The Mixed-Proficiency Language Class: Consequences for Students, Professors and the Institution[1]

(La clase de varios niveles. Consecuencias para los estudiantes, los profesores y para la institución)

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Abstract

This article examines the effects of a mixed-proficiency language class on the participation, progress, retention and classroom management with students enrolled in the Associate Program in English at Universidad Nacional (Brunca Campus). The social and economic consequences that this phenomenon may have on the university and the community are also analyzed. Data were collected using focus groups, interviews, questionnaires, structured observations and artifacts.

Resumen

Se examinan los efectos de reunir estudiantes con varios niveles lingüísticos en una sola clase de inglés como lengua extranjera y sus efectos en la participación, progreso, retención y el desarrollo de la clase en el Diplomado en Inglés de la Universidad Nacional, Sede Regional Brunca. Se analizan las consecuencias sociales y económicas en la institución y en la comunidad. La información se recolectó de grupos focales, entrevistas, cuestionarios, observaciones estructuradas y artefactos.

Introduction

In spite of positive efforts to make learners communicatively competent, many challenges emerge in a language class. One is the case of the mixed-proficiency language class (MPLC), which refers to the situation faced when students with different language proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) are placed in the same group to receive language instruction. In this type of group, some students are beginners with very little ability to communicate while others are advanced students able to handle almost any communicative situation they are given in class. Between those extremes, intermediate language proficiency students can engage in basic communicative situations, understand main ideas and have short fluent interactions. In such a complex scenario, professors become jugglers, moving pieces harmoniously and cleverly to accomplish successful instruction providing all the students equal opportunities for learning.

This pressing reality points to the need for research to shed light on the challenges that both professors and students face in MPLCs. Undoubtedly, those challenges may have serious consequences at individual and group levels. At the individual level, when students' language needs and goals are not met, student dropout and disappointment may cause program failure. This, in turn, may have social consequences; if a program is disqualified, it will fail to satisfy the needs of the community for bilingual professionals. Therefore, this research aims to explore and describe the consequences of placing students with marked differences in language proficiency in the same class in the Associate Program in English (APE) at the Universidad Nacional, Brunca campus.

The Pertinence of the Study

This program started in 2008 with an enrollment of 209 students. However, during the following years, enrollment increased mainly because of the program's schedule, which is from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. from Monday to Friday. It allows students to both work and study. In addition, the program's short duration, in comparison with that of other academic programs offered at the campus,[3] makes it an attractive option for students. MPLCs have been common in the APE since 2008 (when it began as a regular program at the UNA Brunca campus), due to the different levels of the students who enrolled in the program. The mixed-proficiency of the target group may have serious consequences on teaching and learning for the students, instructors and the institution itself. Regarding students, being in a class where language proficiency levels are so different may affect their participation, which then, can affect their progress in the course. With regard to the instructors, the development of the lesson may become a nearly impossible task for they have to try and find a midpoint from which to teach. However, focusing on this midpoint, although well intended, may discourage those learners whose linguistic competence is far superior. Moreover, students whose language levels and learning needs are not addressed appropriately may end up dropping out. This is an issue of concern for the entire institution.

To gather evidence about the different levels in the first-year of the APE, a proficiency test[4] was administered in February 2011

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3   The Associate Program lasts two years while other programs take four years.
4   The proficiency test administered was a Mock TOEIC (a simulation of a Test of English for International Communication), a two-hour, paper-and-pencil, multiple-choice test that consists of 200 questions divided into two separately-timed sections. Listening and reading skills were tested as were pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar micro-skills. The test was administered in the language laboratory and an answer sheet was used. This test has a score conversion chart that places students into a six-level scale which are A1–A2 (Basic User), B1–B2 (Independent User) and C1–C2 (Proficient User). These categories are based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. This test was designed by the ETS (Educational Testing Service), a non-profit, US-based organization.

to thirty-three students as a diagnostic procedure for this research. Students' proficiency levels were identified by using the guidelines designed by The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which allows placing students in four main categories. The number of students' correct answers is converted by using a scale that goes from 10 to 990. The categories depend on the results, so students who score from 0 to 220 points are in the A1 category; students who score from 225 to 545 points are placed in A2; students who score from 550 to 745 are placed in B1; students who score from 750 to 845 are placed in B2; and finally students who score from 850 to 990 are placed in C1. Table 1 presents key results from the diagnostic test administered to the informants.

