

Theme-based teaching and meaningful learning

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Medellin

2018

Abstract

Nowadays, one of the biggest challenges for teachers is to be able to involve students in the classes. The aim of this action research project was to explore the impact produced on class engagement through the implementation of theme-based teaching that is tied by the interests and needs of the students.

This action research was developed during two school terms with a group of fifth graders at Institución Educativa Jesus rey. Data was collected through observations, surveys, and interviews. The project shows how the use of theme-based teaching is a powerful tool to keep kids engaged in the English class and to promote meaningful learning.

Key words: Theme based teaching, meaningful learning.

Degree requirement

This action research is submitted as a requirement of the bachelor of Education in teaching foreign languages (English-French) at the escuela de idiomas, universidad de Antioquia, in Medellín, Colombia.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor Mary Isabel Arredondo for the continuous support on my research project. Her guidance helped me a lot in developing research competences. I could not have imagined having a better advisor.

I thank my cooperative teacher and students for their commitment and support during my research project and opening a space for me in their classroom. I would also like to thank my mother, my grandmother and friends not only for their unconditional support, but also for encouraging me in all of my goals.

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Preface

The actions of this research project were implemented in a fifth grade class at I. E. Jesus Rey. I decided to focus my project on the use of themes because I wanted to explore an alternative way to teach the language different than just using dictionary and memorizing lists of words from Spanish to English. I was interested in transforming the learning of the language through different activities that make possible a connection between the use of English in their context taking to account students' lives experiences and interest.

Description of the context

The Institución Educativa Jesus Rey is a public school located at Robledo neighborhood at the North-west of the metropolitan area. The student population come from nearby neighborhoods that belong to social stratum 1 and 2. I.E Jesus Rey was created in 1976 by the religious community “Hijas de Cristo Rey”. A group of nuns that wanted a school for families with scant economic resources. In 1985 the institution was given the name “Idem Jesus Rey” in honor to the religious community.

In terms of infrastructure the school has four floors. In the first floor: one scholar shop, one deposit for sports materials, the direction office, the secretary office and a cafeteria. In the second floor: 7 classrooms. In the third floor: It has one library, 8 classrooms, chemistry, physics and biology laboratory, and finally in the fourth floor there are 6 classrooms, a library, an Auditorium and 3 computer labs. Students within the institution have several school facilities; these include a school restaurant where some of them get food at no cost and a psychologist.

The philosophy of the Educational Institution Jesus Rey is framed in the conception of the Contemporary human beings, who answers to the needs of their environment and it tends for the creation of an environment of educational community, where people are formed with strong and responsible personalities that respect the differences fight: for the good of the civil society and for the experience of the Christian, moral, ethical, political values and for the environmental.

The school has as mission to contribute an integral formation through the experience of human and Christian values and the development of critical thinking answering to the

diversity and to create human beings capable of adapting to society with academic excellence. And its vision by 2025 is: the school Jesus Rey will be an educational institution with major recognition at the regional level for offering an integral formation and students that respect the diversity and promote the development of civil competences.

English is a mandatory subject within the school. There are objectives determined for each grade. In primary school the English time is two hours, for this reason I observe two groups. It is a classroom of fourth-grade which consists of 41 students whose ages range from 8 to 10 years old. The students are distributed by 7 individual chairs each and there is a desk for the teacher in front of the students. The classroom is located on the second floor. It has one board, there are also some windows. There is a tape recorder but there isn't any TV or computer. In general students in the classroom are highly active and very talkative. They demonstrate interest for the English and they ask for the meaning of new words.

My cooperating teacher holds an undergraduate degree in Physical Education therefore she does not have English knowledge although she has taught English for two years. There are six students who received psychological assistance. She applies a traditional methodology and she prefers pupils to stay in line and to work individually, except those who need psychological assistance; they work in pairs. In general children in the classroom are highly active and very talkative. They demonstrate interest for the English language and they ask for the meaning of new words.

Problem statement

The English education in Colombia has many goals; one of them, is according to the law 115 of 1994; primary and secondary education should be provided with elements of conversation, reading, comprehension and ability to express in English as a foreign language. These aims are not possible because there are many problems, one of them is that teachers in primary school do not know English because they have their degrees in other subjects. They have not been trained for teaching it as a second language which means that they are teaching a subject that they do not know; which results in inadequate foreign language classes because these are in Spanish , the students do not have didactic resources and classes need more time to plan the topics in order to develop their competences in the second language; consequently, these aspects refrain students from having a meaningful learning experience because they do not have any direct contact with the language; they are just learning isolated words and translating phrases in Spanish with no sense for their lives.

