading strategies. Students are asked to find texts in an area of their interest that reflect the rhetorical function being discussed in class. They read the text and identify the topic, the main idea, the secondary ideas and any details they consider important. This information is then presented graphically either on a flow chart (process), time line (chronology) or diagram (comparison and contrast) when possible. The student is then asked to give his opinion of the text, whether he agrees with the author or how the information obtained has changed his views on the topic in question. The student submits a copy of the article along with his reading log.

The Note taking activity is similar to the Reading log with the sole difference being that the teacher assigns the reading to the entire class. After reading the text, the student is free to write a question based on the information obtained. This question is then handed to other members of the class who answer it and is then passed to others who correct it. The responsibility for reading, understand and evaluating comprehension is then left to the student. The teacher can then check the evaluated question and determine whether the student who answered and the one who corrected the answer understood the text.

Vocabulary sheet and Glossaries

Another activity that stems from the reading log is the vocabulary sheet. Students are asked to select five (5) new words from the same text to practice vocabulary acquisition strategies and techniques. They first have to try to guess the meaning of the word from the context in which it is used. Students are encouraged to write the mental processes they used to arrive at the meaning. They then look at the morphology, prefixes, suffixes, the part of speech, if it is a cognate etc. The next step is the dictionary where they write all of the

meanings found for the word and then back to the text to decide which of the meanings fit the context in which it is used. They then either write a synonym, draw what the word represents or explain the meaning in their own words and finally the new word is used in a sentence. To help fix the unknown word in their long-term memory, students are asked to draw a semantic map showing three or four words that they associate with the new word and to explain the association.

Each of the steps is allotted a certain percentage of the grade and the student who has gone through all the steps receives the total grade. The teacher can evaluate the student's comprehension of the text and the unknown word through the choices he makes. If the student is unable to choose the correct meaning of the word for the context in which it is used or if he uses the word incorrectly in his new sentence, then the teacher knows that he still does not fully understand the meaning of the word and can point this out to him.

The main purpose of this activity is not getting the students to learn the new vocabulary but rather to work with the cognitive and metacognitive strategies they possess and to put these into practice. Because of the detailed work involved, students usually select the five words that they consider important and the evaluation of this process is seen when students are not allowed to use dictionaries in their quizzes.

The third course is content based and the student reads texts from the areas of the Universe, Evolution, Computers and Ecology. The Glossary is an activity from this course and it is aimed at helping the student understand the terms found in the texts. Students select 15 terms from any of the areas and are asked to make a glossary giving the definition of the term or an explanation written in their own words with a drawing or picture (when possible). The terms should be in alphabetical order with the bibliography consulted. In writing the definition of the term, students once again make use of the signal words they learnt in the first

and second part of the reading program. While some students consult dictionaries and encyclopedias to help them define the term, others use the information obtained from the texts read in class and in so doing reveal their understanding of the term within the context.

Final Unit Tasks (Second term)

The final unit tasks are mini projects for each of the rhetorical functions discussed in the second term. After each one of the functions has been discussed and the texts studied in class, students are asked to either research the life of an important scientist or the events leading up to an important discovery (chronology), to describe the steps in an experiment or manufacturing process (process), to describe the causes and effects of any phenomenon or of a disease (cause and effect) and to look for a current problem and discuss the hypothesis arrived at and future predictions that could be made. As this is the last rhetorical function explicitly presented in the course, students are asked to identify all of the functions that are to be found in the texts obtained from their research.

For each task, students submit a copy of the text they have used to obtain the information, a graphic organizer with the relevant data and a summary written in their own words. Students use the appropriate signal words to link the information given in the graphic organizer. One of the aspects teachers evaluate is the student's ability to recognize the main rhetorical function in the text. If, for example, a student submits an article where the main rhetorical function is hypothesis for a final unit task related to cause and effect, then the teacher will know that the student is still unable to recognize the main rhetorical function in the text where obviously there are more than one. Teachers also look at the student's ability to organize information, as in the case of chronology and process or to correctly identify the causes and effects of certain events. These activities put theory into practice and encourage the students to work outside of the classroom on unknown texts.