Table 1. Results from the Proficiency Test Administered to First-year Students from the Associate Program in English
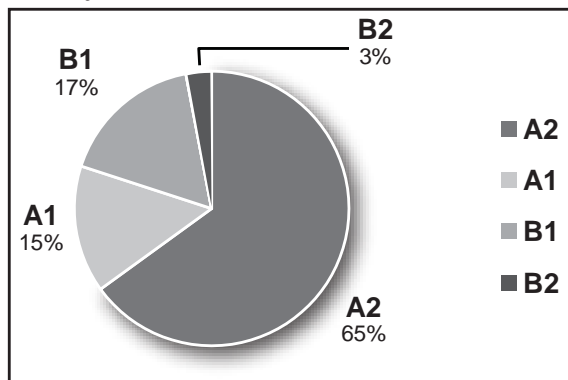
Source: Diagnostic test, February 2011.

Table 1 shows the percentage of students in each linguistic proficiency level and reveals that a surprising majority—65%—are classified as A2. In addition, 17% percent of the students are in B1, while 15% of the subjects are A1. A small number of students are B2. It is also important to consider that even though there are many in

level A2, their scores range from 225 to 545 points; this means that they could have marked linguistic differences. These results suggest that the Associate Program cannot ignore the reality of the mixed-proficiency language class.

Socio-economic Situation in the Southern Region

Pérez Zeledón has experienced a radical change in its socio-economic orientation. The main driver of this transformation has been tourism, which has taken the place of agricultural activities. Perhaps no other single variable correlates more closely with this economic reorientation than the ecological direction of tourism in the region. As Arce illustrates, tourism has displaced agricultural activities such as coffee and grains to a certain degree.[5] Likewise, popular tourist attractions such as Chirripó National Park and its hotsprings, Marino-Ballena Biological Park, Del Caño Island, Corcovado National Park and beaches along the Pacific coast have turned this area into a paradise for national and international tourists. In fact, Sánchez, explains that there are still more attractive prospective rural places that could be used as a means to improve the quality of life of people in the region.[6] He added that tourism is one of the main topics of interest in Pérez Zeledón. Under those economic circumstances, the labor market in this region is shaped by a demanding reality of effective communication skills, establishing the English language as a priority.

The Brunca region, like many others in Costa Rica, has suffered an employment crisis in which lay-offs have become a common reality. This has led citizens to pursue higher levels of specialization and competitiveness by obtaining effective tools in order to be considered potential employees who deserve a job position. Based on the tourist employment needs of this region, people are

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5   Luis Enrique Arce, *Pérez Zeledón* (Heredia: Litografía Morales, 2006) 186.
6   Leonardo Sánchez, *Análisis de economía regional en el cantón de Pérez Zeledón* (San José: Universidad de Costa Rica, 2008) 30.

required to learn English so that international income will increase. To accomplish this, they must consider efficient English programs offered in the community. The Associate Program in English has attractive characteristics that make it a viable option for those community members who require a specialized and competitive profile to meet the labor market's needs in the region. Two of these features are its night schedule and its duration (only two years).

How Does the Mixed-Proficiency Language Class Emerge?

Educational institutions with language programs differ in registration procedures, each one making its own decisions, and having specific actions and requirements to follow. Even though some of these institutions have made great efforts to group students who share similar linguistic needs at the beginning of a program, there is always the chance of finding a class in which students with notably different linguistic proficiency are put together. To prevent this, some institutions administer a placement test so that students can be grouped with peers who have similar language skills. However, this attempt is not always successful since many institutions use tests that do not fit the particular needs of their context and the particularities of their language programs. Additionally, MPLCs emerge for other reasons. Scrivener claims that grouping students by age, using ineffective placement procedures, and putting the learners into a single group because the school has insufficient levels may cause the MPLC phenomenon to arise.[7] Unfortunately, not all institutions have the financial or institutional support necessary to be able to use the appropriate placement/grouping procedures. That is the case of the program analyzed here.

