

An Action-Research Project in the English Literacy Classroom (A preliminary report)

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1. Initial reflection

During my teaching practice in a secondary school I worked with 2º ESO (Secondary) level students. They are immerse in the MEC-British Council bilingual program and my observation has taken place during the English Literacy lessons. These students take five hours per week, that is, one per day, of English Literacy, which consists not only of the study of grammar and vocabulary, but also of topics concerning the language itself. The students in this class have a homogeneous level in general, although it is worth noting the presence of both some outstanding students and some others with some problems to adapt to the average level of the class.

During my observation I have realised how the students are, in general, inattentive, talkative and most of the times off-task. Because of this, the environment created in class is not a very good one to work in, since the teacher needs to be constantly addressing their bad behaviour (talking, not paying attention, not doing the tasks assigned...). The signs of boredom and lack of interest leads most of the times to the lack of participation even when the teacher tries to make them collaborate by asking them. This lack of participation and being off-task can be seen above all during the explanations provided by the teacher and in the activities subsequent to these explanations.

2. Observation

In order to deal with these problems of lack of interest and boredom that leads the students to be off-task, and in order to find out a possible common cause which made students behave that way and feel so demotivated to pay attention in class and be collaborative and on-task, I decided:

- To analyse the organisation of the lesson and the timing of the activities. I will observe how the lessons are presented by analysing different factors, concerning the teacher's role; the suitability of materials and procedures; the organisation of the classroom; the maintenance of students' interest and participation and how the teacher motivates the students when presenting the lesson; and assessment and correction, since all these can be a possible cause for students' demotivation and lack of interest.
- To analyse the type of activities that the students are asked to do after those explanations by taking into account their suitability to the students' needs and preferences.

- To observe the students' behaviour when they have to listen to the teacher and when they are given time to do the activities by using some patterns of observation, such as keeping a diary or filling in some classroom scheme sheets with the students' behaviour when off-task.
- To talk to the teacher before the class in order to see how she has prepared the materials and how is she going to present them to the students, and compare her expectations with what actually happens inside the classroom once she begins the lesson; how the students react to the activities proposed and the reasons for this reaction
- To analyse the materials that the students are presented, since they do not use a book for this subject.

In order to do this, I firstly observed and took notes on the teacher's performance while explaining and on the students' behaviour while they were working in a model of the class on paper. Secondly, I reflected on the results and tried to find a possible cause that could deal with; and, finally, I designed an action plan with some strategies to tackle this problem as far as I can.

After the observation, these are the results I reached:

1. The dynamics of the lesson: the teacher comes into the class, gives the students some photocopies for them to follow the lesson; as I said, they do not have a book for this subject, and the teachers explains – lectures– and expands what the students can see in the copy. After the explanation, students are asked to do some activities related to what has been explained and, if they have time, the activities proposed are corrected. The teacher is the one who talks mainly (too much *Teacher Talking Time*), and she does not make the students part of the process since they do not participate actively in the lesson. Because of this, most of the students disconnect and their level of motivation to follow the lesson lowers; therefore, they begin doing some other things than listening and working.
2. Students' attitude: As the lesson is not presented to the students in an attractive way and their attention is not caught since the beginning of the explanation, students' attitude tends to be like this: writing notes to pass them to other student, talking with a partner, writing in their copies, daydreaming, interrupting the teachers' explanation, etc. They stop listening because they are not given a reason to pay attention, and I mean a real reason, a reason that makes them be attentive, since when the teacher menaces them with not having the break at 11 they all are suddenly quiet, but still not listening, only painting their copies or looking through the window.
3. The type of activities proposed is not very motivating either. The students are not offered a real context to work on. The examples and activities provided have been made up for them to work on what the teacher wants at each moment; most of them are not authentic texts and materials, and they do not deal with topics related to their interests.
4. When the students are exposed to the activities, mainly written texts, the only previous task has been to listen to the teacher's explanation. There has not been interaction between teacher and students, and communication has only taken place from teacher to students; the teacher has not asked them, she has not related the topic to the students' real lives and world, she has not attracted their attention to the topic and therefore the students have had no time to reflect on the topic, to activate their previous knowledge or to relate their own vision and experiences to what is being dealt with, and this is one of the reasons why the moment they have to do the activities, they do not have any interest on them and if they do something, is just mechanically, but not paying attention on what they are asked to do.

