

ACTIVATING YOUNG LEARNERS IN THE TEACHING/ LEARNING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES (DINOCROCS TRAVEL TO ROMANIA)

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This article aims at describing how the innovative methodology used in teaching foreign languages to young learners (three and eight years of age) was applied in Romania by Euroed Foundation, Iasi. The method has been developed by the “The Adventures of Hocus and Lotus” project co-financed by the European Union under the Lifelong Learning Programme. One of the most important innovations of the project which was highly appreciated in Romania was that it gave kindergarten teachers the possibility to teach a foreign language in their classes without them being language teachers or having an advanced level in the foreign language. The key of the method is the fact that it aims at teaching a limited amount of linguistic content and, as a consequence the kindergarten teacher has to master the foreign language to a certain extent, mastery that can be acquired through a training programme, less extensive than one of qualifying foreign language teachers. The paper focuses on the training programme. Instead of blanketing the teachers with theory, it aims to provide them with an educational model whose pedagogic lines are consistent with the natural developmental processes of language acquisition. An added value of having foreign languages taught by the class teachers is the special communicative and emotional relationship between the children and their teacher. The method was also applied to the mentally disabled children with good results.

Key words: administrative staff, students, languages at the workplace, agriculture, business and administration, on-line language learning resources

The training aimed at teaching kindergarten teachers a limited amount of linguistic content thus giving them the possibility to teach a foreign language in their classes as well as providing them with an educational model whose pedagogic lines are consistent with the natural developmental processes of language acquisition.

The training began in September 2008 and spread over the school year until June. The training consisted of five face-to-face meetings, trainers’ observations

and counselling sessions. Trainers and trainees kept in contact throughout the training. The first training session started in September and lasted 5 days, followed by four more one-day meetings in November, December, March and May.

The first face-to-face meeting concentrated on familiarising the trainees with the *Dinocrocs* project: its objectives, principles, innovative teaching strategies, activities and materials (*Dinocrocs presentation*). The presentations also highlighted the teacher's great influence on the children's language development and the new role that the teacher has as a 'magic teacher' who makes learning possible (*Magic teacher*). Some psychological aspects of the foreign language learning process were also underlined (*Language in the brain*). Our trainees found them very useful and convincing because they explained scientifically all the technical details necessary in implementing the method. The theoretical aspects made clear to the trainees why certain steps should be taken in order to get the expected results.

From the very beginning we wanted to convince our trainees that they are the most suitable persons for the jobs assigned to them- to teach a foreign language to their children without having too much knowledge of it before their initial training- and that the course should equip them with everything they needed to start and continue teaching the new language. Our trainees understood that their success in using this method is based on two concrete facts: the special communicative and emotional relationship they have managed to establish with their children and their special qualification as being trained to teach small children in an attractive way, suitable to their age.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The first meeting was concentrated mostly on the introduction and practice of the first two formats. The teachers, most of whom were kindergarten teachers, were taught only the new language they would be using with the children under the form of the stories of the formats. We insisted that the teaching method prescribes that the teachers learn from the stories as they act them out together with the children in class. Thus the more practice they have, the better and more confident they will become.

During our meetings we tried to ensure an encouraging atmosphere similar to the atmosphere to be achieved in class with the children (constant eye contact and smile proved to be significant tools in this respect), which would stimulate trainees' constructive participation. We also assured our trainees that we would try to suit every learning style by favouring a balance between theory and practice (we also showed interest in the way they relate the new experience to their previous ones); that we would give participants time to practice and see the results for themselves making them thus confident in what they had learnt; and that we would facilitate a constant dialogue between participants allowing teachers to share their teaching experiences.

Furthermore, we also insisted on the importance of the non-verbal channels of communication such as facial expressions, actions, gestures and body language in conveying messages. Our trainees agreed that such tools are handy and can be very efficient if they are used appropriately. They are clear, easy to use and do not cost anything. They can help children imagine and therefore visualize the words and situations. They are clear clues helping children understand meanings. They can facilitate understanding of messages, create atmosphere and forge bonds among

people. The tone of voice is also important as it helps children interpret words through emotions.

They had used body language before but they had done that instinctively without having a clear scientific explanation for their actions. The project raised their awareness about the meaning of body language in relation to the language learning process. They now know that it is a tool that cannot be neglected. Our trainees signalled some cultural differences between gestures, which if not clarified would lead to serious misunderstanding.

We talked a lot about the importance of eye contact and the teacher's direction of the gaze: to draw the attention of your listener(s) towards a determined place, object or person; to share an experience; to give and receive cues about the alternation of turns in conversation. We all agreed that its primary function is to draw and hold the attention of the class. Without this shared attention between the teacher and students the acting-out could not even start. Our trainees noticed the importance of the relation/synchronization between teacher's gaze and her words and actions. The teacher's gaze spoke volumes about the teacher's emotional involvement in the story, if the teacher was really experiencing what she was telling about. During our training when observing different teachers doing the formats with their children we noticed that some teachers managed to capture their children's attention and make them actively participate by being extremely engaging in the process. On the other hand other teachers did not get the same results although they seemed to know their formats very well, did the same gestures and actions. What they lacked was obviously their real involvement which was reflected in the way they used their gaze. They were not seeing the things they were speaking about, which made them unreliable narrators in the children's eyes.

Another important factor in communication is the smile, which helps the teacher create atmosphere and encourage communication and learning. This is sometimes hard to achieve when the teacher is not relaxed and feels uncomfortable.

Our trainees understood that the role of the teacher cannot be overlooked and that only a magic teacher can enjoy the expected results. The acting out is a special moment, a moment of sharing and emotional complicity. The children share with their teacher the characters' emotional experiences and live through the magic of the narrative in the first person, forming mental representations as they do so. It goes without saying that the teacher has a great influence on the children's language development.