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7   Jim Scrivener, *Learning Teaching* (Malaysia: MacMillan Publishers, 2005) 67-68.

The Need for Identifying Different Proficiency Levels

When faced with MPLCs, professors should identify the students' language proficiency as a first step. For this purpose, they can implement a diagnostic activity, administer a placement test or just carry out a thorough observation. Once instructors identify their learners' proficiency level, they face the challenge of addressing the classroom experience by means of differentiating instruction. There is an underlying need in any language program to identify the linguistic competence of learners since it becomes the basis for the effective and successful implementation of language curriculum. If specific learners' needs are not identified, teaching may lack the instructional components necessary for learners to succeed in the learning of the language.

Learning in MPLCs

Each human being is gifted with distinguishing traits to be able to contribute to society in a unique way. Language professors identify these individual differences when teaching students with very different social skills and learning capacities in the same class. Some of these characteristics include language aptitude, motivation, and age, and make differences even more pronounced in MPLCs.

Language aptitude explains why some students are able to grasp ideas after short explanations, others memorize large lists of words with no effort, and still some others are able to interpret pictures to convey meaning in a short time. In contrast, other types of students, in spite of having a strong desire to learn a new language, cannot internalize key concepts or ideas. According to Byram, aptitude refers to "cognitive abilities rather than attitudes and affective dimensions of learning."[8] It means that learners have less control

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8   Michael Byram, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning* (London: Routledge, 2000) 37.

over this ability. The MPLC is already a challenge and if there are learners with an aptitude problem, the negative effects will be more noticeable since they will put an additional burden on both professors and students.

Motivation also takes a central role when identifying learners' differences in MPLCs since it can be affected directly. Due to the disparity in language proficiency, it is easy for students to become frustrated in MPLCs, since high proficiency students may feel held back and low proficiency students may feel pushed. Additionally, not all students in a classroom have the same motivation. Students have different reasons for being in a language class. For instance, some may be there because of their parents or the educational system, as in the case of children and teenagers, or even university students when taking required courses for a degree.

When considering learners' differences in MPLCs, age plays a pivotal role since adding another noticeable difference among students can make the classroom a harsh learning environment. Teenagers and adults perceive and value education differently, so grouping students with varied ages and linguistic levels can have serious consequences. Teaching adults is of particular interest here. In *Teaching by Principles,* Douglas Brown mentions significant cognitive and affective characteristics such as adults' ability to handle abstract rules and concepts, their longer attention span (longer than that of children and teenagers), their appeal to multiple senses, their self-confidence identified as global self-esteem, and the fact that due to their developed abstract thinking ability, they can understand context-reduced segments of language better.[9] Certainly, students' needs vary across a number of dimensions, and the idea that age makes a significant difference in learning and defines classroom instruction places a heavier burden on the professors facing mixed-linguistic proficiency classes.

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9   Douglas Brown, *Teaching by Principles* (New York: Longman, 2000) 86-91.

Student Participation

Participation in the classroom is directly linked to students' engagement in activities. This aspect is commonly graded in language courses due to the positive outcomes that student participation has on their learning of the language. Participative students ask questions, respond, solve exercises as requested, take part in discussions. In other words, they work actively toward achieving their own learning outcomes. They also tend to be more aware of their learning process while internalizing linguistic knowledge. This positive attitude toward learning is defined as engagement. According to Krause, this type of engagement refers to "the time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance learning."[10] Foreign language professors must promote class participation by giving students the opportunity to be active builders of their own learning and at the same time recognize a wide scope of participation. One main concern in participation is that learners' language proficiency determines classroom involvement. In MPLCs, students face a disparity in quality and quantity of participation. Students with a higher proficiency level may take an active role since they have the skills to express their opinions and solve exercises more easily and faster. On the contrary, students with a low language level may display passive behavior that limits in-class engagement and consequently slows down their progress in the language.

Classroom Management

Language instructors teaching a class of students with contrasting linguistic levels face laborious challenges. There is an erroneous attempt to see all learners in a class as having one particular language proficiency level, and class management is inaccurately based

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10   Kerri Lee Krause, "Understanding and Promoting Student Engagement in University Learning Communities." Center for the Study of Higher Education (2005): 3.

on that level. By so doing, professors fall into the habit of following the same classroom procedures regardless of the students' linguistic proficiency level. This involves three main elements of the language class: material, error correction and evaluation.

