

USING PLAY ACTIVITIES AND AUDIO-VISUAL AIDS TO DEVELOP SPEAKING SKILLS

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A project was conducted in order to improve oral proficiency in English through the use of play activities and audio-visual aids, with students of first grade in a bilingual school, in la Calera. They were between 6 and 7 years old. As the sample for this study, the five students who had the lowest language oral proficiency were selected. According to the results, it is clear that the sample has improved their English oral proficiency a great deal. However, the process has to be continued because this skill needs constant practice in order to be developed.

Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language is a complex process and using audio-visual aids and play activities makes it easier and motivating. This study focuses on ability to express thoughts orally.

At the beginning of the process the group was analysed and the sample was selected after a diagnostic stage (classroom observations, teacher's diaries, and a diagnostic test) in which the chosen students showed a low level in speaking skills. A hypothesis was then defined: students can improve their English speaking skills if classes have play activities developed with the use

of audio-visual aids. As can be observed, the aim of this project was to outline some resources in which students may be able to use English orally through some activities carried out during the classes.

Theoretical framework

In the foreign language classroom, students are often reluctant and too shy to open their mouths to speak. This is not just because they are learning a new language and haven't got enough of it to say anything. Even at a very elementary level, perhaps even during the first lesson, there is always something students can say if we as teachers motivate them and create a confident environment where they try to use the language for themselves.

What is important when working with beginners is to find the balance between providing the language through controlled, guided, and free-style activities. Controlled activities help students to develop confidence as well as the ability to participate in class because they give the opportunity to practice repetition. Guided activities give students the opportunity for free expression by using language in the form of games, working in pairs or small groups. Finally, through free-style activities, pupils have the chance to use

the new language relatively spontaneously. Students focus their attention on the message, not on the language.

Play activities provide a powerful stimulus for real language use because they help teachers to create contexts in which the language is meaningful and they can be used at different levels of proficiency. Some of the play activities that we used in our project were chorus work, mechanical drills, meaningful practice, dialogues, games, songs, poetry and videos.

Regarding audio-visual aids, we should stress that they have many roles to play in language learning. They can be used in different contexts and places. They contribute successfully to the learning process because they motivate students to want to speak. For our project, we designed flashcards, pictures, wordcards. Additionally, we used tape recorders, multimedia resources, a language laboratory, a reading centre, and a video-room.

Research procedure

The case study was carried out in two cycles. In the first cycle there were five students while in the second there were only four because one of them went to study in a different school. Classes were held in the classroom, the reading centre, the English laboratory and the video-room using play activities.

Information was gathered by means of:

- *Daily class programmers* which were designed using audio-visual aids and play activities in Phonics, Reading and

Grammar classes.

- *Teachers' diary observations* taking into account what the sample did and said during classes.
- *Videos* of the production stage in order to analyse sample proficiency.
- *Observation checklists* based on six aspects: commands, hesitation, pronunciation, confidence, chorus work and class participation.

Results

Results of the present case study are presented based on the data collection techniques:

1. Students followed commands frequently.
2. Students did not hesitate as much as at the beginning.
3. All students improved their pronunciation.
4. Students improved self-confidence.
5. Students increased chorus-work participation.
6. Classroom participation increased a great deal.

Discussion

The results of the analysis of oral production showed a general improvement by the students in this skill. We noticed that students improved not only their speaking skills but their listening too. There is one student who did not attend all of the classes and, when he came back to school, he did not participate, he did not feel confident about participating in the classes. This made us think that oral participation depends on children's state of mind.

They have been interested in the classes because of the play activities and visual aids. They enjoy classes with both of them. They prefer English to the other subjects.

They look excited when going to the reading centre, laboratory and video-room. They would like the teacher to repeat the videos, the classes and the material.

Thanks to the new methodology, the foreign language has become more lively for the students and most of them are using it out of the classroom in real conversations. They make groups and sing the songs taught inside the classroom. Despite this progress, we are aware that the process is an on-going one and teachers need to work on motivating students to use English and practice it as well as to improve their listening.

General conclusions

1. Play Activities and audio-visual material motivate students to learn English.
2. Students prefer colourful visual aids.
3. Play activities help focus students' attention on class contents without realising what language items are being practised.
4. They enjoy having varied play activities from class to class.
5. It is necessary to ensure that students have a friendly and confident atmosphere in the classroom.
6. Students prefer classes in which structures are taught in real contexts.
7. Students need to know that they are making progress.
8. Classroom activities must give students opportunities for free expression.
9. Teachers must tell learners how to make the best use of the little they know.
10. An analysis of students' oral production showed a general improvement not only in this skill but in the others.

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