3. Action plan

As the class does not follow a book, it is very easy to adapt the different topics we have to deal with to the students' needs and preferences. This situation offers many advantages, since the teacher is able to present the students texts they feel comfortable with and interested in. Because of the millions of possibilities that this situation offers, I decided to take action: the lesson they have to work with now is "Drama". I asked the teacher what the students are supposed to learn, which are the objectives and the kind of activities, related specific vocabulary, theoretical explanations, etc. She told me some things about it and she showed me the plan she intended to follow, which was the same as usual. Students were supposed to deal with dramatic terms and texts, so I read thoroughly the copies that the students were going to receive and the tasks they were supposed to work with. After that, I thought about how to present the unit in another way, and I had the idea that it could be good to present the students some real, authentic materials they were familiar with, so I went to the internet and found the real scripts of some famous films and TV series in English. I decided to talk about this to the teacher, and I proposed her if I could create some activities around that material. She gave me her permission to do it and told me that it could even be done in the laboratory of English, where they have computers for all the students and internet connection, since she was going to explain later in the year some text types related to computers and the internet. Because of this, I decided to plan a session of drama, where theoretical explanation and working in activities were included, so I decided to prepare not a lecture-kind lesson, but an inductive plan, one in which students were involved since the beginning of the lesson.

I prepared a website with some activities to work in.¹ Firstly, we did a warm-up task, where I asked them questions about drama and dramatic terms, to provide them a context to work on. By doing this, I had attracted the students' attention. They had to listen to me and to the rest of their classmates because they were all included, not only me as a teacher was the one who had all the knowledge. With this warming up activity, the students had time to activate their correct schemata and previous knowledge about the topic, and now, after having reached to some conclusions, among them that dramatic scripts could be found in television and cinema, they were ready to start working. I had prepared some activities on-line which dealt with the scripts of current films and TV series. The activities I prepared were supposed to be done in pairs. I thought that pair work could work in this case since the students were going to practise firstly with another classmate before they were asked to answer in front of the whole class, and so their level of anxiety would be lowered and they would participate more.

As for the activities offered, I tried to present the students as many possibilities and choices as I could, so that they worked in those scripts that they were more interested in. They were in front of real, authentic materials that were known and appealing to them and this way they were on-task and working. As the activities were very open, the students were able to be creative as there was not a "correct" answer, but many possible options, and the fact that the activities were more open ended than usual was also motivating for them. As for results, they were very positive. When working on the worksheet on dramatic terms, students got 71% of correct answers on average, but apart from numerical results, the most important thing was that I fulfilled my first objective: during the completion of the activities, the students, who were attentive because I had "included" them in the lesson from the very first minute when we started revising theory, were on-task, interested in doing things and putting hands up to ask things and helping one another.

¹ The website I created can be seen at <http://dramapractice.googlepages.com>

4. FINAL REFLECTION

The changes I have introduced have been positive, and even the students have realised that things can be learnt in many different ways and that something that can seem boring can be dealt with and become something interesting and appealing. The teacher was with me in the laboratory and at the end of the activity, the students told her that they should do these things more often, that they had liked to work on Drama that way. Moreover, after the activity, I passed a little questionnaire to the students to see how had they liked the activity, and the results are great. Some of them have made very interesting comments that should be analysed and taken into account very carefully by the teacher; for instance, when asked “Which things did you like about the activity?”, there are comments such as “*the type of learn*” or “*that all can be learn with a play*” (I suppose the student meant that for them the activity was a kind of game but that they learnt a lot); or that the things they liked the most was to work with things they knew, that were interesting and relevant for them “*because it was my favourite programme*”. In my opinion, apart from offering them motivating and interesting materials and including them in the lesson, making the students feel part of the process of learning, both by interacting with them when explaining and asking for their opinions in a questionnaire is very positive for them, for the development of their learning awareness and to feel motivated as they see that what they think and what they say also counts.

It is true that even though the activity has worked well, some students asked for more time to do them, and I am aware that students cannot be the whole year doing activities in the internet lab; however, the activities I have created could have been presented printed and done in class. If I introduced the lab component was for two reasons: the teacher was going to explain the students some e-text types as the next topic (blogs, commercial letters, emails...) and the introduction of the new technologies can be a very motivating activity if done properly.

In short, with this project I have changed the method from deductive to inductive, I have given the students a purpose to work, I have offered them authentic texts and materials which were relevant to their interests and I have included them in the process of learning. By doing this, the students have been more motivated and the initial problem of lack of interest and being off-task has been significantly reduced.

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