Instructional material is a key element in the classroom because it is the basis for instruction. This means that classroom material can promote meaningful and efficient learning if it is properly designed. By and large, this material is the backbone of the class from which many of the classroom procedures and dynamics are derived. That is why the design and use of classroom material should be given careful consideration. As Tomlinson has stated, the material should "[p]rovide the learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communication…, [a]chieve impact in the sense that they arouse and sustain the learners' curiosity and attention."[11] Neither of these two principles are addressed when textbooks, printed copies, videos, songs and any other source are used as a "one-size fits all" tools to cater to all linguistic needs in MPLCs. Students may either lose interest because those materials are far below their language proficiency or they may become frustrated because they just cannot keep up with the flow of the class.

Error correction is an issue of concern for every EFL professor since key considerations such as what, how and when to correct students to avoid discouragement is not an easy task. In fact, claims about the value of error correction have changed in perspective moving from an aesthetic position that prevented and punished errors to a flexible one that, according to Hedge, views them as part of "a creative construction process."[12] Likewise, Hedge argues that "the treatment of error requires consideration of many issues. Whether or not to perform the role of diagnoser and corrector of errors is only the first. If we decide to undertake this role, we will need a careful

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11 Brian Tomlinson, *Materials Development in Language Teaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 15.

12 Tricia Hedge, *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 15.

policy for making decisions about what, when and how to correct."[13] With this argument in mind, one can conclude that learners produce a wide range of errors in MPLCs. Thus, professors must be selective in deciding what to correct from learners since low proficiency students cannot be corrected the same way as high proficiency ones are, though they need to be pushed more than the rest. In the long run, language instructors teaching students with different proficiency levels in one class have a greater responsibility than others do.

It is particularly important to recognize that evaluation in MPLCs is quite challenging. Evaluation in language instruction can be divided into testing and assessment. A test is, according to Brown, "a method of measuring a person's ability or knowledge in a given domain."[14] It has a summative component that focuses on the overall level of achievement or product and a formative one that refers to "a variety of ways of collecting information on a learner's language ability or achievement."[15] As opposed to testing, assessment centers on a formative level of achievement that values progress rather than product. Instructors in an MPLC are confronted with a dilemma which is not easy, and very much dependent upon the flexibility of the curriculum. This dilemma causes instructors to reflect on whether to measure the students' progress by administering tests that abide by the course objectives. If they do so, students with a low-proficiency level will be at a disadvantage since they are set up for failure by not providing them with differentiated testing procedures to satisfy their particular learning needs. Conversely, if professors resort to utilizing differentiated testing that considers the students' individual progress, a serious consequence arises: the gap of language proficiency among students will continue to exist in one classroom.

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13   Hedge, 15.
14   Brown, 384.
15   Chrisitine Coombe, Keith Folse and Naney Hubley, *A Practical Guide to Assessing English Language Learners* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010) xv.

Student Progress

Student progress in the language classroom can take two forms: quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative progress is measured by good grades on tests, quizzes and assignments, high scores in courses, competitive scores on standardized tests and finally by the successful completion of an academic program. A qualitative view of progress takes into consideration the students' capacity to reach communicative goals inside and outside the classroom setting. Many factors can influence effective academic performance, such as curriculum, the professor's and students' involvement and engagement in their learning process. Student progress in MPLCs is linked to success in learning the language. Learners who thrive are the ones who are able not only to obtain good grades but also to show linguistic improvement in classroom performance. If institutions are committed to success, learners will benefit from that directly. Adequate funds, time and resources can lead to notable outcomes. In light of this, institutions must ensure that learners are achieving the expected outcomes since their progress reflects the effectiveness of the particular program. On the contrary, institutional neglect can become a stumbling block and prevent success.