This is the case of the class I am observing, a fourth grade English class at Jesus Rey School. There are 41 students in a small classroom.

My cooperating teacher feels a bit insecure because she doesn't have knowledge about English and she doesn't speak it. She teaches English just memorizing lists of words and translating them.

The teacher does not use any material to explain other activities, she always uses the board in which students have to copy everything on it. 'The teacher wrote on the board a list of numbers from 100 to 500 which students had to rewrite. The Next

sentence is an evidence from my journal in which the teacher said: 115 /one hundred fifteen” (Journal, August 15) The previous example shows that students are learning isolated words.

I think that this class needed more time to plan the topics, even the activities worked in class. So, I have been thinking about how to teach vocabulary in a creative form without the need to translate. For me, it’s important to work with appropriate teaching materials related to the topics and appealing to students’ likes. Content is adapted according to their ages and considering concepts close to their lives.

Raising my lessons around themes that not only contain structure and new vocabulary for my students, but also those topics they can associate with their needs and their context. I think that the best way to improve their classes and English learning is Theme based; this is an approach that has been described by Diana Mumford (2000) as follow:” building on their interests and life experiences, young people’s attitudes, skills and knowledge are developed in meaningful ways”.

Theoretical framework

Regarding the theory I read about two concepts: meaningful learning and theme-based teaching; I present a conceptual framework with key concepts that helped me to define what theme based is, its main purpose and why it is important to be considered in language learning.

Meaningful learning

I think that one of the aspects to keep in mind within the school is to make learning useful to students. Because new vocabulary will be more meaningful if the activities are interesting to the learners. According to this, Cajamarca and Piña (2010) affirm that “meaningful learning involves new knowledge that is related to what the learner already knows, and it can be easily retained and applied”. In other words, the structure of the students’ previous understanding determines their new experiences, and these modify and restructure them. Teachers should promote relevant content in which they are able to link their prior with the new information, as a construction process of their own vision of the world.

I consider that learning becomes relevant to students when it is connected to their needs, interests and to their real lives. Meaningful learning happens when learners can make sense of what they learn. I think that with a purposeful content, children may be able to work out the new language or feel motivated by real interest in a topic.

Rodriguez et al (2006) also mention three main conditions if the students are to learn meaningfully. Firstly, the learner must have a basic and well-organized prior knowledge; secondly, there has to be a positive predisposition for learning and the last one they to be motivated to learn. (p.90). This is one important thing in my research project that my pupils are motivated when they work in a particular theme that they previously chose.

Theme based teaching

Language teachers are invited to go beyond the grammatical perspective, which claims to believe that if students know grammar, they know language. So now, we have approaches for teaching languages with a connection with students' lives and interests.

“By building on their interests and life experiences, young people’s attitudes, skills and knowledge are developed in meaningful ways. Inquiry and communication are activated by a desire to know more, resulting in enthusiastic participation in the learning process “(Diana Mumford, 2000).

As Hsu and Lo (2009) states “the main purpose of this approach is to allow learners learn the knowledge of the specific content area and increase their language skills naturally” (p.72) This approach incorporates real contexts where students can develop or become proficient in their four languages skill as, writing, reading, listening and speaking. Thus Tessier & Tessier (2015) affirm, “the use of a theme helps students learn about the subject via the ability to apply subjects to the theme and their lives, by increasing motivation and comfort and by promoting learning by adding new knowledge to existing theme-established scaffolding”. (p.15)

Teachers need Content that was adapted according to ages and considering concepts close to their lives because they have the responsibility to promote the use of languages providing context and planning the activities.

Taking into account that the kinds of learners belonging to this project are children and that meaningful learning is the purpose to be accomplished, I decided to work with theme-based teaching because students need a way to make learning fun and relevant;

activities in which, meaning, form and use are combined in social interaction. According to Valencia and Lipson (1998), thematic-based teaching is also an approach when teaching more powerful content, higher- level thinking, and meaningful application of skills through themes. (p. 96) The main objective is to help students become knowledgeable, capable and thoughtful through practical, exciting and interesting themes, materials and activities.

Kucer, Silva and Delgado-Larocco (1995) present three critical conditions with theme-based teaching. These conditions should be promoted in my classroom in order to provide children an appropriate atmosphere to learn the target language. The first condition is risk- taking and it is defined as “the learner explores learning even as he or she knows that mistakes are natural characteristics of the learning process” (Kucer at al. 1995, p 12) It is important to create a classroom environment in which mistakes are not punished on the contrary, they will increase student’s motivation and increase an active participation in class.