Class preparation

The aim of this activity is to evaluate students' understanding of the text through their preparation of a class worksheet. Students are asked to find a text of their choice and to prepare a class worksheet with Pre-reading, While-reading and After-reading activities to be given to their classmates. A vocabulary exercise, exercises dealing with reference markers, scanning or skimming activities and general comprehension questions are prepared. Students submit the original text, the notes they took while reading the article, the exercises they made with the answers and the worksheet without the answers.

In this activity, students call upon their classmates to make use of strategies such as prediction using the title of the text or photographs, they look at the structure of the text and its cohesion and coherence when they work on the reference markers and also look at ways of testing their classmates comprehension of the text through the questions they ask.

On-line bibliography

Among the objectives of the final reading course is that of giving students the tools to evaluate the validity of information presented in a text, as well as introducing them to bibliographical research skills through abstracts and book reviews. The on-line bibliography was then seen as a way for both of these objectives to be achieved and considering the large and varied number of web sites available, it would also be a way to help students evaluate the validity of the content of material found on such sites. In this activity, students are asked to visit at least 5 web sites related to any of the four topic areas. Following the guidelines given for evaluating the sites, students have to give in a report indicating the author of the article, the source of the information on the site, whether it be a private page, a university, business enterprise, government agency etc., the number of links associated with the page and a summary of the information given. The student is then asked to give his opinion on the

validity of the information he has read and the criteria used to form this opinion. The web sites are given for the teacher to check the accuracy of the summary. Apart from evaluating the student's comprehension of the information given on the site, this activity reveals the manner in which the student processes information and how his own personal view on a topic, his content schemata, influences his interpretation of facts.

In-class worksheets

These are worksheets prepared by the teacher and aimed at practicing different reading strategies. The pre-reading activities are focused on encouraging students to use such strategies as prediction, brain storming, activation of prior knowledge of the topic etc. while the while reading activities are aimed at reinforcing certain reading skills: guessing meaning of unknown words from context, dictionary use, scanning activities, putting information in correct order etc. The after reading activities are always aimed at getting students to apply the new information learned to a specific problem or to present the information in another form. While all of the activities are corrected and comments made, only certain areas are graded and this depends on the specific objective of the class.

STUDY

In order to obtain our students feedback on the methodology used in the three courses as well as their views on the evaluation system implemented, a questionnaire was given to all 112 students enrolled in the program at the end of their academic year, 2000. Questionnaires are a very useful way of gathering information about different dimensions of teaching and learning (Richard and Lockhard, 1994) as they would enable us to collect the information we needed relatively quickly. This information would then be used as input for evaluating the course and materials and making the appropriate adjustments. In this particular case it was

decided that the questionnaires were to be answered anonymously as we felt that our students would feel less threatened in this way.

The questionnaire was written in Spanish (Appendix A) and consisted of the following four open-ended questions:

Item 1: “What is your opinion about the score given to the Departmental Exam in parallel courses (30%) versus the score given to the Departmental Exam in regular courses (50%)?”

Item 2: “Did the score of the Departmental Exam in parallel courses (30%) influence your academic progress? Explain.”

Item 3: “What is your opinion of the alternative evaluation used during the parallel courses in relation to: a) Project assessments, b) Portfolio assessments, c) Contracts, and d) Portfolio and contract activities?”

Item 4: “Do you think that your language learning progress and final performance during parallel courses was effective? Explain.”

Items 1 and 2 were designed to elicit students’ opinion about the role the weight of the departmental exam played with regard to their final grade at the end of the course, while item 3 was designed to obtain their view of the alternative qualitative process approach used in assessing reading comprehension and the influence those activities had had on their language learning development. Item 4 was aimed at obtaining feedback on their language learning development at the end of the course.