Retaining Students in the Program

In order to retain students in the program, faculty members and authorities must be truly committed to the success of programs. The administrative authorities of the institution need to be engaged in ongoing curriculum evaluation, which is "a systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a curriculum and assess its effectiveness within the context of the particular institutions involved."[16] If authorities ensure

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16 James Dean Brown, *The Elements of Language Curriculum: A Systematic Approach to Program Development* (Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1995) 218.

that the learning process will be successful, a high student retention rate can be guaranteed.

Certain conditions promote student retention. According to Tinto, one is that "students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide clear and consistent information about institutional requirements."[17] Faculties must delineate the conditions in which the learning process will take place so that learners can move on and finish programs successfully. On the contrary, if no linguistic requisites are established for the admission process, students may feel out of place and that may result in attrition. If there is no institutional commitment and learners are discouraged by rough conditions that do not foster academic integration, students may decide to drop out. A consistent high dropout rate has dangerous consequences in any language program. Authorities cannot leave attrition unresolved; otherwise, programs can be closed and the institution's prestige can end up in crisis.

Data Collected from Professors and Students

Professors and learners in the APE were the main source of information for this research. An introspection of their perspectives is the starting point to address the consequences of the phenomenon.

Professors' Perspectives

Interviews, a questionnaire, and class observation were the three instruments used to gather the information supporting the results displayed in this section. The constructs discussed here are participation, classroom management, retaining students and progress.

Consequences of MPLCs on Participation

According to the professors surveyed in this research, participation is quite hindered by the learners' linguistic gap. In the

17   Vincent Tinto, "Taking Student Success Seriously." *Higher Education Monograph Series*, Syracuse University (2001) 2.

interviews conducted, these language instructors argued that students with a high language level tend to take part in class and have no problem expressing or communicating ideas. In contrast with these high achievers, the in-class contribution of low proficiency students is limited. Professor A explained that in her group, three students lacked vocabulary and consequently just did not say a word.

A similar situation was explained by Professor C who stated that low proficiency students shield themselves behind the ones who participate. More specifically, she explained that in group activities, learners always pick the same person to present the ideas discussed (Interview 1, September 2011). In fact, regarding this issue, during the observation stage of this research, certain students participated only when requested to do so by the professor and the responses of these students were limited to single words. Except for Observation 1, during all the observations conducted the language instructors called students by their names to give them the chance to participate. Unfortunately, what definitely made a big difference was the type of answers provided since they varied from one-word answers to more elaborate responses. It was clear then that students with a low proficiency level did not have equal opportunities to participate since high proficiency students took control of the class while these low proficiency students remained silent or provided limited responses.

Consequences of MPLCs on Classroom Management

In terms of classroom management, professors' perspectives were recorded on the questionnaires. They all argued that students with a high proficiency level usually influence the lesson by answering without being called on or by not giving the rest of their classmates a chance to prepare an answer or a comment. Professor C mentioned in Interview 1 that during the class they usually even have to continue to work with exercises that were to be done in the next class. In contrast, during the interviews the instructors remarked

that low-proficient students usually take more time to solve exercises. This situation makes time management a difficult task.

Another aspect regarding classroom management is that the repetition of explanations can be boring for high proficiency learners. This situation causes professors to be in the middle of both types of students. As Professor C noted "it is really hard to make them [low proficiency students] follow the other ones [high proficiency students] because it is hard to decide: Do I go back? Or do I continue? That is where you have a lot of decisions to make as a professor" (Follow-up Interview, September 2011). While observing group B, it was evident that the instructor was constantly resorting to a slow speech pace; she replaced words and paused to give learners time to think. However, in spite of her efforts, some students could not give the information requested, and when they did, their answers were limited in comparison to those provided by high proficiency learners.

The linguistic gap contributed to a discipline problem; as Professor A said, "It was hard to manage the group in terms of discipline as well as their level" (Interview 1, Professor A, August 2011). Then, in the follow-up interview, she said: "It was a really mixed group, different kinds of groups, discipline was the major issue for me." During the observations, it was noticed that students with low proficiency were usually off-task. It was recorded that those students talked in Spanish with their classmates and text-messaged from the beginning to the end of the class.

In the questionnaire, professors were asked the degree to which classroom management was affected by the mixed-level nature of the group. They all agreed that low-proficient students take more time to solve exercises while high achievers are faster; this leads to time management issues. Additionally, they believed that error correction must be addressed differently for low and high level students, and that is also time-consuming. After analyzing professors' comments and answers, one can conclude that MPLCs have tangible consequences on classroom management.

