



College students doing research? Yeah right! Well it can be done

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to share the changes and innovations implemented in the research strand of the BA in Language Teaching at the School of Languages from the University of Colima. We will first describe the conditions and characteristics the research classes had prior to our intervention. In this first section of the article we will discuss important aspects such as: content, methodology, projects as well as other issues related to them as they were.

After this description, we will talk about the analysis we made to the research strand and the conclusions we reached. Following, we will explain the changes and innovations we decided to make in the content, the methodology and assessment of the research strand. In addition, we will talk about the results we expected from the different changes we made.

Finally, we will present the results of the intervention to the research strand, these include the linkage among the four research classes that make up the strand, the combination and sequencing of the theoretical and the practical aspects of any research initiative, a number of student presentations accepted at several national English teacher conferences and some publications of the research projects the students carried out.

"Research is to see what everybody else has seen,
and to think what nobody else has thought" (Albert Szent-Gyorgyi)

Introduction

This article aims to show the development that research as a class has presented in the School of Foreign Languages of the University of Colima (FLEX from now on). The definition and importance of research for FLEX will be discussed, a description of the situation found before the re-structuring of the research strand in the current program is included, the changes and innovations made to the program are described and the expectations we had and results obtained will be presented.



1. Background

FLEX has a BA in Language Teaching since 2001, this program includes a research strand made up of four classes starting in fifth semester and finishing up in eighth semester with the writing of a BA dissertation. If we analyze the previous FLEX program, BA in English Language, we find that research was a component in the last two semesters with the goal of writing a BA dissertation as well. These two programs show that research for FLEX has been an important aspect for the professional development of their students. This statement is confirmed with the results of an informal interview to the teachers and a questionnaire for the students. Teachers were asked “Why is research an important component of the BA?” and students answered the following question: Is Research important? If their answer was yes they had to state three reasons for it. It is important to mention that none of the students questioned found the practice of research as ‘not important’. The most significant responses are presented next:

- “Research is important because it will allow our students to be able to further develop as teachers...” (Teacher response)
- “It is required by any reputed institution that their teachers are able to carry out research” (Teacher response)
- It allows students to improve their teaching practices in general by being able to solve problems, improve their planning, adapt materials, and in general become better teachers” (Teacher response)
- “If our students are able to carry out classroom research they will become reflective teachers translating this practice in a high sense of responsibility” (Teacher response)
- “Mexico needs high quality researchers” (Teacher response)
- “It will help us solve problems in the classroom” (Students response)
- “It will help us complete our dissertation work” (Students response)
- “It will help us to get a better job...” (Students response)
- “It will help us adapt and choose better materials for our classes” (Students response)



- “It can help us understand better why things happen in a certain way”
(Students response)

When we asked both, teachers and students, to define what research was the following terms were a common occurrence: systematic data collection, analysis, inquiry, knowledge, professional development / growth, reading, problem solving strategy, information, interpretation, results. Therefore, it can be said that for FLEX research means: *The opportunity for professional development or growth that starts with an inquiry or a problem which; through systematic data collection, its analysis and interpretation of such data and discussion of results, questions can be answered, problems can be solved and conclusions can be reached. This is a cycle that can contribute to improve teaching practices in general.*

It can then be said that for us, and the teachers and students at FLEX, research is a very important element of the BA program. However, although research was perceived as very important by the faculty members, students and the curricula where research was present in four semesters, the actual situation of it was very different.

2. Research Strand Situation

As it was mentioned above students take a research class in their junior and senior years. The fifth and sixth semesters include a class called “Research Workshop” and in the seventh and eighth semesters there is a class called “Research Seminar”. These four classes are linked one to the other in what constitutes a research strand. Before we started teaching these classes, we carried out an exhaustive evaluation of the situation presented within the strand on the grounds that “evaluation of any curriculum or program is both inevitable and essential for the well being and improvement of the program” (Onel, 1997). The following are the issues that resulted from this evaluation:

1. The programs for the four classes were not linked nor sequenced one to the other. In other words, the content of each program was isolated from



the rest and the same topics repeated as much as four times in the four semesters mentioned above.

