ENCOURAGING INTERACTION BY APPLYING COOPERATIVE LEARNING

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A project was conducted in order to improve oral interaction in English by applying cooperative learning to students of seventh grade. These students have lower levels of oral production and attend Marco Fidel Suárez public school. So, I decided to choose topics related to real life and to plan a series of activities of sensitization to create stable work groups and to increase oral interaction. According to the analysis and results, I can say that cooperative work and the oral activities help the students increase oral production, express better and use a foreign language with more security. In spite of the results, I consider that cooperative learning needs more time so that it can be successful. Students must have the will to cooperate. Only when students have that good will and can work together is the potential of acquisition of knowledge maximized.*

Introduction

One of the greatest failures of schools has been their inability to guarantee foreign language acquisition. The majority of the students never become fluent in the language they have studied. Students memorize vocabulary words, conjugations of verbs, and grammar structures, but they don't speak and don't use the language in real situations. Therefore, we should break with the traditional pattern and teach a foreign language in a communicative way so that students can learn to express their ideas with more freedom, interact with their partners, and understand by themselves the responsibility of their learning.

The objective of this study is to organize teambuilding through real, meaningful and pleasant activities that lead to more efficient academic work and help students develop oral communication skill.

The theory for this study is that of Spencer Kagan on Cooperative Learning. This theory considers that, teambuilding, as the name suggests, is the process of building teams. Building teams is not merely putting four students together to work. It means turning a group of four students with different backgrounds and experiences into a cooperative and caring team. (Kagan: 1990 and Laurie and Kagan: 1997). Moreover, classbuilding itself abandons sequential organization of the class and adopts a simultaneous structure that allows interaction among the students. They have opportunity to speak in pairs, within teams or small groups.

Procedure

Feeling the necessity to change the methodology for the teaching of English as a foreign language, I decided to carry out this project. The idea consisted of working in groups to increase oral interaction. The investigation was carried out between February and May of 2001, following the pedagogical framework described below.

The first step consisted of practicing teambuilding activities with the purpose of improving the relationships on the team to obtain better results in class. One of the activities that they liked most was Flashcard Game. *It consisted of filling in the answers for themselves (favorite color, ice cream, dessert, etc). Then, students circulated around the class and found another person and asked him/her a question for a match. If he/she got a yes, each one signed the other person's hunt sheets. If he/she got a no, that person asked another question looking for a match. They continued alternatingly asking questions until they found a match, then they formed new pairs.*

The result of this exercise was positive because it helped create a comfortable atmosphere of trust and security to begin speaking in the foreign language. Students liked to move in the classroom and to speak with their partners.

In the second step we practiced oral language activities. The activity that facilitated them was *Complete the drawing.* It consisted of forming pairs. One pair got a simple picture of a landscape and the other pair got a similar picture, but it was not complete. The pair with the complete picture had to describe what it saw while the other pair drew a picture based on the first pair's oral description. When the drawing was complete, the two pairs compared it to the actual picture, discussing similarities and differences.

Speaking from experience, my students and I can say that the exercise was good because it helped increase oral interaction and made the acquisition of the foreign language easier.

Research approach

The investigative method for this study was Action Research because it allows the continuous reflection of students and teachers regarding the teaching-learning processes.

The techniques used for the gathering and analysis of data were the teacher's diary, recordings and questionnaires. I registered data in each class on behavior, feelings, reactions, likes, difficulties, hypotheses, suggestions, explanations about cooperative learning, and oral interaction. Also, I recorded the exercises of each activity to observe difficulties and advances in the oral production and handed out the questionnaires upon finishing all teambuilding and oral language activities to gauge the opinions of the students of the practices carried out. The exercises were analyzed one by one and then analyzed, creating the appropriate triangulation for general conclusion.

Results

The results of this study confirms that group work, consisting of the ludic and oral activities, created a pleasant atmosphere in the group, generating an appropriate space, so that the students felt more relaxed, participated and spoke freely using both the mother tongue and the foreign language.

The students understood the activities, previous explanations and homework. They worked well, had positive attitudes, came to an agreement and enjoyed the exercises. Nonetheless, some of them had difficulties in pronunciation because they normally do not have opportunities to practice listening and pronunciation skills.

The classes were active and amusing. Here is a comment of one student: *"between game and game we learn more"*. One of the difficulties that we had was the group size. Some students

lose the central objective of the exercise easily. So I decided to divide the class into two groups and first practice with some and then with the others, assigning tasks to each group.

Teams facilitate learning because "*with each other's help and unity they can learn much more*" as the students said. During this task they help their partners to advance personally and academically because advanced students help those students who don't understand .

I found that topics connected to real life facilitated and increased oral interaction. Some students found it easy to speak while others tried to speak with the teacher's help.

General conclusion

The results reported in this study suggest that cooperative learning helps students acquire knowledge more easily because teambuilding activities create a flexible environment and students feel more relaxed. They could ask questions, solve problems, make suggestions and speak freely.

Cooperative work improves the social and affective development of the students. They have opportunities to be known, to have a good time with their partners and help each other. Students with higher levels of proficiency help the students with lower levels.

Cooperative work increases oral interaction; the student has the opportunity to speak in pairs, within teams, or small groups. Through the activities used in this project, they can express freely and use the foreign language with more security.

Teambuilding and oral activities helped the student increase vocabulary, express her/himself

better, understand the language, and speak a little more.

Pedagogical implications

I suggest that teachers work with cooperative learning class because it adds variety to the teacher's repertoire. It helps teachers manage large classes with diverse needs. It improves academic achievement and social development. It maximizes the acquisition of second language by making the classroom more humane place to facilitate learning (Holt et al: 1991).

Further research

Besides the results presented in this study, there are some topics that could be the object of study of future investigations: the consequences generated by application of cooperative work in traditional teaching, how this work affects the behavior of the students, and, how to implement cooperative learning in our institutions.

References

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