

IMPROVEMENT OF WRITING PROFICIENCY THROUGH CREATION OF HOMOGENEOUS GROUPS IN THE CLASSROOM

*Luis Ernesto Ortega Sarmiento
and Víctor Adrián Rodríguez Nieto*

Our interest in students' writing in the second language (English) encouraged us to carry out research in the classroom, taking homogeneous group and mixing it with new activities to provide alternatives in writing. We found a lot of theory about writing skills which did not take into account students' problems such as adolescence, likes, environment and their attitude toward English.

From these elements we developed a research project divided into two cycles. The first cycle confirmed a problem and the second one was used to provide possible solutions to the problem (writing proficiency), always taking into account our students as the main performers in our research.

Introduction

We chose SANTO TOMAS SCHOOL (our work place) in order to carry out our research. There, English had been a common subject but recently it has taken on importance in the curriculum. For this reason we have found that students have problems using English, especially in eighth grade, because these students have suffered the change from a regular work load to an

intensive load, and also, they did not study English in primary.

Additionally, we observed this group as a good target of investigation due to its behaviour, interest and age level. These students are ready to learn and we wanted to help them through this research work.

Our first task was determined through some activities (first cycle) that elicited students' English production, deducing that from what we had observed (as their teachers) in their writing performances.

We developed a series of activities to determine a problem and to pinpoint which population and which level demonstrated signs of problem (diagnosis). During this diagnosis we noticed different performance levels and that students worked depending on the activity's level of interest. Looking at that situation, we thought of a new work alternative which would encourage students to develop their writing and at the same time to organise groups according to production level, helping the class and the student to work according to his own proficiency. From this we have drawn up this hypothesis: "*Handling small homogeneous groups in the classroom itself may help students to improve their writing proficiency*".

Hence, we began to develop a second cycle, taking as a reference a literature review about groups (group interaction, group techniques, kind of groups, etc.) and writing techniques (our field of action in this research). We created groups, called CORNERS. We can define them in this way:

- Picture corner: use of pictures , drawings to promote free-style writing.
- Miming corner: use of gestures, representations and sounds to raise students' sensibilities through written work.
- Organising sentences to build paragraphs corner: use of headlines and sentences prepared by teacher so students follow a sequence in their writing performing.
- Using readings corner: from readings chosen by the teacher, the student has to read and paraphrase, or express the ideas using his own words.
- Reading comprehension: the student has to read a slightly more extensive text where he has to deduce and work from a main idea to do his own writing.
- Four skills corner: this corner integrates work on writing, listening, speaking and reading. From a tapescript previously recorded by a teacher, the student listens to a text, writes notes about a story and organises them; teacher gives them the whole story written down and the student compares his notes with it and comments on it to his teacher.

Then, students were organised into similar levels and we applied a series of writing activities based on free and controlled writing techniques using very illustrative patterns and interesting material for students. Our goals through this work were to achieve a levelling process where students would feel comfortable and be able to develop their writing skills.

Procedure

We organised the corners in the classroom over twelve class hours (blocks), two blocks per corner. Each time block was 90 minutes where students had to develop the totality of activities proposed; i.e. 180 minutes per corner working.

We carried out the work using six activities which were prepared with guidelines to hand out to each corner. Groups received guidelines with the entire instructions for working. They had two or three activities always focused on the technique used for the corner. Coloured illustrations and interesting materials were presented .

The teacher's role in these activities was to be a guide and to clarify instructions or to correct students' performances. Guidelines were very clear and explicit.

These activities were carried out based on a controlled writing situation, used to give coherence and cohesion (structure) to the building of paragraphs and sentences, checking grammar and syntax carefully; sometimes correcting and helping students. We also used free writing techniques by using models such as large pictures,

gestures, headlines and reading, giving the students the possibility to express their ideas freely.

Regarding previous comments on time, level and instructions, when we tried to do the two last corners (reading comprehension and using four skill corners) we found students had many difficulties: they did not understand these new complex instructions because they had to follow certain stages to understand the next instructions and so on. The grammatical and syntactic level, which required the students to have more knowledge, was a problem in those activities.

Results

In order to collect data and to evaluate this work, we used three sources of information: tutor's information, observer's information and students' interviews (how the activity worked for you, how you deal with others and your feelings towards the activity). We made a triangulation of these aspects, showing information in graphic statistics. In each corner, we can see the following results:

- Picture corner: The activities and the students' feelings toward work were 100% effective. It was very productive for the class, the teacher and the students.
- Miming corner: Effectivity, regarding the attitude of the students who changed it into a kind of game, playing around, was forty percent (40%) in all aspects.

- Organising sentences to build paragraphs: The students thought the activity seemed to have rigid standards. The students showed a very good attitude, presenting 100% productivity.
- Using reading corner: Here, vocabulary and grammar structures were more complicated, but despite that, the students made a good effort, due to the interesting readings, and got positive results in the corner.
- Reading comprehension and four skills corner: these activities were not performed because of the difficulties mentioned above.

Discussion

As we said at the beginning and throughout this article, students need motivating activities which push them to try to write well, also to work with people with a similar level that makes it easier to work. Taking this and the benefit of our students into account, we designed activities and applied them getting very good results. Students took the main role in the class, working with their likes and writing about their feelings. It was reflected in the picture corner, building paragraphs and using reading corner, but in the miming corner this kind of freedom conducted them to disorderliness. In general, this work is very effective but teachers have to be careful about students' personality, writing level, classroom, group work techniques and demands in writing performance.

Conclusions

Through this article we have mentioned the main role of the student as the centre of the research. We want now to draw the following conclusions projected toward the pedagogical field:

1. This way of improving writing proficiency based on corners and homogeneous groups could be used in the classroom as a pedagogical tool to provide solutions to possible problems, not just in writing skills, but also in other communicative skills because the students always look at options in which they can develop their knowledge freely.
2. We observed that the work environment was positive; our work as teachers was limited to guiding the groups with instructions, having little participation in the class development, merely resolving some difficulties. •