

ENCOURAGING SPEAKING THROUGH THE USE OF STORYTELLING

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While students were involved in English classes throughout last year (1998), it was noticed that all of them recognised isolated vocabulary, but were not able to apply it in oral or written sentences. Some action research was carried out on how the Literature Approach and the continuous repetition of stories could increase oral production. It became clear that the students enjoyed and comprehended stories and answered questions in complete sentences.

Introduction

Throughout 1998, we worked in different grades of Nuevo Gimnasio Cristiano and we identified a lack of oral production in the vast majority of students, even though they had had five hours of English per week in the previous years. For this reason, we attempted to find a method that would integrate the four language skills in a way that would be more related to students' interests and would encourage them to practise meaningful sentences instead of learning a list of disconnected vocabulary. We opted for the "Spotlight on Literacy" series, a method including all the characteristics mentioned above. The purpose of our investigation was to evaluate the progress of basic oral production like

greetings, expressions, routines, asking and answering questions, which was reinforced by the continuous repetition of the stories involved in the series we opted for. The action research was carried out in second grade from February to June 1999. This report reveals the impact the stories had on the students.

Procedures

Fifteen students from second grade were evaluated at the beginning of the year and we detected a general frustration among the students because of their lack of oral production in English. Therefore we changed the teaching method to a method centred on literature, called "Spotlight on Literacy", which uses stories to teach grammar, phonic, spelling and speaking. Students had their own set of story-books and they visualised the pictures and listened to the story at the beginning and, later on, expressed what they saw. Role playing was introduced in order to motivate communication and to allow students to make their own recordings of the story, thereby improving their pronunciation.

In February, the first questionnaire was applied to find out students' attitudes towards English and diagnose their individual levels. From March to the beginning of June,

students expressed their likes and dislikes, difficulties and achievements in their journals. While the classroom teacher focused on the application of the context learned in stories in her own diary, structured classroom observation was conducted alongside with video recordings that captured specific aspects such as students' participation, comprehension, asking questions and telling the stories.

Results

Students enjoyed the stories, which were illustrated to help understanding. In March, April, and the beginning of May, stories were read a number of times and the repetitive pattern encouraged speaking. Students illustrated the stories on their own and wrote a short report which they recorded on a tape and told it in front of the class. Therefore students felt more confident with their English during that period; in contrast, the last story was worked on only on a short period of time and was not repeated enough. This could explain why the numbers of positive answers in the questionnaires dropped in the last cycle, as well as the fact that students felt exhausted when they had to answer the last questionnaire on the last day of the first semester.

Regarding the observation charts, it can be noticed that students used expressions only when they had read a story that contained expressions. Routines which include telling the date and daily weather were more frequent at the beginning of the observation because of the fact that the students did not respond correctly and others

corrected or completed the answers. Towards the end, only two or three students answered questions regarding daily routines because by that time, students understood the questions well, answered correctly, and others did not have to intervene in order to correct their classmates.

At the beginning, students never asked questions. Once some simple question structures were taught, two students implemented questions to ask for information a number of times. In March, around 40% of the students were able to answer questions and the number increased in each class. It is important to notice that from April 27 on, children started answering in complete sentences instead of just one or two words.

On May 6, two students told the story to the rest of the class and the video observation on May 13 shows that all students, except one, did an oral presentation of the story "Any Kind of Dog". Each student told the story using complete sentences because they knew it by heart. About 50% were able to tell the story without difficulties and it was quite natural for them. One student who had only said one expression in the entire process was able to tell the story without problems. Another student had written in his diary that it had been difficult for him to tell the story. Yet, on the video, he was very eager to tell it and even volunteered in class, raising his hand when the teacher asked who wanted to be next. In his diary, he mentioned this activity as the one he had liked best in this class.

In the diaries students, in general, expressed that they like English and feel they are learning through stories. At first, some of the students felt frustrated because they did not understand anything, but by the end they had gotten used to stories and were able to understand in spite of not knowing all the vocabulary. They enjoy reading a lot and even though it was difficult to write the summaries, they liked to come up front and tell them to the rest of the class.

The first three stories were frequently named in the diaries because they were repeated over and over again. The last story was only mentioned by two students. That story was not worked on in the same way but more quickly.

The teacher's journal confirmed that at the beginning, students had more difficulties understanding the stories, but the continuous repetition of the stories and analysing the illustrations, most students were able to answer the questions related to the stories. Students liked the stories and enjoyed reading and analysing them. Most of the students were able to summarise the story and tell it to the rest of the class even though some students still have difficulties answering questions.

Reflection

The first attempts at language production result from repeating words frequently, practising their use and imitating words that others use, until students assemble learned components to express meaning. Our

research proved the validity of this principle, since we had observed how the students first practised by repeating isolated words and then used them in complete meaningful sentences. Stories are very useful in this procedure since they apply many repetitive patterns.

Ellis and Brewster (1991) claim that children want to find meaning in the story, so they listen with a purpose. They therefore need to develop a positive attitude toward not understanding everything and must build up the skills for searching for meaning, prediction and guessing. This could explain students' frustration at not understanding everything in the beginning until they had gained a positive attitude towards listening for gists. As a result, at the end of the process, it was very evident that students were understanding the context even though they did not understand every word.

According to the teacher's journal and classroom observation, we were able to observe problems regarding answering questions. More students answered simple questions in every class and were able to respond in complete sentence structures by the last month.

Ellis and Brewster describe how children enjoy listening to stories over and over again. This frequent repetition allows certain language items to be acquired while others are being overtly reinforced. Many stories also contain natural repetition of key vocabulary and structures. This helps children to remember details, so they can gradually learn to anticipate what is about to happen next in the story. Repetition also encourages participation in the narrative,

thereby providing a type of pattern practice in a meaningful context. This also helps them to produce summaries of the stories and report them to others.

Conclusions and implications

Regarding the results obtained at the end of the investigation, we can conclude that students used greetings, expressions, routines and answered simple questions because of the continuous repetition of the story-telling approach. At the moment, students are still unable to formulate a structured question. At the same time, we discovered that students greatly improved their listening, reading and writing skills; and their pronunciation is much more accurate now than at the beginning. Their attitude towards English is very positive and two students even expressed repeatedly in their diaries that they would like more English classes. In order to help students with interrogative sentence structures, we suggest

specific activities that focus on Wh-questions; for example: games and stories that include questions.

Bibliography

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