The subjects were distributed in three groups. Group 1 was made up of the 31 students who had taken the three-term parallel program, group 2 of the 47 students who had studied two of the courses, while group 3 consisted of the 34 students who had studied only the last course. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Subjects' distribution during the program

GROUP	COURSES TAKEN	NUMBER OF STUDENTS
1	ID1-111, ID1-112, ID1-113	31
2	ID1-112, ID1-113	47
3	ID1-113	34

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

Taking into account the qualitative nature of the study, a nine-column matrix was created, for each group of subjects, into which the data obtained from the questionnaires was summarized and collapsed into categories, for the purpose of calculating percentages. (Appendix B).

The following categories, **positive/negative; yes/no** emerged from the analysis of Items 1 and 2 respectively. For example, when students used words with a positive connotation like, very good, excellent in Item 1, this was considered to be **positive**, while when they considered the percentage to be either too high or too low, it was considered to be **negative**. For item 2, **yes** was used for those subjects who considered that the lower score had had a positive influence in their grade and **no** for those who thought it had not.

The categories obtained from Item 3 followed the same procedure as for item 1 (**positive-negative**), while those corresponding to item 4, followed the same procedure

carried out for item 2 (**yes-no**). Moreover, in the cases where students had not answered any of the items, the category **did not answer** was used. It was also taken into consideration some important comments that had been expressed by the students.

The results obtained from the analysis of the data were divided into three parts: first, the data collected from the 31 students who had studied the three-term parallel program (111,112,113) was analyzed, followed by the data from the 47 students who had taken two of the courses (112 and 113) and finally that of the 34 students who had studied only the last course (113). This division was made based on the moment in which each group of students had enrolled in the courses. Finally, the results obtained from the 112 students were gathered together. The following table shows the percentages obtained for each of the items.

Table 2: General results

Item	+	-	Did not answer
1	87%	12%	1%
2	78%	20%	2%
3.a	65%	10%	25%
3.b	80%	12%	8%
3.c	46%	10%	44%
3.d	69%	14%	17%
4	94%	4%	2%

RESULTS

After analyzing the table above, we can see that the majority of the students considered the fact that the Departmental Exam in parallel courses had had a lower percentage than in regular courses to be positive and more than half of the subjects thought that this had had a positive influence in their final grade at the end of the course.

With regard to the alternative assessment used, i.e., projects, portfolios and contracts, 65% of the students considered the project done in ID1-111 and 112 to be a positive form of

evaluating their reading comprehension whereas 10% did not. It is important to note that the 24% of the students who did not answer this item correspond to those who had entered the program in 113 and would not have done this activity. On the other hand, while 80% of the students considered the portfolio assessment to be positive, 12% did not and 8% did not answer the question. When asked about the contract, 46% thought it was a positive evaluation instrument while 10% did not. Again, it should be pointed out that not all of the students were given this option in the final course, ID1-113 and this is reflected in the 44% who did not answer this item.

When consulted about the activities that made up the portfolio and contract, 69% of the students considered them to be positive, while 14% considered them to be negative and 17% did not answer. Finally, with regard to the feedback obtained from our students, 96% thought that the alternative assessment used to evaluate their academic achievement in reading comprehension during the parallel remedial courses had had a positive influence on them, while 4% considered that it had not had any significant influence on their performance.

CONCLUSION

The information obtained from our students through this questionnaire was important as this was the first time that alternative assessment was being used throughout the entire program and we needed to get their opinion on the differences they might have experienced with regard to the two types of evaluation: Traditional vs. Alternative, especially when the former, through the Departmental Exams, plays such a decisive role in their final grade. The majority of the students (78%) considered the lower Departmental grade to have had a positive influence on their final performance, with one of their main reasons being the fact that they were under less pressure and could work better in class. One student commented on

the fact that the Departmental exam not only measured their proficiency in reading in English but also their analytical capability and that a higher percentage would be too much. This emphasizes the frustration that these students, who have problems understanding the surface meaning of the texts, face when confronted with questions which require a deeper analysis of the text which obviously most of them are unable to do.