2. The teaching methodology employed was a traditional one, where learning seems to be a passive affair (Brandes and Ginnis, 1986).
3. Students of sixth semester who already took the first part of the research workshop class did not really know much about the basic theoretical underpinnings of research, nor about the practical aspects such as the data collection methods and research approaches.
4. Students of eighth semester who already took two semesters of research workshop class and one semester of research seminar and who, up to this point 'in theory', should have completed the literature review for their dissertation, in practice at best they had only a rough draft. In some cases they pretended to use similar methodologies despite the fact that they had a wide variety of topics which called for different research approaches and methodologies.
5. Students had no real reason for carrying out research other than accrediting a class.

2.1. A comparison of the four research classes as they were

The following chart shows a comparison of the contents included in the four research classes as they were before the intervention. The chart is organized starting from the research class to be taken in the 5th semester and moving chronologically to the one that takes place during the 8th semester. The contents are included in Spanish as to not modify their meaning.

Research Workshop I 5 th Semester	Research Workshop II 6 th Semester	Research Seminar I 7 th Semester	Research Seminar II 8 th Semester
Primera Parcial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Las cualidades del investigador • Preparando el terreno – Métodos para la investigación educativa <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Investigación acción y el Modelo "el maestro como un investigador" b) Estudio de caso c) El estilo etnográfico d) Estudios e) El estilo experimental 	Primera Parcial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Las cualidades del investigador • Preparando el terreno – Métodos para la investigación educativa <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Investigación acción y el Modelo "el maestro como un investigador" b) Estudio de caso c) El estilo etnográfico d) Estudios e) El estilo experimental 	Primera Parcial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • La naturaleza de la investigación <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Hablando sobre la investigación b) Experimentando la investigación c) Compilando la investigación d) Analizando los datos de la investigación e) Diseñando la investigación 	Primera Parcial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selección de los métodos para la colección de los datos • El análisis de la evidencia documental <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) La naturaleza de la evidencia documental b) La localización de la evidencia documental c) La selección de la evidencia documental d) El análisis crítico de los



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<p>f) ¿Cuál método?</p>	<p>f) ¿Cuál método?</p>	<p>f) Interpretando las definiciones la investigación g) El significado de definir la investigación h) Reflexionando sobre las definiciones de la investigación</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigación de la adquisición de una segunda lengua: un repaso Factores que afectan el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua (repaso) Preparando el terreno – Métodos para la investigación educativa <p>a) Investigación acción y el Modelo “el maestro como un investigador” b) Estudio de caso c) El estilo etnográfico d) Estudios e) El estilo experimental f) ¿Cuál método?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigación del salón de clases: el análisis de la interacción <p>a) Hablando sobre la investigación del salón de clases b) Experimentando la investigación del salón de clases c) Compilando la investigación del salón de clases d) Analizando los datos de la interacción del salón de clases e) Diseñando tu propia investigación del salón de clases f) Interpretando la investigación del salón de clases g) El significado de Investigación del salón de clases h) Reflexionando sobre la investigación del salón de clases</p>	<p>documentos</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diseño y aplicación de cuestionarios Planeación y conducción de entrevistas Diarios Estudios basados en la observación
<p>Segunda Parcial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revisión de la literatura <p>a) El marco teórico y analítico b) La revisión crítica de la literatura c) Localización de materiales publicados d) Acceso a bibliotecas e) Planeación de la búsqueda de la literatura f) Conseguir los materiales</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Llevar registros y tomar notas <p>a) El fichero bibliográfico b) Haciendo las referencias</p>	<p>Segunda Parcial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Revisión de la literatura <p>a) El marco teórico y analítico b) La revisión crítica de la literatura c) Localización de materiales publicados d) Acceso a bibliotecas e) Planeación de la búsqueda de la literatura f) Conseguir los materiales</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Llevar registros y tomar notas <p>a) El fichero bibliográfico b) Haciendo las referencias</p>	<p>Segunda Parcial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigación del estudio de un caso: investigación en proceso <p>a) Hablando sobre la investigación del estudio de un caso b) Experimentando la investigación del estudio de un caso c) Compilando la investigación del estudio de un caso d) Analizando los datos del estudio de un caso e) Reportando tus resultados f) Diseñando investigación</p>	<p>Segunda Parcial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> La interpretación de la evidencia y el reporte de los resultados Interpretación y presentación de la evidencia El reporte de los resultados



