

THE FUN APPROACH TO ENGLISH LEARNING

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T*his project was conducted in order to improve oral interaction in English through the practice of games that permit the development of communication. This provided us the opportunity to improve our methodology and to encourage 4th grades, at the Henao y Arrubla Institute. At the end of this investigation, we observed that not only the sample had improved their oral production, but the rest of the students could interact in the process as well.*

Introduction

At the beginning of year 2000, we discerned a lack of oral production in the majority of our students. We worked three hours per week and we thought it was necessary to implement an adequate process for having a good and effective development of the class. We chose a sample at the Henao y Arrubla Institute. It operates on calendar A offering elementary and intermediate grade levels. Our sample showed a high desire to improve their oral interaction. They are not shy to speak, and on several occasions, they use "Spanglish".

Teaching speaking is perhaps the most demanding skill for the second language teacher. Children want to express their emotions, communicate intentions and reactions, explore the language and make fun of it in their own language, so, they expect to be able to do the same in English. How the interaction is achieved in formal situations is a matter of technique or

of classroom approach. In less formal situations, it involves imaginative planning with student input.

How can games help learning?

Games can help people break down their learning barriers. For example, take the case of a person who is shy in a normal classroom situation and who is afraid or embarrassed to participate in class, but, in a game he/she can be creative and free to express his/her opinions without any problem.

Games are facilitators of knowledge and bring down tension and anxiety. Games provide an enjoyable environment in situations where communication is necessary. Games in the English class are a way to supply students with enjoyable situations in which they feel distracted and do not see themselves as if they were straightjacketed.

However, we must realize that not all the games are appropriate or not all of them have the characteristics needed to teach best. The best games are those that favor communication and where the players find it essential to communicate. We can focus on words, discussion, action, problem solving and guessing, or a combination of these.

The purpose of this investigation was to determine if the use of games in English teaching and learning was adequate and effective.

We developed this project keeping in mind three key questions. The principal question was: How can we encourage the elementary student to use English when playing games? And related questions were: 1. What kind of games can we use to make students interact in the English class? 2. What kind of processes can we follow to make the games effective?

Action research was chosen as the research approach. This method permitted us to apply processes spirally and all the time we could plan, act, analyze and reflect upon the data collected.

The data for this study was collected for four months from February to May, 2001. The information was collected while developing the school's syllabus with the constant use of games, according to topic, in each class. We took notes in the teacher's journal and it was necessary to videotape in some classes to observe students' behavior. Also, two surveys were applied at the beginning of the process and at the end to determine needs, preferences, likes and dislikes concerning the games in the English classes.

Those instruments were applied to ten students who were our sample and who had shown a high interest in oral production and who, at the end of this investigation, showed themselves to be very motivated because they now knew that they should help their classmates.

Results

The results showed that the students can achieve a mastery of vocabulary and usual expressions with the constant use of games in the English class. For some weeks, when we played games in the English class, we observed similar behaviors or attitudes. We analyzed our

journals in order to improve later classes. We observed that the majority of the students were anxious, creative and motivated.

Students were very interested in the English classes they were playing games in and we could see that they improved their vocabulary and in the use of expressions in and outside English class.

Constantly, students asked us, "teacher are we going to play games today, please?... Teacher that class is great!". These comments were very important to us because we could see that the use of games in the English class was effective.

Conclusion

The principal purposes of the development of each English class were oral interaction and the consideration of games that suit the students' learning process and their preferences.

The sample (10 students) showed that games could be an excellent means to acquire knowledge of English and that students could help themselves improve because they are freer, and more active when playing games, especially those that come up with winners. So, it is easier and faster for them to manage or assimilate the learning situation. We conclude that games are good pedagogical tools because students learn a foreign language better with activities that were prepared according to their attitudes, needs, preferences, likes and dislikes. Games are the most complete tools to make our students autonomous, free and creative. Controlled games foment values such as honesty, justice, comprehension, acceptance whether winning or losing, respect and responsibility.

We could infer that when students worked on exercises, topics and activities, they remembered the games played and practiced

them. They were motivated to participate more actively. For the development of the games, it is important to emphasize that the teacher must know how the students use knowledge and how they practice what they learn.

Pedagogical implications

We are conscious that learning is a selective and individual process directed by specific needs. Using games to achieve a good level of oral interaction requires an adequate educational environment generated by the teachers. We want to point out some recommendations in order to make effective use of games in our classes.

- The teacher must know the students' needs, preferences, likes and dislikes and based on those, she/ he can prepare the lesson plan for each class keeping in mind what kind of games can be used or which are the most adequate according to the topic being studied.

- The teacher must determine clearly the objectives that she/he wants to obtain with the game that she/he uses.

- We should choose games that respond to the needs and characteristics of the group as well as time limits, conditions, space and material, and make the necessary adaptations according to the situation.

- We should prepare alternative games that permit us to achieve the objectives in case the program or time slot changes because of an unforeseen situation.

- Before starting a game, the teacher must be sure that all students have understood the rules and he/she must be located in a place where all his/her students can see and hear him/her when he/she speaks to them.

- The attitude of the teacher in the classroom, his/her students, his/her behavior, his/her dynamism in the demonstrations and explanations of the games are the keys of progress in learning from games.