However, 20% of the students considered the lower grade to have had no effect on their academic performance. A closer look at their comments revealed the fact that some of them would have preferred an even lower percentage assigned to the test, others, a higher percentage with less written activities to be done in class and some just did not like multiple choice type exams and so the lower percentage assigned did not affect them in the least. These comments also revealed the role that different learning styles play in the type of evaluation that some students would prefer to have. The comments made by the students also gave us an insight into what they considered to be an important and effective manner of helping them to learn and practice the reading skills necessary for academic achievement as well as the assessment of the same.

80% of our students considered alternative assessment through portfolios and contracts and the activities contained therein as being an excellent way to evaluate the on-going learning process. Students who had worked on projects during ID1-111 and 112 found that these had encouraged them to do research, had maintained their interest and had helped them to clarify and reinforce the “themes”, in this case the rhetorical functions that they were studying in class and which they related back to their own personal project. However, the 10% who did not like project work found it to be long, tedious, boring and required work outside of the classroom.

With regard to using portfolios as part of their assessment, many students agreed that it was an excellent way to evaluate their learning through continuous work and effort as some mentioned that it showed the work they were really capable of doing. Many students used the word “responsibility” and perhaps the fact that they were in charge of doing their assignments, keeping all of their corrected work and then turning it in at the end of the term, may have made it all the more important to them. Most of the students also liked having the freedom to choose the activities they wanted to do and have evaluated and a few mentioned that they could plan their learning and with it the effort they were making in the course. Perhaps students felt that the choices they were making were theirs and not imposed by some outside “authoritative” force and somehow this made them feel more responsible for their own learning, progress and success. This may be the reason why the words “responsibility” and “creating commitment” appear in so many comments made with regard to the use of contracts. However, a number of our students did not like either Portfolio assessment or the contract. Some could not see the use of portfolios and others found the contracts to be of little benefit to their learning. Both were considered to be boring and tedious.

Nevertheless, as a result of the positive feedback obtained from the groups who had used the contracts, this option is now being offered to students in the second course (ID1-112) where, based on the results of a diagnostic test given to the group the first day of class, each student is given the choice to work on different activities to improve specific skill areas. They are also given a percentage of their final grade that will be dedicated to evaluating these specific areas and the student is free to choose the date of the test and the percentage he/she wants allotted to each area.

Our students’ comments strengthened our belief in the importance of student involvement in their learning process and the need to have a flexible evaluation system that

has a positive instead of a negative effect on student motivation. 94% considered their learning in the parallel courses to have been effective. Many students mentioned the fact that constant work and effort had led to an improvement in their reading comprehension, higher motivation than in the previous courses, along with lower stress levels and of course, the type of evaluation found in this course had contributed to what they considered to be effective learning. The following are just a few of the comments made and which have been translated from Spanish into English.

- I feel capable of reading and interpreting readings, writing compositions and even understanding some conversations in English. (Parallel 111)
- I believe that if I had continued in the regular courses, although I would have passed the subject, I wouldn't have learnt as much as in parallel. (Parallel 111)
- It was relatively effective. It depended on the effort that I made. (Parallel 112)
- Yes. It helped me to realize that yes I could. (113 Parallel)
- Yes, much more than in the regular course. I learnt by doing the activities.
(Parallel 113)

Constructivists believe that “..effective learning begins from the learner's active participation in the process of learning [where they] are fully involved in decisions about the content and processes of learning...” (Benson, 2001). Our students participated in their learning process by being able to choose the topics they wanted to research in the projects, the texts which interested them in the reading logs and final unit task activities, through the activities they wanted evaluated in the contract and the collection of their hard work and effort in the portfolio. Their comments are a testimony to this ideal. As one student wrote. “Now I am not afraid of English..”

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Appendix A: Questionnaire's Format

UNIVERSIDAD SIMÓN BOLÍVAR
DEPARTAMENTO DE IDIOMAS

PERCEPCIÓN ESTUDIANTIL SOBRE LOS CURSOS ID1-111, ID1-112 E ID1-113 PARALELO

Apreciado estudiante, el siguiente cuestionario tiene como objetivo obtener tu opinión sobre las actividades de evaluación utilizadas en los cursos de paralelo a fin de mejorarlas. Por lo tanto, te agradecemos que lo respondas con toda franqueza y honestidad. De antemano, muchas gracias por tu colaboración.

