

Enhancement of students' lexical intake: influence of socio-affective strategies

**MEJORA DEL PROCESO DE ADQUISICIÓN LEXICAL DE
LOS ESTUDIANTES: INFLUENCIA DE LAS ESTRATEGIAS
SOCIOAFECTIVAS**

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Abstract

This document reports the findings of a research proposal aiming at analyzing the kind of impact that can have the use of socio-affective strategies on students' intake in an EFL classroom in a private preschool called Liceo Santo Ángel located in Sogamoso- Boyacá. The implementation of collaborative learning and activities related to students' emotions and feelings were pivotal in the course of this proposal. Observation formats and focus groups were used as main techniques for collecting data. Results showed that socio-affective strategies work well on student's intake, collaborative learning was a space for self-correction and peer correction and some aspects as sensitivity, lexicon learning among others were enhanced.

Key words: Social strategies, affective strategies, intake, collaborative learning.

RESUMEN

El presente documento reporta los hallazgos de una propuesta de investigación cuyo objetivo general era analizar el tipo de impacto que puede llegar a tener el uso de estrategias afectivas y sociales en la retención lexical de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en un colegio preescolar ubicado en Sogamoso- Boyacá llamado Liceo Santo Ángel. La implementación de aprendizaje colaborativo y de actividades relacionadas con los sentimientos y las emociones de los estudiantes fueron esenciales en el curso de esta propuesta.

Palabras clave: Estrategias sociales, estrategias afectivas, intake, aprendizaje colaborativo.

Introduction

This document evidences a descriptive case study that was conducted with two groups of preschoolers in a private school in Sogamoso-Boyacá. This research is conducted through case study because it generates concrete knowledge, context-dependent and it is also based on the principle of relativism in nature (Flyvbjerg, 2006). It also tries to analyze problematics in order to create a holistic description of them making use of the “Complex functioning thing” (Stake, 1995, p.2). The principal aim of this article is analyzing the kind of impact that can have the use of socio-affective strategies on students’ intake.

With this proposal, I expect to ameliorate issues related to the lack of appropriation of lexicon in English classes, the indisposition of learners towards group activities and the promotion of students’ abilities to express feelings and emotions. The aforementioned aspects are expected to be improved through the use of collaborative work and activities that include social and affective strategies.

Rationale

Students’ interaction and motivation have been perceived by several years as main influencing factors when learning a foreign language. As teachers, we always try to provide our students with the most of opportunities for them to learn in the best way and to construct knowledge from several resources. The promotion of a relaxed environment, the expression and development of emotions and affective bonds or the inclusion of group activities in English classes can serve as good instruments to

foster students’ learning process and the appropriation of English language in their daily lives; as well as a way to increase the levels of sensitivity and treatment towards people who make part of their affective and social bonds.

Educational context

This proposal was conducted with two groups of preschoolers in a private school called “Liceo Santo Ángel” located in Sogamoso-Boyacá. The groups are constituted by boys and girls in the ages of 4 to 5 years old and they count on 24 and 15 students respectively.

Observation and group meetings allowed me to identify that learners not always learn the totality of lexicon shared in English classes or this learning is so low, they are not so used to work in groups, ask and receive help from others or being friendly with their peers. That is why, it is relevant to conduct this proposal with them in order to increase students’ intake and ameliorate the issues already mentioned.

Description of activities proposed

In three English classes in which the topic was the parts of the body I implemented the following activities:

- In the first class, I took a plush toy that students named “Charlie”. I asked students to make a circle and sit down, I put the plush toy in the center and we started to sing a song about the parts of the body by using TPR (Total physical response) in order to practice the top-

ic. Later on, every single student had to say a compliment to Charlie making use of lexicon worked. For instance, "I like your head" and give him a hug. This process was repeated with all students: every single student made use of vocabulary learnt in the previous and the current class to do the activity. After having done that, I asked every single student to stand up, say a compliment to the partner next to him in the circle and give him a hug. Here again, the process was repeated with all students.

- In the second class, after doing the motivation, presentation and guided practices of the lesson. I put some craft paper on the floor and students and I made a circle again and sat down. One student had to lay down on the paper while another one drew a part of his or her body by using a paint brusher and paint. Later, the next student had to do the same exercise until we got a whole body on the paper, constituted by all parts of me and students' bodies. Later on, the totality of them were painting and decorating the product and it was stuck on the wall. Then, learners and I did a reflection upon how important is to work all together to achieve a goal and the relevance of equality in our daily lives, we talked about equality because we discover that the result we got was created by all of us; we all contributed with a specific part of our bodies for creating a single one.
- One of the activities we do in the school has to do with a farm we visit periodically and develop some tasks there. The farm is an open space in which we find some farm animals and nature. That is why, in the third class, I took advan-

tage of activities and visits we do to the farm to develop the third workshop of this research proposal. There, learners and I sang the song worked in previous classes and later we built a scarecrow by using clothes, sacks and dried grass. We started collecting the dried grass, putting it into a sack and finally we formed the arms, the legs, head and son on. Later, students were presenting the scarecrow to their peers pronouncing the parts of its body.