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<p>c) Tomar notas y la preparación para el reporte d) La categorización para la evidencia e) Haciendo citas f) Mucho alboroto de nada</p>	<p>c) Tomar notas y la preparación para el reporte d) La categorización para la evidencia e) Haciendo citas f) Mucho alboroto de nada</p>	<p>del estudio de un caso g) Interpretando la investigación del estudio de un caso h) El significado de Investigación del estudio de un caso i) Reflexionando sobre la investigación del estudio de un caso • Planeando el proyecto a) Selección de un tema b) Las primeras ideas y delimitantes para el foco del estudio c) ¿Hipótesis u objetivos? d) El plan del proyecto e) Los tiempos • Llevar registros y tomar notas a) El fichero bibliográfico b) Haciendo las referencias c) Tomar notas y la preparación para el reporte d) La categorización para la evidencia e) Haciendo citas f) Mucho alboroto de nada</p>	
<p>Tercera Parcial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • La naturaleza de la investigación a) Hablando sobre la investigación b) Experimentando la investigación c) Compilando la investigación d) Analizando los datos de la investigación e) Diseñando la investigación f) Interpretando las definiciones la investigación g) El significado de definir la investigación h) Reflexionando sobre las definiciones de la investigación 	<p>Tercera Parcial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • La naturaleza de la investigación a) Hablando sobre la investigación b) Experimentando la investigación c) Compilando la investigación d) Analizando los datos de la investigación e) Diseñando la investigación f) Interpretando las definiciones la investigación g) El significado de definir la investigación h) Reflexionando sobre las definiciones de la investigación 	<p>Tercera Parcial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revisión de la literatura a) El marco teórico y analítico b) La revisión crítica de la literatura c) Localización de materiales publicados d) Acceso a bibliotecas e) Planeación de la búsqueda de la literatura f) Conseguir los materiales • Investigación de estadística descriptiva: el análisis de un estudio a) Hablando sobre la investigación de la estadística descriptiva b) Experimentando la investigación de la estadística descriptiva c) Compilando la investigación de la estadística descriptiva d) Analizando los datos de la estadística descriptiva e) Diseñando tu propia investigación descriptiva f) Interpretando investigación descriptiva h) El significado de la estadística descriptiva i) Reflexionando sobre la estadística descriptiva 	<p>Tercera Parcial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redacción de la versión final del reporte • Presentación del proyecto de investigación

Chart 1: Overview of the contents of the four research programs



From this chart we can draw the following conclusions:

1. Research Workshop I and Research Workshop II included exactly the same contents in their programs.
2. Research Seminar I included all the contents studied in both research workshop classes – these contents are stated in exactly the same way. The only topic that is not included is *Qualities of the Researcher*. That is:
 - The contents of the first partial evaluation of research workshop are included in the contents of the first partial evaluation of research seminar I (see Chart 1).
 - The contents of the first part of the second partial evaluation of the research workshop classes are included in the third partial evaluation of research seminar I. The contents of the second part of the second partial evaluation of the research workshop classes are included in the second partial evaluation of research seminar I (see Chart 1).
 - The contents of the second partial evaluation of the research workshop classes are included in the first partial evaluation of research seminar I (see Chart 1).
3. The other contents present within research seminar I are just a more detailed description of the contents repeated three times so far. For instance within the contents of the first partial evaluation ‘action research’ is considered as a topic and then it is made a distinction between this topic and ‘classroom research’ when one is part of the other. Another example is that within the contents of Research Seminar I during the first partial evaluation is mentioned as a the topic ‘case studies’ and then during the second partial evaluation the same topic is dealt with apparently more detail (see Chart 1).
4. It was also noticed that it was only until the second part of the second partial evaluation in Research Seminar I where students started working for the first time in the selection of a research topic for research, the writing of objectives, hypothesis, and the construction of an action plan.



