

Project-Based Learning and Language Learning Strategies in the ESL Classroom

A case study in teaching ESL with project based curriculum.

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Mrs. Bobbi Preble, a third grade ESL summer school teacher at Payette Elementary School in Payette Idaho started her day the same way she had begun her class all summer quarter. The “student of the day” was to give a description of their weekend to the class. “We went to the movies. I went shopping and got shirts” Hiberto stated. Mrs. Preble was not surprised by his short sentences and lack of description. Only after coaxing was Mrs. Preble able to extract some detail of his weekend. The board now read “My family went to see the movie Scooby Doo. Then we went shopping. I got three shirts. Then we went home.

“The problem with my students at this age is the lack of adjectives and adverbs in their language” Mrs. Preble said as she looked at Hiberto’s paragraph. “It is so hard to get them to express anything other than their basic actions.”

Hearing this veteran teacher’s statement didn’t surprise me. It wasn’t the first time I had heard of this problem. Another ESL teacher, Kim Neill, felt “The problems with ESL students in [her] classroom are difficulty creating complete sentences and complete paragraphs.” I was at Payette Elementary to conduct a short educational workshop with these eight ESL students that would incorporate communication skills. Because there were only three days of school left and it was a Monday morning, it was going to be a challenge to keep the students attention.

On Task

My goal was to see how language would be used in context with a fun hands-on project. I chose the PCS BrickLab because it is an easy tool for the students to use and there is little to no preparation time. With the BrickLab, I set out to conduct a communication activity called Tall Towers to see if communication and descriptive word usage would improve if students were actively involved in a project. Tall Towers combines communication, public speaking, and architecture into a building activity using LEGO® manipulatives.

The BrickLab project began with a short introduction and lecture. I explained the concept of post and lintel and why they are strong structures, and acted the concepts out with arm movements. After explaining that a door has posts and lintels, I asked students if they could see any others in the room. Students immediately started presenting different examples. The second part of the lesson was telling each of the students that I was going to hire them as architects, but not before we all had a discussion about what architects do. Throughout the lesson I continued to emphasize the new vocabulary and reinforced the new words the students were using.

The third activity was the building activity. The students were told they needed to build the tallest and strongest structure possible that would withstand a gale force wind (blowing on it)! Students worked cooperatively talking and instructing each other on what piece should go where and discussing design. After fifteen minutes these students had built some great towers, and all were eager to see if they stood up to the “wind test.” But first, students had to collaborate with their partner and create an oral presentation describing their tower. Students had to describe the what, where, how, who, and why of their tower in a public speech to the class.

The student’s speeches, although not in true speech format, were very descriptive and used complete sentences. Students introduced the towers; “This is the Tallest Tower. We named it Tallest Tower because it is very tall and has a long pointy top,” and “This tower will be a hotel that people will come to in Mexico,

on the coast. It has a huge pool and you can see big dolphins swimming!” Not only were their sentences descriptive and in correct grammatical structure, but the students were excited and wanted to tell about everything their tower would have. These students were engaged and excited. They were learning without knowing they were learning.

Incorporating Language Learning Strategies

Cognitive psychology in education specialists Anderson, Simon, & Reder conclude that "Among the processes that have been shown by recent research to have considerable power in speeding the learning process and encouraging the learner to achieve deeper levels of understanding are learning from examples and learning by doing."

The PCS BrickLab offers 208 hands-on projects in four subject areas that allow ESL students to play and learn. Without forcing language, the BrickLab allows language to develop naturally and students show an amazing confidence in describing what they do by speaking aloud and journaling. According to the 1999 INFOSCUELA Project¹ study -- a study of student accomplishments when incorporating LEGO® manipulatives into daily curriculum versus the standard learning techniques -- students in the second grade showed a 10% increase in language acquisition and a 34% increase in self-esteem. Fourth graders also showed an increase with a 21% improvement in language skills and an 8% advance in self-esteem.

Many ESL teachers struggle with the mechanics of getting their students up to their native speaking peers. Teachers know exactly *what* they need to do, but often find it difficult to accomplish. This is where Language Learning Strategies (LLS) come into play. Language Learning Strategies are “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 (Learning a second language) skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability (Oxford, 1992/1993, p. 18). In “Meeting the Challenge of Content Instruction” by Judie Haynes & Judith O’Loughlin (1999), one of the best ways to teach ESL students is to “provide concrete examples of vocabulary words through the use of visuals, such as flash cards, games, and puzzles.” This example of a Language Learning Strategy, in addition to the characteristics noted above state that LLS:

- allow learners to become more self-directed
 - expand the role of language teachers
 - are problem-oriented
 - involve many aspects, not just the cognitive
 - can be taught
 - are flexible
 - are influenced by a variety of factors
- (Oxford, 1990a, p. 9)

By incorporating hands-on manipulatives and posing a challenge to students using the BrickLab curriculum, I believe that I effectively used these Language Learning Strategies with Mrs. Preble’s Third grade class. The BrickLab was the perfect resource for presenting a large amount of information in a short period of time, it offered a hands-on project with a fun and familiar manipulative, and it didn’t require more than five minutes of preparation time. More than that, I was able to learn with the students. I was also sure that the students walked away with information they didn’t have before. In those 45 minutes, I became a teacher, motivator, and friend to the students. I wouldn’t feel so confident about my previous statement, if

¹ Research on the Educational Impact of LEGO® materials. A recent research project (1998-1999 school year), conducted by the Peruvian Ministry of Education. This study involved the coordinated participation of the Peruvian Ministry of Education, educational psychologist Ivan Montes Iturizaga, Dr. Seymour Papert and the MIT Media Lab, the Pontificia Catholic University of Peru (CISE), the Pedagogical Institute of Monterrico, and the teachers, schoolmasters, parents, and all 1,653 students from the 14 participating schools.

three of the students hadn't hugged me as they headed for the busses and said "can you come back tomorrow?"

My newest little Architects in Mrs. Preble's class helped to reinforce my thoughts about project-based Language Learning Strategies and affirmed my hopes of teaching language and speaking with exciting hands-on projects. Something I was not expecting was the confidence and excitement that came from the students. The last time I checked, homework was not something to volunteer for, however Hiberto chimed at the end of the lesson "I'm going to do this at home too!" Hearing that, I needed no more convincing.

Bibliography

Haynes, Judie; O'Loughlin, Judith. "Meeting the Challenge of Content Instruction." May 13, 1999. Online version: <http://www.everythingsl.net/inservices/judith.php>

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