The second condition is reflection, which is seen as “ the process by which learners can understand how others see the world and by which these views can be compared to the students’ own perspectives (Kucer at al. 1995, p 13) The final condition is called collaboration; it is about the formal patterns of relationships that are established in a community of learners (p13) This condition applies to children because they love working with others, mostly when it comes to games, role plays and dramations.

General objective

-To promote meaningful learning experiences with the use of theme-based teaching.

Specific objectives

- To explain how theme-based teaching transform the English learning process in a meaningful experience.
- To interpret the advantages of using theme-based teaching to teach English.
- To provide a good environment for the students to learn and practice English.

Development of Actions

The main objective of this project was to promote meaningful language learning experiences through the use of theme-based teaching, I decided to organize the course program based on the institution syllabus and the unit lessons were related to objectives from guia 22 for FL instruction. I started to activate students' previous knowledge about each theme, with kids' help, we created our definition. Then, for expanding the students' thought, I used not only some flashcards, I also used videos, worksheet, big books and different activities to promote the participation of the students having variety in the exercises. I designed my units asking my students about the topics that they enjoyed and we did a list with all the topics, finally they chose pets for all the group.

The initial first week of lessons began by exploring previous knowledge about pets vocabulary and introducing the nouns and adjectives. Concerning to first activities about nouns, students categorized the animals according some aspects such as habitat, abilities, and personal description. They did some other exercises such as games (Matching and hangman).

They did different activities such as seeing a video about different animal's descriptions, singing the song "Sing with the monkey Manu" and worksheets in which students had to describe animals and draw their descriptions. At the end of that week, they had to do a short presentation in which their classmates had to guess what animal their partner was representing in the game and students asked which was their favorite animal and why, then they had to interview their other classmates.

The second week and the third week we worked with a short story: the donkey on the island. And the students had to answer some questions of general comprehension and they had to select the verbs and nouns that the story had. Then, they created an imaginary pet. out of modeling dough and decorated it as they wished. When they were done, they presented their pets to their classmates, mentioning the name they gave, food and any other characteristics.

The fourth and fifth week we worked with the topic of the antonyms and feelings based on the adjectives that students had been employing at last class. We used different activities such as reading comprehension, worksheets and songs.

Findings and interpretations

As for the analysis process, I followed Burns (1999) advice in order to define the techniques I would use to collect data. I decided to have some observational techniques such as observations, and a personal journal where I wrote all about attitudes and activities developed in class; I also designed an interview which was applied to my CT and a survey conducted with the fifth graders class at the end of my practicum.

I had a focus group that consisted of twenty-five students, fourteen boys and eleven girls.

To explain how theme-based teaching can transform the English learning process in a

meaningful experience I did a chart to categorize students answers and their works.

Through the data analysis 2 main categories were identified: Students' meaningful experience and participation and benefits of theme-based teaching.

Students' meaningful experience

Regarding the students interview, they all agreed that the activities worked in class encouraged them to participate more in English classes, since they found them motivating, interesting, and very funny. In addition, they expressed the fact that the topic chosen by them was very significant because they wanted to enjoy a new learning that was linked with the theme of their interest; in this case, pets.

In general, I can say that when I started my practicum; students were very talkative and curious but when they had to say something in English or express an idea they were afraid of making mistakes however, the classes were advancing they had more confidence to talk in English. As it was evidenced by "las clases son muy divertidas, no me gustaba el inglés porque me sentía insegura pero ahora no me da pena participar y me gusta mas el ingles espero ansiosamente aprender cosas nuevas en clase". (survey, May 21th 2018).

Other aspect relating to this is students' dependence to the dictionary "me gustan mucho las clases son muy divertidas pero prefiero pasar frases de ingles a español o español a ingles ya que es mas facil y no cuesta tanto pensar o realizar una actividad". (survey, May 21th 2018). For us as teachers, it is a challenge because students prefer activities very easy when they do not need a lot of effort but when they are faced to think and create something new

they have the opportunity to learn a lot. the more attractive the activities are, the more significant learning becomes since they respond to their needs and interests.

Benefits of theme-based teaching

During the classes students had the opportunity to learn more about content through in this case pets and learn language at the same time. It was very gratifying for me to present English in a more contextualized way, because they could learn for example; about a vocabulary related to feelings, at the same time they could express what they feel in a specific situation in their life and in this form, learning was more meaningful for them.

