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Ninth grade students EFL learning as they participate in a remedial plan centered in a classroom based assessment cycle*

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* Este artículo es un producto investigativo; corresponde a un avance de la investigación, intitulada: "*NINTH GRADE STUDENTS EFL LEARNING AS THEY PARTICIPATE IN A REMEDIAL PLAN CENTERED IN A CLASSROOMBASED-ASSESSMENT CYCLE*", debidamente aprobada por la Maestría en Docencia de Idiomas; adscrita a la línea de investigación ENSEÑANZA Y APRENDIZAJE DE LAS LENGUAS.

EVALUATION:

“A systematic process of determining the extent to which instructional objectives are achieved by pupils”. (Nunan, D. 1992)

ABSTRACT

During my teaching practice, I have worked with some students who do not reach the expected academic achievements established for English courses, and they need to develop remedial activities. Unfortunately sometimes these students are not successful. They keep low academic achievements even with the additional support from these making up activities. Taking the previous into account, I have designed some remedial activities centered in a classroom based-assessment cycle. These activities have been organized taking into consideration the suggestions that students, EFL teachers and parents have given in interviews and questionnaires.

Key Words: Academic Achievements, Evaluation, Assessment, Remedial Activities.

RESUMEN

Durante mi práctica como docente, he trabajado con algunos estudiantes que no alcanzan los logros académicos establecidos para las clases de inglés y ellos necesitan desarrollar actividades remediales. Ellos mantienen un rendimiento académico bajo a pesar del soporte adicional de las actividades de recuperación. Teniendo en cuenta lo anterior, he diseñado algunas actividades de recuperación centradas en un círculo de evaluación durante la clase. Estas actividades han sido organizadas teniendo en consideración las sugerencias que estudiantes, profesores de inglés y padres de familia han manifestado en entrevistas y cuestionarios previos.

Palabras clave: Logros académicos, evaluación, actividades de recuperación.

INTRODUCTION

This study has been developed at Rafael Reyes School from Duitama (Boy), a public and technical school with 1750 students from pre-school to eleven grade. Moved by some expectations which I detected about remedial activities during my teaching practice at this school, I used some interviews and questionnaires with students, EFL teachers and parents to find out the sources of problems and possible solutions.

Therefore, the analysis of the interviews and questionnaires, made me aware of different relevant aspects influencing students' possibilities to reach expected achievements in English by means of remedial activities. Among them, students referred to nervousness when they had to develop this kind of making up work since they have to review a lot of material. Furthermore, the fact that students had to present remedial activities of different subjects in the same day was a problem because they did not have time to prepare them.

In the same way, the EFL teachers talked about the remedial activities; they reflected about these activities expressing the importance for students to prepare listening, speaking, reading and writing skills to build competent English students; and in the same point it is important to focus the activities on the students needs. They suggested the learning process may be out of the classroom too. They considered it is necessary to have into account different activities maybe, related to games because these can be interesting for them and may contribute students get a better learning; finally they suggested to plan special dates to students develop the remedial activities.

To end, parents suggested that it would be interesting to help their children to develop the remedial activities because they consider this is a good opportunity to share with them. They said they enjoy sitting with their children and talking about the school.

The analysis of my pupils' situation during my studies in the Master program in Language Teaching, led me to pose a question to guide my project: what happens with students English language learning when they work in a remedial plan centered in a classroom-based assessment cycle? My exploration also intended to illuminate my knowledge about

the role of classroom- based assessment in students English Language Learning under the previous circumstances.

This paper includes an introduction, the theoretical framework related to evaluation, assessment and remedial activities; then I present the research methodology which is about how the instruments were used for collecting data; the pedagogical design for explaining the process of classroom based assessment cycle, and finally I point out some initial findings to present the process of one student during the remedial activities.

THE PARTICIPANTS

I am an English teacher in ninth grade and also the researcher in this study. The participants were forty one 9th graders, 11 females and 30 males. Their expectations about English classes were very different. To develop my research project, I worked the remedial activities with all my students, but I selected at random my five participants, one female and four males, and their ages were between 13 and 15 years old. They share different activities such as sports, games, cultural and academic activities in the classroom. But some of them have low academic achievement in the English classes.

In what follows, I want to present to you briefly the theoretical framework which has constituted the support of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To develop my study, it was important to take into account some literature and research in the areas of interest which concern to my question. Therefore this section will develop issues related to evaluation, assessment and the legal Framework of remedial activities.