- Por favor, indica con una “X” los cursos de paralelo que has cursado.

ID1-111 _____

ID1-112 _____

ID1-113 _____

1. ¿Cuál es tu opinión sobre el porcentaje dado al Examen Departamental en los cursos de paralelo (30%) versus el porcentaje dado a este examen en los cursos regulares (50%)?
2. ¿El hecho de que el porcentaje del Examen Departamental en los cursos de paralelo fuese menor (30%) ejerció alguna influencia en tu rendimiento académico? Explica.
3. Emite tu opinión sobre la evaluación alternativa utilizada durante los cursos de paralelo con respecto a:
 - a. Los proyectos
 - b. Los portafolios
 - c. Los contratos
 - d. Las actividades contenidas en los portafolios y contratos
4. ¿Consideras que tu aprendizaje y desempeño final en los cursos de paralelo fue efectivo? Explica.

Appendix B: Example of matrix (group 1)

Sujeto	1	2	3 ^a	3b	3c	3d	4	Comentarios
1.	Buenísimo	No	Difíciles	Lo mejor	Oportunidad	No todas me gustaron	Si	
2.	Bien	Si	Largos/ tediosos	Poco útiles	NC	NC	Si	
3.	Bien	Si	NC	NC	NC	Estudio constante	Si	
4.	Excelente	Si	NC	Responsabilidad / notas	Espectaculares	NC	Si	
5.	Bien	Si	Excelentes	Buena opción	Bien	Algo tediosas	Si	
6.	Bien	No	Muy bien	Hay seguimiento	Excelentes	Bajo puntaje	Si	
7.	Bien	Si	Me gustó	Valoran las actividades	Desmotivan	Muchas	Si	
8.	Flexibles	Si	Mucha ayuda	Responsabilidad /orden	Libertad de elegir	Importantes	Si	
9.	Adecuado	Si	Aprendí	Gran ayuda	Ayuda	Ayudan con la nota	Si	
10.	Bueno	Si	NC	Muy buenos	NC	Ayudan a aprender	Si	
11.	Mejor	Si	Muy Bien	Muy buenos	Muy bueno	Importantes	Si	
12.	Bien	Si	Excelente	Excelentes	NC	Excelentes	Si	
13.	Bien	Si	Buenísimo	Buenísimo	NC	Amenas	Si	
14.	Perfecto	Si	Conveniente	Normal	NC	NC	Si	
15.	Bueno	No	Muy Bien	Ayuda mucho	NC	Muy buenas	Si	
16.	Mejor	Si	Ayudan	Responsabilidad / orden	NC	Ayudan	Si	
17.	Perfecto	Si	Excelente	Excelente	Excelente	Perfectas	Si	
18.	Bien	No	Excelente	Muy bien	NC	Almacenan información	Si	
19.	Adecuado	Si	Ayuda/ investigación	Ayuda	NC	Se practica y aprende	Si	
20.	Adecuado	Si	Ayuda / investigar	Me gustó mucho	NC	Mejora las estrategias	Si	
21.	Bien	No	Bien	Buena oportunidad	Libertad de elegir / me gustó mucho	Ayudan al aprendizaje	Si	
22.	Ayuda	Si	Motivan la investigación	Colección / orden	NC	NC	Si	
23.	Bien	Si	Aclaran temas	Poco útil	NC	No ayudan	Si	
24.	Excelente	Si	Importantes	Mejora la nota/orden	NC	Importantes	Si	
25.	Bueno	No	Motivan	Ayuda / orden	NC	NC	Si	
26.	Flexible	Si	Excelentes	Buenos	Buenos	Buenas	Si	
27.	Muy poco	No	Interés a investigar	Tediosos	Desorden	NC	Si	
28.	Bien	Si	Bien	Muy bien	Excelentes	Ayudan y obligan a trabajar	Si	
29.	Mejor	Si	Excelente	Fastidiosos	Me gustó	NC	Si	