GROUP WORK AS A MEANS OF GETTING STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE

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Three types of activities were worked on with a group of 15 shy and slow 10th grade students at the Centro Educativo Integral Colsubsidio to get them to participate and talk more often and fluently than they were doing. Activities selected for that purpose were : games, role-plays and interviews that had to be carried out in groups. Students' difficulties expressing their ideas fluently rather than accurately were confirmed by means of a questionnaire, then the activities listed above were piloted and the results of their effectiveness were measured by a teacher observer, by my own field notes and by interviews as well as a final questionnaire applied during and at the end of the piloting stage. Results from these three sources were analysed and showed that some students benefited slightly from the activities while others just improved their pronunciation as a result of their work with different partners. Also, some students were not keen on working in groups because they preferred individual work. Speaking ability was not improved as much as expected but the kind of work (group work) helped students to participate more in class. It is also interesting to point out that female students preferred role-plays to the other two activities while male students enjoyed games the most.

Introduction

Communicating ideas in our mother tongue is sometimes difficult and if you are shy or have a different speed of learning from your partners, participation is not going to be easy either in your mother tongue or in a foreign language. In trying to improve our students' oral performance we as teachers often tend to give them grammar rules or vocabulary, but what is important is to integrate them in situations and activities where the student feels confident enough to forget about correctness or about mistakes in order to express what he thinks, feels, etc.

This project intended to help shy and slow students to improve their oral production, basically their fluency rather than their accuracy. Most of the time natural communication involves two or more participants, therefore activities should be as similar as possible to this reality. This research work was done at Colsubsidio School (C.E.I.C.). The sample taken for it were 15 10th grade students who were particularly shy and/or slow. There was obviously a need to create, adapt or use interesting, motivating and challenging activities to involve them enough so that they felt the need to talk because they had a

purpose to do so. In order to achieve the main objective (oral communication), motivation and activities were always linked. Participants or subjects of this project were mixed with partners of different abilities, the use of English was also promoted (as much as possible) because when non-native speakers converse with other non-native speakers, they experience a greater degree of involvement in their interaction, are more persistent in their attempts to get their ideas across, hence work harder to modify their language toward greater comprehensibility (Pica: 1982).

Having in mind its well-know benefits, group work was chosen to help students. Group work was understood as the kind of work carried out by more than two students at any stage of the class, orally, that is as integrative as possible, and that has as its main objective promoting students' participation, focusing on fluency rather than on accuracy. Oral fluency is the ability to express oneself with reasonably good or clear pronunciation using the language students know without, necessarily, mastering it perfectly. Again, the subjects of this paper lack oral production and the way to increase speaking for shy and slow students is to get them to talk through group work with communicative activities.

Procedure

Once the teacher realised the problem, it was confirmed by asking students about their confidence when speaking by using a questionnaire. Then, several group activities such as: dictation, information gap, ranking, jigsaw, guessing activities, problem solving, role-plays, group discussion, project-based activities, prepared dialogues, etc., were tried but finally interviews, games and role-plays were chosen as the tools to help students. Special attention was devoted to students' output bearing in mind that "in a communicative activity, the student's output and the degree of success that output achieves may provide valuable information about the language which is then internalised" (Harmer: 1991, 42).

Then, to measure the suitability or effectiveness of the activities, a classroom observation sheet was designed and used, which was subsequently modified three times. A teacher-observer came to class to observe students' oral performance and sometimes (at the beginning) she participated actively.

The observer cared about students' participation and motivation to talk and about what information they actually could communicate. She also gave valuable comments on the teacher's performance. Meetings after class were planned to discuss what she observed. Another procedure used was the interview. This was carried out after some (not all) sessions. Students were asked about their feelings during the class, if activities were useful, motivating or interesting and about their confidence when speaking.

Field notes were also kept to register students' attitudes, use of new vocabulary, and in general any particular information that provided ideas about the possible improvement students were having. Video-recordings were used as a supplementary

procedure. In some classes a teacher from a different area video-taped some role plays and interviews. Information gathered from it was written down in the field notes notebook.

A final questionnaire was applied to get students' points of view about their improvement.

Results

From the data gathered from the different sources, some individual differences were noted. Three students did not like the idea of working in groups. Their learning style was individual. Some of them were a bit lazy about talking at the beginning but by the end of this project, they showed more interest and involvement in what they were doing. It is difficult to say that they have improved their fluency a great deal because oral fluency takes longer to be developed, and because more activities need to be designed. The output provided by good or fast students encouraged slow and shy students to speak more often during the class. Group work functioned as an integration tool. Students knew more about their partners. Although motivation was low at the beginning of the project, by the end most students found activities easier because group members co-operated and therefore the time spent on it was productive. Role-plays and interviews

were useful to get female students to talk while games served the same purpose in male students. Obviously, there were students with whom the three types of activities did not allow reaching the goal because they favoured individual or working in pairs.

Conclusions

To conclude, it could be said that group work bettered students participation while oral expression of ideas was slightly improved. Participation in class increased as a result of the development of activities where good students backed up slow and shy students. Shyness made it a bit difficult, for some students, to work with other people but it did not stop the development of activities that were carried out successfully in most cases.

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References

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