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Lessons from Central America: Action Research in an Adult English as a Foreign Language Program

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Abstract: *An environment of intense competition among tuition-supported adult English as a foreign language (EFL) programs revealed a degree of accountability to which we in the U.S. are unaccustomed.*

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to introduce new ideas and to possibly change programming methods in a language institute for adults located in San Jose, Costa Rica. My presence as a researcher from outside the country was solicited by the director of the institute to provide the institute with formative evaluation data that could help the institute thrive in an intensely competitive environment. Precisely because of the intense competition for quality programs of English in a city where 23 tuition-supported peer programs (Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad, 1999) competed with each other, the director of the institute invited my participation as an action researcher for seven months. He wanted me to conduct research that would generate formative evaluation data. The institute was widely known in Costa Rica where it enjoyed a very positive reputation. Word of this institution even reached me in the United States where Costa Rican graduate students who had studied there spoke highly of its quality.

Another factor that attracted me to this project was to learn if English as a foreign language (EFL) programs with different contextual assumptions could contribute to our better understanding and better management of English as a second language (ESL) programs in Canada and the United States. I wanted to know if the environment of intense competition produced innovative methods of teaching English as a second or foreign language to adults, methods that might prove useful for ESL program planners in the United States and Canada. The research questions were stated as follows: 1) What was the institute's central theory of language learning and teaching? 2) Did the institute demonstrate concepts of adult education theory or teaching methodology? 3) What accounted for the positive

reputation of the institute, both within the country and in the United States?

On my part as a researcher I wanted to discover, if those English language programs outside the United States could provide useful models for either teaching or managing ESL programs in the United States and Canada. Especially, I wanted to see how programs that existed in an intensely competitive environment were conducted. Although I was invited to help improve this particular program from an adult educational point of view, I came away from the experience with some counter-cultural ideas that I believe could serve teachers and managers of ESL programs in Canada and the U.S.

Theoretical Framework

Merriam and Simpson (1984) described action research as a form of qualitative inquiry that aims to affect change in the phenomenon studied. Such changes include changes in management approach, teaching methods or curriculum. In this form of inquiry, the researcher not only observes the phenomenon, but interacts with it by entering into the educational project itself. I began my research as a trainee in the methods used to teach English as a foreign language at this institute. I later taught a series of classes under the supervision of a tenured teacher at the institute. After a short internship, I taught classes on my own, attended in-service teacher training workshops, and, finally, teamed with the director of the institute to plan and present an in-service workshop for the instructional staff of the institute. To make sense of the data, Sternberg's (1984) theoretical functions of global and local intelligence were used to frame up our findings.

Methodology

The method of data collection could best be described as a combination of case study and action

research. Merriam and Simpson (1984) define case study as “. . . an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution or community (p. 95).” In this case, the limits of the study were bounded by information gathered at one particular adult language institute. Action research describes a form of qualitative inquiry which has as its goal to affect change in the phenomenon studied, such as changes in management approach, teaching methods or curriculum development (Merriam & Simpson, 1984).

I entered into the phenomenon studied as participant observer. From August 22, 1998 to March 5, 1999, I became successively an observer of teachers and students in the classroom, then a teacher trainee. As a trainee, I taught classes first under the supervision of a master teacher. I then taught my own classes independently and, finally, designed and conducted an in-service workshop for the teachers. In addition, I interviewed students, teachers and administrators informally, without an interview guide, almost daily for the seven months of residency at the institute.

The focus of the study was limited to teaching methodology, instructional materials used, reactions of the adult students to methods and materials, students' reasons for choosing the institute and student achievement as measured by students' ability to engage in spontaneous, free conversation. In other words, the study focused on instructional effectiveness, program effectiveness related to student outcomes, student satisfaction and student proficiency. Other possible data, such as budgetary data, teacher tenure, personnel matters were excluded from the study.

After interviews with students or teachers, notes were recorded in a journal periodically during the course of each day. On occasion notes were made after the interviews, on occasion during the interviews and always during classroom observations of the teaching methods used at the institute. Interviews were not tape-recorded. The journal was maintained throughout the seven-month period. Validity checks consisted of frequently returning to those interviewed for correction and clarification. Validity checks were also made by triangulating the data gathered in interviews with teachers and students with data gathered from language coordinators or the director of the institute. A final validity check was made by presenting a research report to eight members of the administrative staff of the in-

stitute for their verification, correction or debate. Thus, diverse individual perspectives of the staff were incorporated into the draft document.