One source of information evidenced that students got involved with themes connected to their daily life, as it was the case of when they explored the topics of adjectives and verbs, because they enjoyed to describe their favorite pets, their abilities and characteristics; some of them could write complete phrases using the verbs to be, to have and the topics seen in class.

“Yo no sabía escribir nada en ingles, solo algunas buscandolas en el diccionario ahora puedo describir mis cosas favoritas y algunas características gracias a las clases de inglés”. (survey, May 21th 2018).

“ Veo menos dependencia de los niños al diccionario y más retentiva con las palabras en inglés, cuando tu escribías las instrucciones en inglés, al principio ellos siempre preguntaban qué dice, què tenemos que hacer, pero a medida que avanzaban las clases ellos mismos podían decir que debían hacer lo cual demuestra que están más familiarizados al lenguaje y comprenden de una manera global palabras conocidas o deducen por las que ya conocen y su aprendizaje es más significativo cuando todo lo que se

trabajo en clase estaba enfocado a un tema del interés de ellos” (CT’s interview, May 21th, 2018).

Conclusions

During the implementation of this action research project students stayed motivated and participative. I found that the use of theme-based teaching is an integrated skill teaching method that combines topics and themes according to students' interest providing real and meaningful learning. Some disruptive behaviors were observed in the class, but in general students responded positively during the two school terms in which the actions were developed.

It is important to say that the teacher needs to study and to reflect about the students' positive attitudes and responses towards different teaching actions (reading activities, listening activities, draw and plays) and to invest time and effort on preparing classes and creating all the learning material and checking and providing constant feedback. It also entails the teacher to be creative and innovative.

It would be important to give some suggestions to teachers interested in working with theme-based teaching. Firstly, you need to be as creative and resourceful as possible when you don't have many resources in the classroom. For example: find a piece of cardboard and draw a grid on it to create a bingo board or draw some snakes and ladders.

Secondly, Teaching large classes is a challenge, but it can also offer many opportunities for you to improve your strategies. It's difficult to keep good discipline in a large class but you have to be strict about discipline and rules that your cooperative teacher had established in the group.

Finally, You need to move around the classroom to see what progress learners are making and what problems are coming up. In this way you can give advice, encouragement and extra individual help where it is needed.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Focus group

Encuesta

Objetivo: Evaluar si el método de enseñanza basado en temas de interés de los estudiantes fomenta experiencias lingüísticas significativas tanto a nivel individual como grupal en los estudiantes de clase de inglés.

1. ¿Con las actividades que realizas en clase has visto que aprendes más inglés?

Si _____

No _____

¿Qué has aprendido?

2. ¿Cómo te gusta aprender inglés?

a. Pasar las frases de inglés a español utilizando el diccionario .

b. Copiar frases que dicta el profesor.

c. Aprender de memoria una lista de palabras.

d. Hablando y escribiendo en inglés sobre temas fáciles y familiares como los animales, gustos y preferencias y otros.

3. ¿Los temas que son trabajados en clase tienen que ver con tu vida y tus gustos?

Si _____

No _____ ¿Por qué?_____

4. ¿Los materiales utilizados en las clases son de tu interés?

a. Si, muy interesantes

b. Si, pero poco interesantes

c. No, son poco interesantes

¿por qué?_____

5. ¿Las actividades que se desarrollan en clase son de tu interés?

Si _____

No _____
¿por qué? _____

Appendix B

Entrevista

Propósito: El propósito de la presente entrevista es poder reflexionar sobre los beneficios que se generan al momento de implementar una enseñanza que se basa en temas familiares y de interés para los estudiantes.

1. Qué opina acerca de las actividades que fueron desarrolladas en clase? ¿le parecieron interesantes y aportantes en la enseñanza de una lengua extranjera?
2. ¿Cuáles fueron los beneficios que evidenció en los estudiantes con esta estrategia de enseñanza en temas aplicada en el aula y considera que tuvo mayor impacto en los estudiantes?
3. ¿Considera que existe una relación entre los temas trabajados en clase y los intereses y gustos de los estudiantes?
4. ¿Mediante las actividades desarrolladas en clase, considera que los estudiantes han logrado aprender más inglés?
5. ¿Existe algún comentario o sugerencia que pueda ser usado para mejorar la práctica de enseñanza? ¿o desea agregar algo más respecto a nuestra temática de enseñanza?

Appendix C