Remedial activities in our country are defined from The Legal framework (Ley 115, Art. 49, 1994) which argues that when students can not approve the academic achievements, teacher has to design a kind of remedial activities in order to students develop them by groups or in individual way to students reach their academic achievements. Taking the previous into account, it is necessary to remember the Decreto 230 (2002) considerations about evaluation which is defined as the process to give a judgment about a determine subject, but before there will be a research process to have elements for giving a judgment. Judgment is defined as the understanding faculty when the man can differentiate the bad from the good and the true from the false.

Based on the Decreto 230, teacher has to grade the learning process of the students writing some letters according to the academic achievement: D (deficiente), I (insuficiente), A

(acceptable), S (sobresaliente), E (excelente). This kind of evaluation is named qualitative evaluation because in this stage, teacher has to evaluate the student's process and the abilities, and the student has to develop problems and express opinions. In this way, the evaluation process changed because some years ago the evaluation was quantitative, it was based on numbers from one (1) to ten (10) and this was based on the students outcomes. Now, the remedial activities won an important role during the learning process because students have the opportunity to develop remedial activities when they do not reach the academic achievements.

Taking into account the last paragraph it is important the teacher be aware about the responsibility he has as a guide of the students, helping them to build their knowledge and remembering that evaluation has to be human. In this way, it is important to consider the technical and human evaluation, "...human approach to evaluation is continuous, immediate, based on classroom life that gives meaning to an ELT curriculum. Furthermore, this human approach considers the teaching and learning experiences as the array of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, values, knowledge and actions that teachers and students undergo and undertake in living their lives in schools" (Quintero, 2003). It is necessary to focus the remedial activities on the students' needs during all the process, because students will be motivated in their learning process and the knowledge will be focus on their reality.

I considered important to review the authentic assessment (Quintero, 2003) for developing this project, because this mentions three advantages for assessing the students: It does not take away from instruction because teacher has to follow the student's process in the English Language Learning, in this way the remedial activities have to be designed according to the student's context and based on their experiences and needs. It takes into account the learning context, because the first knowledge of the child is about the context, he learns to live in his environment. I think about importance for increasing my research project to take into account the students needs, and to analyze the students English Language process, while they are developing remedial activities based on their needs and suggestions. And finally assessing students reflects individual students' progress; because during the research project the students developed the self-evaluation, in order to be aware of him/her process.

For improving our teaching practice it is necessary to develop an authentic assessment through which students can demonstrate what they know and what they are able to do in real life situations. According to Willis (1998) "the human approach to curriculum evaluation is not much different from evaluation living in general". Our function as teachers consists of helping students to make sense about what they are doing and learning. In this approach, they start to become autonomous; understanding their learning process. When we make sense of students' reality we are becoming critical, because we as teachers see students not just as learners but as human beings, who develop capacities and abilities day by day.

RESEARCH DESIGN

My research project is focused on a Qualitative approach which as Seliger, H and Shohamy, F (1984) explains, it is originally developed from the methodologies of the anthropologists and sociologists field. A qualitative approach seeks to study human behavior within the context in which that behavior would occur naturally and in which the role of the research would not affect the normal behavior of the subjects.

This plan is based on remedial activities with ninth grade students and the activities are being developed in the English classes. The students are in the classroom and as they suggested in the interviews, they also developed other activities out of the classroom, such as at home with their parents, where they had the opportunity to share their parents talking about situations given in the remedial plan. During the process I analyzed their behavior with their classmates while they developed the activity.

The qualitative approach, attempted to present the data from the perspective of the subjects or observed groups, so that the cultural and intellectual biases of the researcher did not distort the collection, interpretation, or presentation of the data (Jacob, 1987). The specific method I followed during my project was the case study which is defined by Merriam (1988) as a detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or one particular event. In this case, the setting was the Rafael Reyes School and my attention was focused on five ninth grade students who were selected at random to develop the plan. The results were not modified because it is important to present their reactions and outcomes when students work in remedial activities. I not only took into account my description of phenomena but also my students perceptions developing these activities.

I want to tell you about the research methodology which includes three instruments in order to help me to collect data during the process.