5. The third partial evaluation in Research Seminar I talks about the literature review and where to find the materials but it does not really show how the student is expected to write such review. Instead it includes information about statistics.
6. Research Seminar II expects the student to select the research methods as well as the data collection methods and the analysis and interpretation of the information collected by different means making a big emphasis on document analysis.
7. Research Seminar II finishes with the writing of the dissertation and its presentation.

2.2. The Teaching Methodology

FLEX has as part of its ethos to employ a student centered approach to teaching; however in the case of the research strand a traditional approach was employed, i.e. the teachers seem "...to be concerned primarily with the transmission of knowledge and skills from the expert-teacher to the apprentice-pupil" (Brandes and Ginnis, 1986 p.2). This was evident when all students were doing the same thing at the same time showing that the cognitive aspects of research were the most important ones leaving on the side the students' ability to make choices regarding their own research.

2.3. Situation of the Students in Sixth Semester

On one hand, the students of sixth semester who already took the research workshop I, could not deal with any of the practical aspects of research but rather they had a vague idea of many theoretical aspects and none of them were embedded in a practical situation. In order to better understand the previous claim it is necessary to clarify our understanding of the term workshop as "...an educational program for a ... group of people that focuses especially on techniques and skills in a particular field" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). This situation resulted in a group of students who had no practical techniques or skills to carry out research.



2.4. Situation of the Students in Eighth Semester

On the other hand the students of eighth semester were in a more precarious situation because, although they had taken two research workshop classes and a research seminar one, their dissertation work was not clearly developed, i.e. at best there were a few students who had a rough draft of their literature review with stated topic and objectives. At worst they had not been able to refine their research topic and as a result their literature review included “all and nothing”. We attributed this situation to the way the contents of the classes were chosen and distributed within the programs.

2.5. Reasons for Carrying out Research Initiatives

Junior and Senior students had no real motivation for carrying out research in either one of the classes other than obtaining a passing grade in the class. This situation also contributed greatly to the lack of commitment from the students towards doing quality research.

This in-depth analysis of the research strand led the faculty members of FLEX to propose a number of changes to it.

3. Changes and Innovations to the Research Strand

Taking into consideration that any research design “involves much more than philosophical assumptions... [and that they] must be combined with broad approaches to research (strategies) and implemented with specific procedures (methods)” (Creswell, 2003 p. 4); we decided to make a number of changes to the research strand in order to satisfy our definition of research as well as to address the four areas described previously and which were a source of concern among the faculty members.

The changes proposed are described addressing the five areas of concern described in section 2:

3.1. The Research Strand Programs

Treat research as a true strand of classes where the class Research Workshop I was the beginning and it built up through Research Workshop II into Research Seminar I and Research Seminar II respectively. In other words



Research Workshop I would account for the practical steps in any research initiative and it would build on the other three research classes. Following there is a chart illustrating the contents of the proposed programs for each one of the classes within the research strand. As it can be seen we have tried to make the four classes to naturally lead towards the goal of getting students to be able to carry out a research initiative. The strand represents two cycles that seem to be independent one from the other but in fact the knowledge that students gain from the research workshop classes will greatly aid them in the writing of a more formal type of research such as their dissertation or the article for publication.

