MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO LEARN ENGLISH BY RESPONDING TO THEIR INTERESTS AND LEARNING STYLES

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I observed that students from Barranquillita public school had a great lack of motivation, low interest in learning English and they did not like to interact in English class. They presumed that they could not learn a second language and it was not useful for them because they only wanted to finish school in order to go to work. In view of this, I considered it necessary to know my students´needs, likes, learning styles, preferences and dislikes better in order to design activities that would motivate their interest to learn English. Taking into account this issue, I decided to give my students the possibility to have contact and experience in the English language in order to increase their communicative competence.

Introduction

This project was applied in Barranquillita public school to seventh-grade students. I can say that these pupils are not very motivated to learn the second language because they have no opportunity to practice and apply it outside the classroom, nor any expectations for using it in their future lives. I think if we set a goal and that goal is sufficiently attractive, we will be strongly motivated to do whatever is necessary to reach that goal. My main concern in this study was how we could motivate students to learn English as a second language through classroom activities that correspond to their interests and learning styles.

My first task was to take learning styles into account. With this thought, I administered and interpreted two learning-styles instruments to students: Barsch learning-style questionnaire and Oxford style analysis survey (Barsch: 1994). The instruments classified a majority of the students in the sample as learners who were predominantly visual, hands-on, global, open learning and extroverted. They liked learning through pictures, posters, videos, games, the building of objects, moving around the room, mingling activities, group work and speculating on possibilities. At this point, as a second task, I organized the syllabus according to their likes, interests, learning styles, and social environment in order to give them more favorable conditions and opportunities for using the language.

Procedure

Based on the analysis and reflections about the results from the two instruments, I planned some lessons according to the syllabus and chose topics such as physical appearance, routines and likes. Then I chose classroom activities that correspond to their interests and learning styles, using visual aids (Morgan: 1992) because I concluded that students improve their English knowledge through the visual aids that help them handle language better.

For the first data collection, I recorded notes in my diary after each class. I observed that students carried out the activities according to my expectations. In general, students

manifested more interest in the class and less difficulties. In spite of their having some problems in oral production, some of them felt anxious and shy during the different activities programmed.

Going deeper into the results obtained from the diary, I could conclude that most of the students showed interest in the performance of the activities although some of them looked confused and anxious during the instructions being given by the teacher because of their problems in listening comprehension; but later on they got involved in the activities. I could observe that the majority of the students were motivated by the activities (mingling activity, guessing games and others) and with the material used in class (pictures, posters, charts, etc) that helped them interact according to the visual and tactile learning styles. At the end of the class, students looked confident so I concluded that the activities planned and developed were appropriate and made the students engage themselves in the learning process.

Conclusion

Nowadays, a teacher must be an investigator, must have a lot of expectations about his/her professional development by knowing students' preferences, needs and learning styles better or by recognising their own preferred way to learn in order to give his/her students the best opportunities to practice the foreign language and to generate changes in the Colombian educational system.

In the development of the lessons, I tried to integrate all four skills in the teaching/learning process taking into consideration that the activities suit students´ learning styles, attitudes, needs, preferences, likes and dislikes.

It is important for the teacher to know how students use their physical senses for study and work (if students are visual, auditory or hands-on), how students deal with other people (if they are extroverted or introverted), how students handle possibilities (if they are intuitive-random or concrete-sequential), how students approach tasks(if they are closure-oriented or open) and how students deal with ideas (if they are global or analytic). If the teacher identifies his/her students' learning styles, it is easier for him/her to plan activities in order to motivate students to participate and improve their English knowledge easier and faster.

This research project produced a powerful impact not only on the students of the sample, but also on the rest of the students in the other levels, who asked for the application of those activities in their classes.

Pedagogical implications

I am conscious that learning is a selective, individual process directed by specific needs and motivation and that it requires an adequate educational environment that grows when teachers put into practice the following considerations:

• First of all, teachers must change teaching attitudes and get really committed, involving their colleagues in this process. Our students are really the centre of our research and they can obtain excellent benefits while working in each subject based on the interests and learning styles which motivate them.

• Teachers must know students´ needs, learning styles, preferences, likes and dislikes and based on those, plan the lessons that include more MOTIVATING and INTERESTING activities.

• Teachers must understand how to enable their students to become more effective learners through optimising language motivation. It means we should know how students must use the broad approaches for learning and their specific behaviours to improve their learning.

• Teachers must look for activating knowledge, activities like brainstorming, showing pictures, doing demonstrations, semantic mapping and imagery. For gaining knowledge, activities like reading, charts, graphs, structures and grammar points. For using the knowledge, activities like hands-on activities, worksheets, puzzles, fact games, reading materials, word searches, role-play situations and drills. And for applying knowledge, activities like drawing, cartoons, predictions, writing a story, a poem or a journal (real) and making comparisons.

As I said at the beginning of this paper, we must know our students´ difficulties and try to solve them or look for different solutions to get the best results in the language learning process. Taking into consideration these words, I think that it is important to work in the future with oral production, reading comprehension and the development of writing skills in order to cover very interesting topics that really help our professional development.

References

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