Consequences of MPLCs on Progress

Linguistic progress in an EFL classroom is determined by the extent to which students can attain the course's or program's objectives. Likewise, scores are usually used as a reference to measure pupils' achievement. Monitoring students' progress helps professors to identify those who are struggling, for the purpose of offering appropriate help and guidance. Artifacts, which were provided by the collaborative professors, were one of the main sources of data. To complement this analysis, professors' perspectives were also recorded by means of interviews and questionnaires. A connection between scores and proficiency level was done. The passing grade for this and any other course in this Associate Program in English is 70. The careful examination of students' grades reveals that there is a gap in progress; there are students whose grades on the quizzes are above the passing grade. This may lead one to conclude that those students have been able to meet the course objectives and make progress in the learning of the language. However, there is a group of students whose linguistic level was diagnosed as low and whose grades are below 70. They have shown themselves to be unable to meet the course objectives, and this in consequence is an obstacle for progress. Moreover, professors' perspectives are a key aspect that supports these findings. In the questionnaires, they all agreed that, "Students do not advance much because they are not provided with equal opportunities for learning," and that, "Low proficiency students progress, but at a lower rate." To emphasize her concern, Professor C added that keeping unbalanced progress affects the professors and the students since both hold responsibility for the language learning process.

Students' Perspectives

MPLCs affect both professors and learners. That is why students' opinions and perceptions are vital components in the identification of consequences. To accomplish this task, a questionnaire,

a focus group and class observations are the three instruments that support the results displayed in this section.

Consequences of the MPLC on Participation

According to students' insights about the consequences of MPLCs on participation, they strongly agreed that there are negative effects. In the questionnaire, students were asked to provide additional comments to justify their perception. The negative consequences are listed in table 2.

Table 2. Negative Consequences of MPLCs on participations

- I feel inferior.
- I don't have the chance to participate.
- I need time to think while classmates with a higher level participate faster.
- My participation is underestimated.
- I feel embarrassed about my lack of command of the language.
- Students with a higher level participate more.
- I am afraid of participating.

Source: Questionnaire for students, August 2011.

This list of opinions illustrates the fact that students were not given equal opportunities in the classroom; on the contrary, they were at a disadvantage since they were not allowed to participate and, as a result, they did not receive feedback from the professor. They could not contribute to the class since they did not have the chance to do so due to different circumstances brought about by the MPLC. Though the causes are many (lack of knowledge about the topic under discussion, lack of self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation and comparison with other peers, knowledge of peers and class time), the bottom line is undoubtedly the difference in students' language proficiency. One serious finding is that students' affective and social needs are neglected, seeing that their self-esteem is being shaped by feelings of inferiority, embarrassment and fear. Distress

in the classroom can increase social barriers, since students tend to make groups only with peers who have their same level, and by so doing, deny themselves the opportunity to get valuable input and feedback from other classmates.

Consequences of MPLCs on Classroom Management

Almost all students agreed that the professor should incorporate different classroom activities. For more insight on this issue, the informants were requested to justify their answers by listing a set of activities they thought would benefit their learning. They mentioned games, videos, role plays, grammar activities, interviews, impromptu talks and conversations.

Along with this list of activities, students shared some of their opinions about classroom dynamics. They said that they know professors try to provide active practice, but time is a constraint. One of the students replied that working in groups is the best way to progress and build confidence and that is why professors should promote more group work. In addition, three of the informants argued that activities should be more dynamic and involve all the students, not only those ones who always participate. Regarding the mixed-language proficiency present in the class, some students considered that activities should respond to the needs of all the language levels.

Consequences of MPLCs on Progress

One positive finding is that most students—90%—believed they had improved their language competence due to the knowledge they have gained in the Associate Program in English. However, a remaining 10% stated they had not improved much. In terms of their classmates' progress, 58% of the learners said that some students have not shown significant language progress in contrast with 48% who disagreed. When asked to compare their progress with that of their classmates, the majority agreed that others had progressed more. When conducting the focus group, informants gave significant

insights about the positive effects of having classmates with a higher level. They mentioned those who knew a little bit more helped them understand concepts and corrected their errors so that they would improve and gave them support to achieve their goals. The students also stated that having classmates with high language proficiency inspired them to improve their language performance, and do what it takes to level up with the rest of the class.