Theoretical principles

Taking into account that the main objective in this proposal is to analyze the impact that can have the implementation of socio-affective strategies in an EFL setting, I am going to list socio-affective strategies, collaborative learning and students' intake as the three main constructs that need to be studied as follows:

Socio-affective strategies

Throughout the time we have been able to see several theories that have arisen in regards to teaching and learning a foreign language. This field has been studied from varied perspectives and has shown many results according to specific settings. One of those theories around language argues that language is not learnt in isolation. We always need from others to create conventions, agreements and build social relationships. As Oxford (1990) stated:

"Language is a form of social behaviour; it is communication, and communication occurs between and among people. Learning a language thus involves other people, and appropriate social strategies are very important in this process" (p.144).

According to this author, we can not ignore others because they are part of individuals' development. When thinking about interaction and language we immediately have to think about communities and the relationship is built among them; so, if we talk about our educational settings we could say that interaction among students and recognizing the role of others as main part of oneself learning process is essential for creating knowledge and progress. Also, the use of social strategies is a way of creating a balance between weak and advanced learners, since they both build good relationships in class (Bunesova, 2007).

Considering what I just mentioned above, language and learning occurs among people and It is essential to make use of some strategies in order to be able to achieve common goals. Talking about these strategies, we can take a look at Oxford (1990) as cited in Sadighi and Kukabi (2006) who say that strategies are divided into two major classes, which are: direct and indirect strategies. At the same time, these two classes are divided into six groups: memory, cognitive and compensation under the direct class; and metacognitive, affective and social belonging to the indirect class.

Following the principal aims of this study I only take into consideration the second class of this classification, the indirect class. As Sadighi et al (2006) stated: "affective strategies help to regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes. Social strategies help students learn through interaction" (p.53). since my point of view these two types of learning strategies complement each other because they both consider the learner from an accurate perspective; the fact of looking at his feelings and motivations and trying to combine them in order

to maximize student's learning process can bring very good results in this construction of knowledge and interaction.

In addition, some affective strategies as identifying mood an anxiety level, talking about feelings, using deep breathing among others are significant for L2 proficiency (Deyer and Oxford,1996). It is essential to provide students a relaxed environment in which they can feel comfortable without anxiety and free to express their feelings and emotions. This statement can be supported by Oxford (1990) who stated: "social and affective strategies are of paramount importance, as they involve student's whole person and the learning process is very close to acquisition" (p.268). Until this part we have been able to see the importance of others in language learning. Since language is not learnt in isolation, we also can see that social and affective strategies are relevant in EFL settings because learners need to be seen from a holistic way and all aspects of his life can influence his learning processes.

Collaborative learning

Collaborative work can be seen as a way to complement the idea of language learning through interaction. This is a fact we as teachers need to take into consideration when developing our lessons in order to provide students activities and situations in which they are able to share and construct common knowledge. According to Gerlach (1994): "collaborative learning is based on the idea that learning is a naturally social act in which the participants talk among themselves. It is through the talk that learning occurs" (p12).

This author talks about the talk as a pivotal element in learning. The talk allows learners to construct common knowledge because it is an exercise in which they feel free to tell their experiences and share prior knowledge they could have. In that way, communication appears and learners operate together for achieving specific goals, since students are involved in a process of interaction, they are able to look and understand their differences, as well as learn how to solve social problems that can be presented (Johnson and Jhonson, 1985).

Moreover, collaborative learning is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together. Usually students are working in groups of two or more mutually searching for understanding, solutions, meanings or creating a product. (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). Proposing group activities in our language classes brings our students together in order to construct knowledge.

Students' intake

In a language class, vocabulary is an important aspect and it plays a significant role in a lesson. As Muliawati and Mutia explained: "learning either first or second language is basically related to its vocabulary knowledge, hence limited vocabulary knowledge will impede or stop learning a language" (Muliawati and Mutia, 2017, p4). Vocabulary is also considered as a starting point in our lesson plans, and this vocabulary together with every single thing we do in the classroom by using the target language turns into what we call *input*.