Research Workshop I 5th Semester	Research Workshop II 6th Semester	Research Seminar I 7th Semester	Research Seminar II 8th Semester
First Partial Evaluation I. Terms commonly associated with research II. Why Classroom Research by teachers III. Classroom Research IV. Referencing V. Elements of a research project: introduction, hypothesis, justification, research questions, data collection, data analysis, presentation of findings, conclusions	First Partial Evaluation I. Data collection methods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaires • Interviews • Diaries • Observation: self and peer • Notes • Document analysis II. Experimental Research vs. quasi-experimental research. III. Ethnographic research	First Partial Evaluation I. Use of APA as the standard for their dissertation writing II. Selecting a Dissertation Tutor III. Selection and Delimitation of a Research Topic IV. Hypothesis and Research Question V. Objective writing VI. Selection of topics to investigate	First Partial Evaluation I. Delimitation of the type of research II. Definition of the research method to be employed III. Definition of the data collection methods to be employed. IV. Definition of the methodology process V. Start of data collection VI. Article Proposal VII. First Draft of Article
Second Partial Evaluation I. Quantitative Research II. Experimental research	Second Partial Evaluation I. Case Studies II. Action Research III. Selecting a tutor IV. Action Research Initiative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic • Objective • Hypothesis • Research Question • Data Collection Method V. Writing a presentation proposal draft	Second Partial Evaluation I. Critical reading and first draft of literature review II. Review of first draft of literature review by tutor. III. Correction of first draft of literature review IV. Review of the different research methods. V. Presentation of first draft of the research proposal	Second Partial Evaluation I. Finish Data Collection II. Analysis of data collected III. Interpretation of Results IV. Second Draft of Article
Third Partial Evaluation I. Qualitative Research II. Mixed Methods III. Educational research IV. Strategies of inquiry	Third Partial Evaluation I. Collecting data for their Action Research Initiative II. Interpret and analyze the data III. Write conclusions IV. Send the presentation proposal to a forum / conference V. Write the presentation	Third Partial Evaluation I. Final corrections to the literature review. II. Final corrections of the research proposal III. Viva presentation of the research proposal	Third Partial Evaluation I. Introduction and Abstract Writing II. Putting together the dissertation III. Sending the dissertation to an external tutor IV. Making the final corrections V. Finishing the article and sending it for publication

Chart 2: Proposed programs for the research strand



3.2 Teaching Methodology

As it was previously mentioned FLEX includes within its ethos the use of a student centered approach where “students are encouraged to participate fully in, and take responsibility for, their own learning; each individual is valued and trusted” (Brandes and Ginnis, 1986 p.3). This part of our ethos was addressed by giving each student the freedom to choose their own research topic / project as well as to the choosing of their tutor. Once the projects are chosen students are presented with a wide range of files to study from in order to be able to complete their research project. In other words, they study in depth the topics they need in order to be able to understand their own research project. All of this is done with the guide of the class teacher and their tutor and in this way we are able to instill in them a deep sense of responsibility and commitment. In addition, teacher and student negotiate the evaluation criteria to be used in class as well some of the assignments to be done in class. All of these elements contribute to fulfilling our ethos.

3.3 Situation of the Students of Sixth Semester

At the end of the sixth semester the students will have studied the necessary material to be able to carry out a ‘practical research initiative’. This research initiative will have the form of classroom action research. The class’ cycle will end with the preparing of a forum / conference presentation where they will be able to share the results of their action research initiatives. This will be accomplished with the help of both the class teacher and a project tutor from the FLEX.

3.4. Situation of the Students of Eighth Semester

The students of eighth semester will have the advantage of having taken part of a ‘practical research initiative’ when they begin with the Research Seminar Cycle. Therefore, their formal research or dissertation will be done based on their previous experience. The final conclusion of the two cycles will be their written dissertation and an article to be sent for publication. These things will be



accomplished with the help of the class teacher, a tutor from the FLEX, as well as the help of an external tutor.

3.5 Reasons for Carrying out a Research Initiative

Because students of sixth semesters have to send the results of their research initiative to a forum or conference and the students of eighth semester, in addition to have to complete their dissertation work with the standards of quality needed for publication, they have to write an article for publication the reasons for conducting a thorough research initiative going beyond the mere obtaining of a passing grade. These opportunities also help ensure the conscious aid of their project and dissertation tutor.

4. Results Obtained

After just one semester of trialing we have had some very satisfactory results:

1. 48 completed dissertation works resulting from Research Seminar II class.
2. 24 completed action research initiatives resulting from the research workshop II class.
3. 8 dissertations externally evaluated and ready for publication.
4. 13 formal presentations of the results of dissertation works in the FIEEL (Foro Internacional de Especialistas de Enseñanza de Lenguas) in Colima.
5. 10 formal presentations of the results obtained from the action research initiatives presented in Research Workshop II in the FIEEL in Colima.
6. 2 accepted presentations of the results obtained from the action research initiatives presented in Research Workshop II in MEXTESOL León 2008.
7. 8 accepted presentations of the results obtained from the action research initiatives presented in Research Workshop II in FONAEEL Chetumal 2008.



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Biodata

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