Consequences of MPLCs Regarding Retaining Students in the Program

When it comes to identifying the consequences regarding retaining students in the Associate Program in English, Professor A has a clear perspective. Her insights are significant for this research because she started teaching the group under investigation in February and is still teaching half of that population. She has experienced the MPLC issue longer. In the follow-up interview, she was asked if she knew why group B was reduced to half in the second semester. She shared valuable information. She said that "[the twenty-one students who failed the course] didn't catch up with the speed of the activities… some of them were behind and the group was really, really big. They have to master the language really quick. I have to rush them because of the two-year program." From this comment, it can be interpreted that students with a low level of proficiency were at a disadvantage; their linguistic needs cannot be met. They did not have the chance to move on at their own pace. Furthermore, she insisted that students who failed the course will not be able to overcome their limitations. She said, "…even if they repeat the course, I would say that they are going to have a lot of difficulties mastering the language."

The most compelling evidence about the negative consequence on retention derived from the MPLC was extracted from the artifacts. The researcher compared the students' lists in group A in the first semester (Integrated English 1) to that of the second semester (Integrated English 2). Surprisingly, in the first semester there were thirty-seven students registered, but in the second semester there

were only fifteen. A dramatic reduction of the population is evident. Due to the large number of students that failed, the authorities in charge of the program decided to offer the course *Integrated English I* in the second semester. However, out of the twenty-two students who could have registered in the course to continue with this language program, only eleven did so. Under those circumstances, it is very clear that there is a high rate of dropouts.

Students agreed that for the program to be successful and have a high retention rate, specific improvements must be made. In fact, they gave a set of recommendations (table 3).

Table 3. Recommendations Given by Students to Retain Learners in the Program

According to students, the authorities should…
• provide first-year students with more information about the program.
• administer a placement test at the beginning of the program.
• assign fewer students into each group.
• provide students with instruction on how to give oral presentations.
• improve the language laboratory.

Source: Focus groups 1 and 2; September 2011.

As seen above, though learners believed that the APE is a good language program, they think it does require some improvement. They said that having so many classmates in one group has serious consequences on participation and on the use of language laboratory since it is not equipped to teach so many people at the same time. A number of the participants insisted that the authorities should make a change in the organization of the groups at the beginning of each school year. They think that a placement test could have positive effects, enabling professors to address each group's specific language needs. Similarly, they stated that an aptitude test may benefit the program since people who are less capable of learning a

language will not unknowingly invest time and effort in a project in which they might not succeed.

Social and Economic Consequences

Tourism draws people from many countries to visit the southern region of Costa Rica. National parks such as Chirripó Peak and Corcovado, and beaches like Dominical and Uvita attract visitors from around the globe. Consequently, English being the universal language of commerce, there is a high demand of this language in this part of the country. Currently, there is an increase of business which requires employees to speak English so that their stores and companies can expand their market and selling techniques. This particular job demand makes the learning of this language a necessity for members of the community who compete to earn a living or make profit out of their companies or profession.

The Associate Program in English at the UNA Brunca campus provides members of the community and people all around the southern region with the opportunity to acquire language skills in the English language that may allow them to participate successfully in a highly competitive labor market. The program includes the four language skills (speaking, writing, listening and reading) and the micro-skills (grammar and pronunciation) through the different courses offered, such as Integrated English, Grammar, Pronunciation, Reading and Composition. The schedule is organized so that employed individuals and those who are majoring in other fields can study English. This can be a plus on their resume, and in their professional and personal life.

The current position of English as the main foreign language used in commerce means that its command is essential for people dealing with business of any kind. Pictures taken in downtown Pérez Zeledón reveal that professionals such as dentists and attorneys, stores and transportation services are in need of a command of the English language. They include the phrase "English spoken" as a

marketing strategy; this means that personnel in their offices must speak this language. Not only the professionals but also their assistants and receptionists should offer bilingual services. They do this to reach all types of customers by providing a wider range of communication possibilities. With this in mind, one can conclude that English is essential for the community.