Data was analyzed in the following manner: notes were taken in a small notebook and later categorized by recopying each interview or observation on a 3x5 card. At the top of each card I placed a short title or statement describing the theme of the narrative segment. Cards were then grouped according to their respective themes. Through this process, certain themes considered descriptive of the program were judged for their degree of saturation, highlighted and later reviewed. The program director and I later reviewed the narrative to insure its accuracy. In our final review certain statements were highlighted when they were judged to contribute to emergent themes.

Findings

The Power of Linguistic Theory

The director of the institute, a twenty-five year veteran of teaching EFL, took special pains to clearly articulate a theory of language learning to me and to his staff. That theory was based largely on the writings of Hammerly (1985, 1991) who espoused a form of structural linguistics. As a former structural linguist who at one time had been on the staff at the Foreign Service Institute, Hammerly (1991) claimed that current methods and theories of language learning over-emphasize communicative exercises at the expense of accuracy which result in an adult's learning a pidgin rather than acceptable English. Hammerly (1991) insists that adults do not learn languages as children do. Accordingly, they need planned exercises to help them internalize the basic structures of the target language before attempting free conversation. This theory counters popular communicative and immersion theories currently in vogue in the United States and Canada. The theory of language acquisition that emphasizes communication even at the early stages of learning can be exemplified by the following article that appeared in the *New York Times* under the byline, “Becoming an American 101.” Describing her visit to a community based English as a second language program in New York City, Thernstrom (Oct. 19, 1997) related how the teacher divided the students into pairs and asked them to find out four things about each other. The students constantly turned toward the teacher asking for help. She, in turn,

kept reassuring them to speak English right or wrong. She continually brushed aside their questions for acceptable grammatical forms. "Don't talk to me, talk to your partner," she said as she walked around the room (Sec. 6, p. 88, column 2). However, the *New York Times* reporter observed that the feelings of the learners were palpable; they wanted to learn correct English, not "street speak" (Sec. 6, p. 88, col. 2).

The above article illustrates the very opposite of the theory that permeated the institute, the theory of Linguistics (Hammerly, 1985, 1991). This theory proposed that all languages have a unique structure. Adults do not learn languages the way children do, points out Hammerly. They need structured exercises when learning a second or foreign language to enable them to internalize the basic patterns of the language. Until those patterns are internalized, the learner ends up trying to communicate in a pidgin. This theory so permeated the day to day operation of the program, that four cardinal principles of language teaching based in on Hammerly's writings (1985, 1991) hung framed in the teachers' testing and materials room. The framed set of bold letters read:

OUR PRINCIPLES

1. Always think in terms of the entire group rather than in individuals
2. Prepare your students for success; don't ask them to do what they haven't been prepared to do.
3. If your students can do it, don't you do it
4. Intensive oral practice is the key to achieving speaking proficiency, not explanations. (Framed and hanging on the wall at the institute)

Teaching Principles Related to Adult Education

This set of core teaching principles were, first of all, linguistically robust if one subscribes to the theory of structural linguistics. The principles also related to some well-worn credos of adult education without, of course, the program director or teachers ever having been trained in adult teaching methods. In emphasizing the group over the individual, the institute attempted to maximize practice time, thus involving all the students in large group and small group exercises. Much time was spent, for example, in pair work in which one student would model the pattern or ask the question from the printed materi-

als while the other would answer without the aid of print material. During this time the instructor moved around the room as facilitator and monitor, going from small group to small group, listening, providing useful feedback and modeling when the students so requested. This pattern of teaching involved the students in a very active way, while the teacher served as instructional designer and facilitator rather than drill leader. In one class I observed, the students spoke more than 90% of the time, while the teacher spoke less than 10% of the time. This principle capitalized on two suggestions first advocated by Knowles (1980, p 237) when he spoke of "Skill practice groups" and "Dyads: two-person groups organized to share experiences, coach each other..." In the dyads used at this institute there was a great deal of peer coaching.

The second principle – preparing the students for success – counteracts fear, which the institute insists is the number 1 enemy of learning. Here the institute echoes one of the foundational Rogerian ideas inherent in andragogy: ". . . all threat to the learner must be reduced to a minimum in order for the learner to be able to differentiate his/her perception of the material (Knowles, 1990, p. 42)."

The third principle emphasized student control of the material. This principle assigned the adult educator to the role of facilitator and monitor by emphasizing the student's role as a very active participant. The third principle also reminded the teachers that teacher talk, explanations of grammar were to be avoided or at least to be kept to a minimum. A corollary of this principle instructed the teachers to explain a grammatical point or a sentence pattern only once. After the teacher modeled the sentence pattern, the students were to practice while teacher served as a monitor listening to the student's production of the language, correcting mistakes, helping with pronunciation.

