IMPROVING STUDENTS' ENGLISH THROUGH PROBLEM-SOLVING ACTIVITIES

Gustavo Torres and Gregorio Julio

We as teachers sometimes notice low motivation and participation during the development of our classes. Students have an aphatic attitude and this creates a bad environment when they work in class. Motivating and creating a good environment in class through our English activities, was the objective of our project. We took problem solving activities as an excellent way to create a good atmosphere in class and change the routine in order to motivate and increase students' participation. This project was relevant because we explored a new method of teaching English which included different types of activities and our students became active agents in the learning process.

Introduction

Reflecting on the low student participation and desiring to raise student motivation, we decided to include some problem-solving activities as a way to develop a process in teaching that would guide thoughts (Kudriatsev: 1987) and involve students in situations and activities where they would feel confident and participate by themselves evidencing interest and motivation.

Marinko (1988) defines problem solving as a peculiar form of teaching in which one imitates the investigative process. It outlines problems and solves them in conjuction with the students. In this way , students are in contact with English not only during the classes, but also at every moment.

Problem- solving activities permit students to consult specific topics to express their points of view about the problem, and generates a final assignment where they demonstrate their motivation and participation.

Subjects

The group chosen to be the subject of this project was the tenth grade San Bernardo De La Salle students. It is a religious private school and these students have an intermediate level of English. This group was chosen because it had showed the greatest apathy towards activities during the English lessons.

Procedure

In order to implement our project, the English teacher planned the classes taking problem-solving methods into account. After consulting the theory, we concluded that there was not any activity that we could select to apply during our classes. We adapted some activities of the guide text used by the students to apply problem-solving activities.

We selected motivating topics with the students' help. They were challenged cognitively by means of consulting by themselves and through the teacher's explanation. So, the work was individual first and then shared with their classmates. This way, they were encouraged to work closely in groups by holding discussions about the given situation. Finally they submitted

a list of suggestions or expressed their ideas about some topics related to their lives and experiences.

We began with these activities in March 2001. We gave students the first topic and they researched it for two weeks. After that they discussed their points of view with their partners (The teacher was a guide during this part of the process). Next we organized an activity based on the topic and the students did it over two classes.

The final work was presented by groups and shared with other groups. The same procedure was followed with the two activities during April and students worked not only faster but better. We observed this in a sample written by a student to express his list of people who influenced his life.

Data collection

In order to collect data and evaluate this work, we used three sources of information: student's survey, teacher's diary and video recording. The surveys were tabulated and the results revealed the students' opinions regarding the problem-solving activities developed by themselves.

As teacher-researchers, we observed some lessons while students were developing the activities; we wrote diary entries as soon as classes finished. The last source was video recording. We designed a check list to analyse the videos individually and compared our results. In order to come up with the final conclusions, we used the triangulation procedure.

Results and conclusions

Students showed a high level of motivation because they wanted to express their points of view and they used English more easily and effectively than in other types of activities developed beforehand.

The results showed that the improvement not only in grammar, but also in speaking was noteworthy because these activities generated a high level of motivation in the students. We noticed that interest was higher when the activities were related to the interests of the students. For example, their lives, music, friends ,etc. For this reason we had to be careful when we chose topics to work on in class. Students expressed their interests consulting or working by themselves with the guidance of the teacher. The students' interest could be observed by means of their papers where the quality was better than ever. A sample of students' work is included below. We worked on the topic named 'Lyfe styles' and students were asked to express their ideas about 'People who influence my life'.
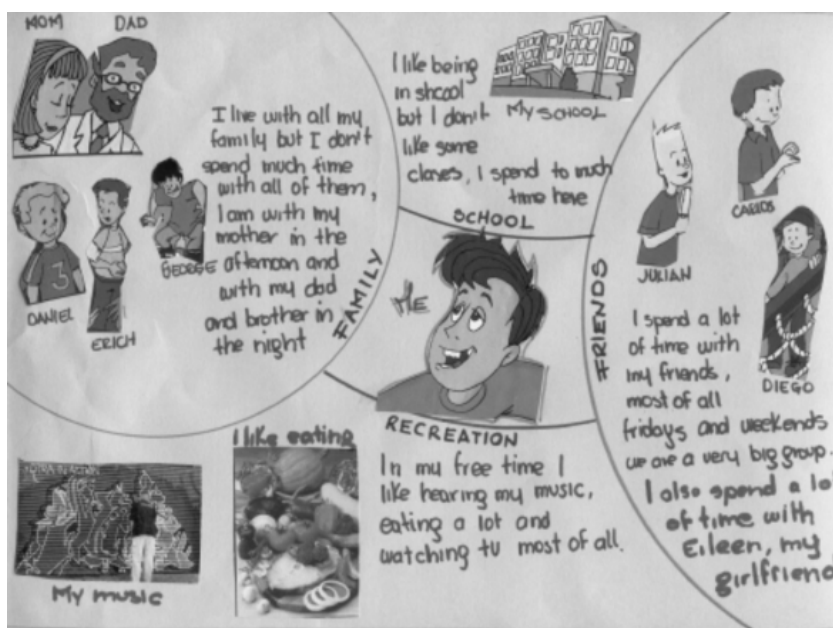
'People who influence my life' By Luis Carlos Cortés Lago, student of 10th Grade at San Bernardo de la Salle School. 2001. Used with permission.

Students improved their English level in all the activities given, but especially in speaking and writing. In the first case, they needed to communicate with their partners and the teacher in order to get involved in the activity assigned. In the second case , writing, students applied their grammar knowledge got through personal study and the teacher's explanations. They were confident expressing their ideas in writing. Students also improved their reading skills because they had to prepare the topics, so they needed to read a lot outside the classroom.

Problem-solving activities involve cognitive and practical problems whereby students have to consult by themselves by via observing, inferring and finally communicating their conclusions or solutions using different forms of communication. The best problem-solving activities to generate good results in the improvement of English are those that let students think in English and feel English as a necessity, not only in the classroom, but also in different contexts outside, such as when they have to investigate other cultures and lifestyles.

The teacher must create problem activities where the students observe, consult, infer, analyse, classify and create the solutions to the given problem and, this way, the students become sure, critical, conscientious, interested, creative and motivated to improve their language levels.

References

Kudriatsev ,T.V. (1987). *Ideas de la Enseñanza Problémica en la Práctica.* Berlín: Instrucción pública. No 10.

Marinko J. (1988). Las Situaciones Problémicas en el Pensamiento y la Enseñanza. Moscú: Ed. Pedagogika.