During my research project, I used the following instruments to collect data:

Interview, as Bell J. (1987) defines this is an instrument which requires considerable planning and preparation time. Therefore, it is most useful when employed periodically and when relatively systematic and uniform feedback is desired from students, parents or teachers. At these times, the information they provide is valuable for planning and assessing whole courses or units. I considered important to use interviews with ninth grade students because by means of these instruments I obtained the students' opinions and suggestions about the remedial activities they developed for reaching the academic achievement, at the same time I could have information about my students' English learning progress as they developed the remedial plan. Their comments were useful for improving the next remedial plan because they mentioned it will be interesting to find puzzles and games in the remedial

activities and the activity at home may include questions about the family. I prepared semi structured interviews; which were developed at the beginning of the project, to know the different opinions students, parents and teachers had about remedial activities and based on these I began to build my project. Then students developed other interviews at the end of the remedial activities to evaluate the activity and to have their opinions and suggestions for preparing the next activity.

The next instrument I used was the portfolios, which are collections of samples of work produced by the student, over a period of time (Bell,J, 1987). These samples include written work which students developed during their academic period. In this case, the portfolios were used to collect the different remedial activities which teacher prepared to students developed during the remedial time. These activities were based on vocabulary about the readings, games, puzzles, draws, and posters; and interviews students did to their parents.

The choice of what goes into the portfolios is based on specific criteria, agreed on by teacher and student together, having into account the students suggestions. Along my study, participants prepared their portfolios collecting activities they did during the remedial time. The students prepared their remedial activities and they did a self evaluation about their work, then they shared the activity with his/her classmate and he/she evaluated the work (hetero-evaluation); and finally, teacher evaluated the work (co-evaluation). These evaluations were kept in the portfolios in order to student was conscious about his/her improvement in the second language.

Finally the field notes were used after returning from each observation, interview, or other research session, the researcher typically writes out, what happened. He or she renders a description of people, objects, places, events, activities and conversations. In addition, as part of such notes, the researcher will record ideas, strategies, reflections, and hunches, as well as note patterns that emerge (Bell. J. 1987), In my study, I collected field notes when my students were developing the remedial activities to record how they worked by pairs and in individual way, their expressions during the development of the activity, the questions students did to the teacher or to their friends to solve their doubts and the different conclusions they reached in these activities. All the aspects were important to write in this instrument because I described the activity and it was important to observe and to write about the impact students had developing the activities.

In the next part, I will share briefly the pedagogical design I implemented to carry out my research experience.

PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN

My pedagogical design is focused on the remedial activities which were organized taking into account not only students' suggestions, but also the source of classroom-based assessment. These remedial activities were prepared during the students' academic development, beginning with the first academic period. In this stage students had difficulties with some topics, and they had to take remedial activities which were designed by the teacher in order students to develop them when the topic had finished.

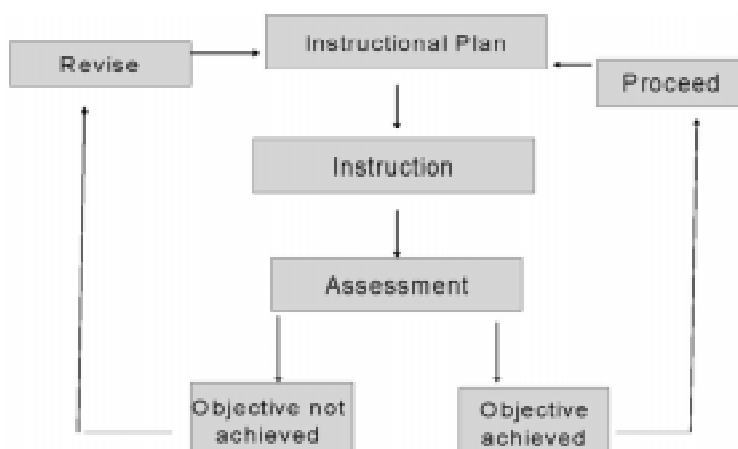
To develop each remedial activity, at the beginning, students were working alone, then they were working by pairs with the same activity, and they were happy because they had the opportunity to share with their friends, and some of them were able to ask to their friends about the activity. Finally they developed the last part of the activity at home with their parents, as students suggested in the interviews.

My proposal is guided by some theories related to classroom based assessment. The authors Fred Genesee and Elsa V. Hamayan (1994) described this topic with planning and monitoring instruction on an ongoing basis in order to optimize students learning. This description reveals the process of my research project because at the beginning I planned the academic topics based on the English academic program for ninth level, then I prepared the classes by means of lesson plans on continuing basis in order for students to improve the English language learning.