Finally, the last principle echoes what I have often heard in adult skill classes – the need and desire for practice. Therefore, teachers should mainly organize the students' practice time. Because the institute makes the assumption that life is hectic for its adult students with work and family obligations, it assumes that students will not have time outside of class to practice or study. Consequently it emphasizes structured group exercises that maximize student practice during class time.

A Modular Curriculum

Students at this particular institute knew their progress at all times because the program was divided up into 52 modules. They moved up and down among the 14 homogeneous groups according to their rates of progress. Teachers were rotated every week because the language learning theory, the curriculum, and the teaching methodology were so well intermeshed that teachers could pick up from any other teacher at any time. At the end of the week, teachers filled out forms indicating what had been done up to the point they left off on Friday. These forms were then given to the teacher that rotated into a particular section the following week. This practice gave the students maximum exposure to different accents and individual eccentricities of voice and diction.

When students first enrolled in the program, they were promised in an orientation session that they would advance to FSI 3 (Foreign Service Institute, Level 3) within 12 months if they gave serious attention to the learning activities provided for them by the institute. This promise contained a bold claim. Hammerly (1991) theorized that the attainment of FSI Level 3 allowed the learner to then enter into an immersion setting where learning from experience should continue at a rapid pace because all of the English sentence structures had been learned. By comparison, the Peace Corps goal for the language training of its volunteer trainees is FSI level 2, a level many fail to reach in 3 months of intensive language training (Nolan, 1989).

In 1998-1999 the institute graduated 12 groups of adult learners. I attended one of these graduation ceremonies held in the cafeteria of the institute. Graduates were seated at a head table of sorts, since there was no elaborate table covering, while the table faced a small audience. The director of the

institute stood next the table holding a microphone in the style of Oprah or Phil Donahue. He asked them questions about their future careers, about their families and about their experiences at the institute in a free question and answer session. Students displayed surprising command of the language at about the FSI Level 3 range of fluency and accuracy, just as the administration of the institute had promised.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

The results of this study highlight the value and power of adhering to theory in the design of ESL programs. The sixteen page curriculum was essentially a guide within which many materials such as commercial texts, video tapes and charts were used and frequently changed. The approach of basing one's entire program on one well-defined linguistic theory that was, in turn, articulated in a curriculum guide rather, than on a possible mixture of theories grounding commercial materials has been advocated by researchers in the field. Hammerly (1991) goes as far as urging the elimination of textbooks in favor of curriculum guides. This approach follows an exhortation given to practitioners of adult basic education by Dill (1997) when he urged ABE programs to develop a sense of continuity. Continuity gives both teachers and students a sense of purpose and direction.

The linguistic theory of the institute could be compared to Sternberg's (1984) concept of global and local intelligence. Using Hammerly's insistence on structured exercises that promote automaticity we can see in the following figure that Hammerly's theory is no more than an application of Sternberg's concept of practical intelligence.

Global Intelligence	Local Intelligence
<p>Novel Facet of Intelligence In novel tasks such as free conversation The mind focuses on one task and operates serially on one set of meaningful sounds at a time. The more proficient speakers have a greater degree of automaticity.</p>	<p>Automatic Facet of Intelligence The mind unconsciously operates on many tasks at the same time in parallel, such as sound recognition, pronunciation, streaming separate phonemes in sense patterns.</p>
<p>Free Conversation which requires Creating meaningful utterances and responding to questions in ordinary conversation</p>	<p>Practicing sentence structures and patterns until they become automatic. Once automatic, little or no attention given to sentence structure or pronunciation</p>

Table 1: Adaptation of Sternberg's Theory of Practical Intelligence (1984, pp. 275 - 279)

At the end of most modules beginning about module 6, the institute begins to introduce more and more free conversation using the sentence structures studied up to then. As a teacher-trainee, I failed my supervised teaching, because according to the master teacher I introduced free conversation in one of my classes before the students were ready, thus ignoring the first of the Institute's core principles. As a side note, of the four teachers who started training with me in September, only one was selected. Two were dismissed outright, I was allowed to sign up for the next training program and retrain, while only one trainee was hired to teach.

Using Sternberg's (1984) model, it appears evident that the only way to evaluate second language learning is in free conversation. Observing the graduates at their commencement, I could see where participants in this program would have an opportunity to evaluate themselves in the final ceremony according to how well they communicated with the program Director. This activity was a single piece of the entire program and replicated what they had done at the end of each module when the language coordinator came to the classroom to question the students on the material of the module. The language coordinator would then ask general questions exemplifying the sentence structures they had already studied and allow them to demonstrate their grasp of the material creatively.

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