People who do not learn this language are jeopardizing their future since they are narrowing their job opportunities. Even governmental institutions are aware of the practicality of bilingual street signs because of the many tourists who require assistance in the English language. The APE is a social and economic need for the southern region because it will support development by providing the community with English-speaking citizens who are able to satisfy an important commercial demand. Additionally, a bilingual community can be successfully engaged in international trade, and therefore increase income.

Concluding Remarks

Professors who contributed to this research concluded that participation is hindered since students with a high language level tend to take control over the class and have no problem expressing or communicating ideas while low proficiency students have a passive and limited role in the class. Likewise, students agreed that a difference in linguistic proficiency affects participation negatively. In fact, learners' affective and social needs are at risk since confidence and self-esteem are damaged. Therefore, low proficiency students are deprived from the opportunity to receive valuable input and feedback from other classmates since they tend to sit next to the same people to avoid distress and embarrassment.

High-proficiency level pupils affect the lesson by answering without being asked to or by not giving the rest of their classmates a chance to answer or comment. Low proficiency students take more

time to complete classroom activities, and the repetition of explanations can be boring for high proficiency learners. It is extremely difficult for professors to handle this inconsistency of class behavior.

Another significant conclusion is related to the role of error correction. Professors do not devote much time to correcting students' weaknesses; hence, students are being deprived from the benefits of correcting their errors. This occurs because professors face a confusing situation since they do not know to what extent they are expected to ignore basic linguistic deficiencies in low proficiency students, in contrast with the idea of helping students build accuracy through constant direct correction. There is a mismatch between the quantity and degree of errors among students; that is why it is difficult for instructors to adopt one position regarding how frequently to make corrections and which techniques to use to correct students' mistakes. The APE helps people improve their language knowledge due to the fact that all students have shown a certain amount of progress regardless of their language proficiency.

A high dropout rate was recorded between the first semester and the second: Half of the students enrolled in the first semester left the program. It is certainly evident that authorities must pay close attention to find the causes of the high dropout rate in this language program. This high dropout rate affects the community at an economic level. The Brunca region is in need of English-speaking citizens who can satisfy tourists' demands. Unfortunately, the number of people enrolled in the program does not satisfy the needs of this region since few students graduate every year. At the social level, community members who do not have the chance to graduate and learn English are jeopardized since they are narrowing their possibilities to get a job. Even though the program has a high demand (as observed through the high number of applicants), it is evident that the number of students who actually graduate is quite low. Thus, few people can take advantage of this valuable language program because of the difficulties students encounter once they are enrolled.

Recommendations

After examining the results found in this study, it is essential to outline a series of recommendations that can aid the students, professors and authorities involved in MPLCs.

Students should:
🏭 have a sense of responsibility for building their own learning;
🏭 follow key principles of Cooperative Learning in order to overcome linguistic, social and affective limitations;
🏭 become informed and take advantage of any tutoring program provided by the institution; and
🏭 become acquainted with the role of language learning strategies to be able to face challenges inside and outside the classroom.

At the same time instructors must be aware of their responsibility as well.

Professors should:
🏭 be aware of the MPLC even in the very first weeks of instruction.
🏭 provide open-ended tasks such as song projects, presentations, writing letters, creating the end of a story and picture stories, so that all learners can perform at their own levels.
🏭 consider grouping learners with either mixed language proficiency or similar proficiency.
🏭 promote peer tutoring by explaining that a good way to practice and improve a new language is to teach it to someone else.
🏭 not wait for volunteers to participate; instead ask specific students direct questions, especially in the case of those who tend to keep quiet.
🏭 not forget that they have a course outline to follow and specific learning objectives to be attained in order to accomplish the curricular expectations of the program in spite of the students' language level.

Finally, administrators can also facilitate these learning processes.

The authorities should:
🏭 include accurate information in the documents distributed to the community so that people understand the proficiency they need to complete the program or course;
🏭 monitor and carefully assess each of the program offered; and
🏭 provide professors with specialized training sessions to prepare them to handle the MPLC assertively.