The authors (Genesee and Hamayan) argue that students need to develop proficiency in the second language at the same time that they expand and master conceptual knowledge and skills in academic domains. The guidelines that teachers have traditionally used for teaching language to these students have focused on language learning in isolation. However, it is becoming common practice for teachers to consult mainstream curriculum guidelines and in particular, the content objectives or the core curriculum, in order to identify the language learning needs of their students. Taking into account the authors valuation, it is important that teachers focus the learning process on the students needs in order to students improve the English language and they practice it in their daily life as a pleasant activity.

In the following paragraph, I am going to present the characteristics of classroom-based assessment cycle which I applied in order for students to reach the academic achievement planned for ninth grade. This process includes:

- The instructional plans.
- Instruction
- Assessment



The diagram presents the process I developed during my research process. I began with the instructional plan which is about to determine the students specific learning needs and to plan appropriate classroom instruction; it is a placement within the classroom. In my case, I began with interviews about the expectations they had related to remedial activities, then, I did a previous self evaluation about the academic achievements we were studying. In the first academic time, these were:

Expressing cultural events in oral and written presentations.

Describing events which occur in the present in written form.

Identifying grammatical characteristics of regular verbs in past tense by means of oral activities.

Practicing pronunciation through activities such as listening and oral reports.

Having identified the students needs, by means of the interviews, teacher then connect the students in learning activities that may have general or specific objectives and that are modified to meet these particular needs and characteristics. This was an important step because it helped me to identify the problems my students had related to the academic achievement and I could determine their specific learning needs, and to plan an appropriate classroom instruction.

The effects of these instructional activities on students learning are assessed in some way, and the results of the assessment are used to make decisions about the next round of instruction. If assessment indicates that the objectives have been achieved, the teacher moves on to the next topic, and the cycle begins again. If the results of assessment indicate that the objectives have not been achieved, decisions need to be made about how to modify

further instruction so that it is more effective. In this case teacher prepares a remedial plan in order to students reach the academic achievement and when the student obtains the achievement, the cycle begins again with a new topic.

Now, in the next paragraph, you will find some comments of one student, related to the remedial process in their academic period.

FINDINGS

At this point of my research, I have not gone through a detail analysis of data. However, I have perceived important insights about my students' process to reach their academic achievements in English. As an example, I am reviewing important aspects from one of my students' process:

Steven: He is 14 years old. He has some problems with the English class because sometimes he does not develop the activities in the classroom. He needs to review the vocabulary because frequently, he is looking for unknown words in the dictionary. He is a shy student, he only asks to his friends about the doubts he can find in the activities. At the beginning, he did not reach two academic achievements from four which were planned for the first academic time. Then, I prepared a remedial plan to support his learning. This plan was organized in three times. The first time the student had to work alone developing an activity about vocabulary, then the student could work with a partner developing some questions related to the reading; finally the student had the opportunity to develop the last part of the remedial plan at home, where the student told the situation of the reading which was about a couple who did not have money to buy a present and in two days there will be Christmas. Student told this story to his parents and they had to answer if they had lived a similar situation to the reading. Finally, students could work by groups and they created a new story in order to represent it to the class. Steven developed the activity very motivated and some comments about the activity were: "I enjoyed the activity because it was different from others. I liked the activity about drawings because for me it was new to represent by means of a draw and I always was writing the meaning of the words. I liked the activity I developed it with my mother, because I could share with her an activity and she was happy listening to me and, then telling me a story. It was interesting". With this remedial activity, Steven could practice and review the topic he had low mark. In the self evaluation he expressed that he needs to practice because he knows he has to learn verbs and different vocabulary. As I said at the beginning, Steven was a shy student but now he can talk to the teacher, when he has doubts, he asks to the teacher, now he enjoys the English classes. Finally he reached the achievement but he continues improving the English language.

CONCLUSIONS

As an English teacher, I could observe that students enjoy learning different topics, but it is important to innovate based on the students' interest, in this sense, students are motivated in the English class and they are engaged in their own process.

During the development of this project, I had the opportunity to share the learning process nearly with my students; I could perceive their expectations, their anxieties and in some cases their fears and sadness. By means of classroom based assessment cycle, students had the opportunity to achieve the academic objectives because they could prepare the topics again following a designed remedial plan.

It is important that teachers focus the learning process on the students needs in order to learners improve the English language and they practice it in their daily life as a pleasant activity. BELL, J. (1987). *Doing your research project: A guide for first time researchers in Education and social science*. Milton Keynes, Philadelphia. Open University Press.

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