

PROMOTING COMMUNICATION THROUGH THE ENGLISH DAY: AN EXPERIENCE AFTER STUDYING AN IN-SERVICE COURSE

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One of the main concerns I shared with other English teachers while taking an in-service course at the Universidad Nacional was that of providing opportunities for students to practice the language. Despite the difficulties (large classes, limited time for language teaching, and lack of student motivation, among others), we try to generate interactions that allow them to experiment with the language. Nonetheless, those practices are not enough. In this paper I describe the way an extra-curricular activity was organized and carried out as a means to engage students in a meaningful activity: *The English Day*.

English is a language of international communication, and not limited to any one country, religion or culture. With the advances of technology, English in Colombia is becoming an important linguistic phenomenon and is creating a need for learning. This is partly due to the fact that, in many cases, academic and job demands are higher. Additionally, the emigration of many families who are leaving our country, generate the need to learn this foreign language to establish a good communication in English speaking contexts. These factors have had an impact on individuals' cognitive, affective and socio-cultural needs, among others. Taking into account these needs, it is important to improve the communicative skills in our schools through activities that involve our students'

senses and cognitive skills as well as through experiences that catch the students' attention so that they are sensitive to acquire and construct knowledge.

After studying an in-service course at the Universidad Nacional, I have undertaken new experiences which have created in my professional life a new and fresh view of the English teaching job. All of the experiences I had there helped me improve my methodology to develop listening, reading, writing and speaking skills and to apply with my students appropriate guidelines to acquire the second language through different activities that create motivation in the teaching-learning process.

Another goal I was able to achieve after the inservice course was the designing of my English Project. It follows the new curricular guidelines for foreign language teaching and is being applied in the environment of education in Bogotá (MEN: 1999).

After that course and in spite of the limitations and difficulties to effectively apply ELT methodologies, I felt a deep need to establish conditions for students to engage in processes related to their daily experiences and opportunities for interaction which could help them to develop their thinking skills. In doing so, I thought students could develop the main competencies in the second language as well as the traditional skills. In the long

term, students could be given the chance to share experiences with other partners from different schools and who have the same profiles we have at Juan del Corral School.

In my English classes I have tried to follow pedagogical guidelines and principles learned at the University, but in reality, I have found many obstacles in applying them in the classroom. I consider these obstacles are the same ones most of my colleagues of Distrital schools face. One of these is large classes which limit the correct development of language skills because that factor limits the participation of all students. Policy makers and administrators have not taken into account that English probably needs a special methodology according to the level of the grade, with groups of about 20 students. This is different to other subjects in which students have the chance to acquire knowledge and interact in their mother tongue.

To overcome difficulties, I searched for options to inject my classroom with more vitality and to expand the activities developed in class into a real and significant environment. I thought that organizing the English Day could be a new way to enhance students' participation and integrating schools could generate motivation to join efforts, so that both, teachers and students worked as a team in the development of activities intended to foster communicative competencies and to make teaching and learning easier.

Organization of the English day to promote communication among students and sharing with other schools

The purpose of inviting different schools to my institution to celebrate the English Day was to motivate students to improve their

English, through communicative activities in which they could express common interests in English. This activity, I thought, could provide opportunities to show proficiency.

To organize the English Day, I sent invitations to some schools of my locality. They were invited to participate with role plays, songs, choreographies, and poems, among others. I started to work with my students of ninth grade motivating them to read stories such as "The man who tried to please everybody" and with 10th grade we worked on drama activities. As we know, reading literature stimulates students' creativity as they become more adventurous in the use of the language they are learning. They begin to appreciate its richness and linguistic variety through the context of the story. After doing some comprehension exercises, I asked them to write the script and to dramatize it in groups. This was done with great responsibility and enthusiasm. While some groups of 10th graders opted for acting out, others were inclined and motivated to make the scenery and the decoration of the place. Role play was an excellent activity for students. Since the beginning of the process, they all expressed an interest in bettering their English skills in the classroom, in the rehearsal of the play and in its performance. Throughout the rehearsal of the drama, they could express all their emotions, feelings, fears and doubts. They supported each other to keep motivation up because they were conscious of the challenge they had in front of them.

Students from all grades of the institution participated in other activities like poems, dance, songs and choreographies. These activities were prepared in class developing different listening, reading, writing, and oral exercises. Finally, we established a compromise to participate in the English Day. As can be seen, planning required extra time, especially in the last two weeks.

The focus during the process of the activity was students' participation so, I put into practice cooperative work principles (Kagan: 1994). Time and material keepers as well as monitors were appointed. Duties were distributed among all students who carried out each task assigned. Throughout the process we started to negotiate with students rules of work, time and responsibilities, and code of mutual behaviour relevant to the English Day activity. The discussion made the students and me aware of individual responsibilities and roles. They encouraged classmates to be aware of passion for work. Likewise, when they had difficulties, they found a way to continue the work. This environment generated confidence to correct mistakes without pressure, to follow instructions without resistance to the process, to express their own ideas, and to develop their creativity to speak in English. On the whole, the activity generated a linguistic and sociocultural

environment. Motivation was high and learners worked very hard. They were eager to learn and improve their English competence.

The English Day experience: Some snapshots

We had a varied and long program. Each student of each school was conscious of his role, behaviour and responsibility. They showed language competencies through linguistic, interpersonal, art, musical, and drama activities. Schools demonstrated creativity and proficiency in English through the different activities they brought: songs, choreographies, role-plays, dances, poems, and cheerleaders. Furthermore, the environment students from our school created caught the participants' attention (English proverbs, balloons, printed programs, presents for guests, identification cards for all the staff of the School, and the scenery for the drama activities, among others).



Achievements

All students were satisfied with the results of the activity. They were impressed by the participation and the organization of the activity, which kept the audience attentive throughout the four hours. Douglas' testimony supports this: "The process of learning a second language involves a total compromise from students. It implies necessary physical, intellectual and emotional compromise to send and receive linguistic messages successfully".

Teachers also valued the activity a great deal. To confirm this, we have the opinion of Gloria Alvarez, English teacher from Jose Asunción Silva High School, one of the schools invited: "This English Day was very exciting, funny and interesting because I had the opportunity to watch, listen, understand and learn from all the activities that the English teachers from Juan del Corral Technical Institute carried out with their pupils. I also thank this school for the chance they gave me to participate with my students. These activities were very meaningful. One could see that teachers and students worked as a team. This work is really relevant to me because it had an impact on language learning and involved the participation of a complete school community. This English program had varied topics, within a daily context. It was easy to understand and the content was motivating and interesting. So it encouraged the audience and interlocutors to understand and enjoy every single activity".

Another aspect I would like to highlight is the fact I confirmed that most schools' needs are the same. Thus, several schools could start networking through an inter-institutional English Project that matched our common needs.

Conclusions

Participating in teacher development programmes gives us some tools to grow professionally and to make our teaching more successful. However, it is our task to think and act beyond –without depending entirely upon external support- so that we can lead activities in tune with the English curriculum we have at school.

The English Day Programme we had at school demonstrated how students can benefit from activities that allow them to share with other schools and to see their progress in their communicative skills. By showing their proficiency in the language as well as by reflecting upon that of students from other schools, they may be more conscious about the importance of developing higher competencies in the English language.

References

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