Now, talking about input, Kumaravadeivelu (1948) defines input as the oral and/or written body of L2 to which foreign learners are exposed by the use of several tools. In this sense, we as teachers try to provide our students with a lot of language exposure in order to facilitate and improve their learning, but sometimes results are not pleasant. After doing plenty of activities we can perceive that students do not learn the totality of input but the one they want. Teachers do not have much control over this issue. Corder as cited by Kumaravadeivelu (1948) suggested that "it is the learner who controls the input or more properly his intake" (Corder, 1967, p165). Intake must be considered because it is what students finally stored in their memories and the knowledge that they will be using in the future.

Findings

After having implemented this research proposal, I could identify some factors and students' reactions that I organized into some categories. Students' participations and disposition, increase of sensitivity levels, self-correction and peer correction, and English in daily life are the items I will list as follows:

Students' participation and disposition

At the very beginning of the implementation of activities there were some evident behaviors and attitudes that did not favor the good development of lessons. Lack of attention, lack of disposition or low level of participation were some of the issues that hindered the learning and teaching pro-

cess. One note done in the observation format evidences this:

“When I started the class some students did not want to make silence nor stay sat, so I decided to ask them to make the circle outside the classroom in another room of the school. It was attractive for the students and behaviors changed, so that I started the very first part of the class” (Observation format, June 8th, 2018).

After having taken the students to a space different to the classroom their attitudes changed in a very positive way, then they were so curious about knowing the plush toy I had put in the middle of the circle and learners felt motivated about sharing their feelings, hugging toys and peers and looking at good aspects from others. Every single time an activity was developed, there was a notable attitude of participation and disposition.

Increase of sensitivity levels

Another aspect that I was able to identify from students' attitudes and responses in the focus groups was that their levels of sensitivity increased positively. The treatment towards the plush toy and towards their partners was better in classes. A student stated:

“For me, it was a little bit difficult to express a compliment to Charlie (Plush toy) and to my partners, but later the teacher said I was doing it well and I felt more confident to express myself and I liked to hear what my friends told me and what I told them as well” (Focus groups transcription, June 20th, 2018).

In this part we can see that the student had a progress in regards to his production of English and the expression of his feelings.

The student manifests that he did not know what to say but later it was easier for him to tell his partners some compliments which is an aspect that was perceived not only on that specific student but almost on the most of them. There was a level of sensitivity by the most of students. The treatment towards the plush toy and their peers was a little bit better, during the class the amount of fights among them was reduced and it was interesting to see the learners' efforts for finding a compliment to be expressed to the toy.

We teachers should promote this sensitivity on students because we educate people to perform and live in a society. Currently, we need citizens who know how to live together for constructing and achieving common goals. So, from schools we must start generating spaces for developing and acquiring values and reflection.

Self-correction and peer correction

Group activities were a space for self-correction and peer correction. A note done in the observation format stated that: “Learners formed some groups for developing the activity, some fights were presented but finally they got the good result, it was not me who corrected mistakes but they on their own” (Observation format, June 12th, 2018). In the development of some activities, the mistakes were corrected by the same student and sometimes by the others. Anyway, this is an aspect that still needs to be worked on them, because although students' behavior was good in the sessions in which this proposal was conducted, it changed in next sessions. This could be caused because sometimes we

as teacher do not talk to students about the importance of working together and as I could perceive, this reflection is necessary in every single class until we can reach our objective.

English in daily life

The activity developed in the farm was an exercise that allowed the articulation of thematic seen at school with daily life. Every single activity that I did in the farm: songs, games, presentation of topic, guided and free practices showed me that students' learning of body parts had increased significantly. A student stated that:

"Cuando fuimos a la granja y armamos el espantapájaros, y entonces el profesor nos preguntó las partes del cuerpo del espantapájaros, y entonces yo me acordé que eso lo habíamos visto en clase y yo las dije bien" (Focus groups' transcription, June 20th, 2018).

"When we went to the farm and did the scarecrow, the teacher asked us about the body parts. So, I remembered that we have studied that topic in class and I was able to respond well" [Transcription]

Here, we can see how meaningful was for the students the knowledge they had acquire in the school in order to transfer it to other contexts. Although there was some lexicon they still did not acquire, the most

of it was used by them in order to show others the product they had created and language took a main part on it.

Conclusions

Finally, I can conclude that taking into consideration students' emotions in the classroom arises as a pivotal lesson part. It can increase student's motivation for learning and at the same time we are working on sensitivity and values.

When developing group activities, it is essential to give students a specific role in the activity. In context in which collaborative learning is a problem, the lack of knowledge about what to do by part of learners can lead to misunderstandings, complications or even fights. In a group activity the teacher can say every single student what his or her function is, how this function is important for achieving a common goal, and finally to develop the activity.

Self-correction and peer correction are so useful in language learning. Mistakes will always be presented and they are also a way of improving, learners can and should take part in this process of improvement by correcting themselves and their peers thanks to the fact that they feel more comfortable and confidence is bigger among them.

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