During the training teachers were provided with scripts which they would follow to act out the stories. They also learned the accompanying hand gestures and actions, the songs from the musical versions of the narrative formats, again with the relevant actions, and to recount the stories in the second language with the aid of illustrated books. The teachers themselves experienced the formats physically (through the actions of the narrative format), emotionally (via the music) and visually (through the illustrated stories). After the training sessions the teachers were also teaching the formats to their class. In other words, the teachers used what they had learnt with the children straight away.

The T-shirt featuring the two main characters of the "Adventures", Hocus and Lotus, was also introduced from the very beginning. The trainees understood that it is the password allowing children to enter the magic world and signalling them that they are inside Hocus' and Lotus's world where only the new language is spoken or understood. It is fundamental for creating a context dedicated to learning the new language. We tried to make it a habit by using it whenever we acted out the formats so that we ourselves we took it seriously. So whenever we had to interrupt our acting out

or while preparing ourselves for acting out we used to rolled it up so that the drawings of Hocus and Lotus were covered.

The 25 trainees were 23 kindergarten teachers, a teacher of English (from Euroed foundation and two other kindergartens in Iasi) and a teacher teaching mentally disabled at a special school in Iasi. Their ages and qualifications varied ranging from newly qualified to experienced teachers but all of them shared the same enthusiasm, love for children and interest in their self development.

All of them have attended training courses on teaching young children. In terms of their English we had different levels: advanced- the teacher of English; intermediate- 20 and beginners- 4. Although we envisaged that we would encounter some difficulties with the beginners, things progressed smoothly and gradually in time. We noticed two different attitudes in relation to trainees' own ability to learn the new language: a very enthusiastic and a less confident one. We acted according to the indications and principles of the method and we taught only what the teachers needed. We insisted on having a pleasant atmosphere. We respected our trainees' own pace of learning and encouraged initiatives. We avoided being judgmental. With the trainers' and colleagues' encouragement, help and support the beginners got the confidence they needed in order to be able to teach their children the formats. At the end of the year we had only one confident attitude coming from all the participants alike.

The experiential method showed its results soon. Trainees learned to act out the stories along with the actions and the gestures by acting out together in the group no matter their level of English. The material was reinforced by the songs so that everything was experienced on several levels making memorizing and internalizing the materials very easy. The beginners said the decoding of the new language was facilitated by the trainers' gestures and facial expressions. They also underlined the role of repetition in decoding and taking the material in. If they did not get the meaning first time they acted out the format they were interested in with a view to getting the message (and that happened to the children as well). Repetition was not monotonous because it was based on interesting topics, interacting, sharing experiences and eye contact. However, at least during the first meetings whenever they felt uncertain they asked for help. What was interesting was that they initiated these moments coming up with the Romanian version of the material and asking if it was good. Later on they even developed a new kind of pleasure by postponing the moment of asking for help until they were able to decode the message themselves without any help. Confidence was gradually built in time through personal experience and acting out together, which was in fact in the spirit of the method.

Throughout this time the teachers were also teaching the formats to their class, which also counted as another form of repetition. They had to teach the children what they had learned during the training. The key factor which contributed to their success was no doubt the magic T-shirt which introduced them into another world they could only share with their teacher and colleagues. The value of the common secret they had to keep was doubled by their children's increasing interest in the formats. The trainees also admitted that the first format was easy to learn and act out, which made its success certain. Then as success breeds success, they were encouraged to move on to the next format and try to keep up with the previous results. It was hard work but children seemed to enjoy it. Moreover, trainees no longer had any problems with discipline or lack of attention on behalf of the children. All the children were alert, ready to be acting out the formats, actively participating in all the activities. The cohesion of the group increased: the trainees noticed their children were more willing to help each other, to share their toys and generally to play together.

The teacher from the special school was one of the most enthusiasts in our group of trainees. She had a class of 10 pupils whose ages ranged from 10 to 13 but their intellectual development was close to a six year old child. We saw her when she introduced the first format to them: only half of them showed interest in participating in the format. The other half displayed an obvious lack of interest in their acting out. Moreover, the oldest of the girls did not want to participate at all. While the others were acting out, participating more or less actively in the performance what struck me about her behaviour was the intense way she was watching the teacher. We felt that she wanted to make sure that the teacher was taking everything seriously. Later on after she had also joined in she confessed that she had thought that it was just a game that the teacher wanted them to play. That was why she first refused to join in. She thought she was too old to play games. However, the teacher's gestures, facial expressions and constant eye contact with the children might have acted as a sort of incentive as they all became more active towards the ending of the format. They all asked for an encore and then the video with the cartoon enlivened the atmosphere entirely. The next day five more children from another class asked for permission to join in. It goes without saying that they all got the permission requested and became part of the group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The trainees appreciated the rigour of the theoretical and practical model/approach for teaching the second language. They also mentioned the magic of the rituals and the atmosphere as key factors of the success of the approach. Another group of trainees appreciated the use of body language and actions whereas a third underlined the emotional bond between teacher and children, which they said, is often neglected in schools.

To summarise, all the teachers stated that they were happy with the content of the course and the teaching materials. Moreover, a large proportion of the teachers said that the new methodological approach influenced their teaching style and as a result they placed a greater accent on their relationship with their children. They also mentioned the principle of learning through fun, the use of a variety of channels of communication (gestures, expressions, actions etc.), and the systematic repetition innate to the format. They all enjoyed the course and appreciated the friendly atmosphere and good personal relationships they had experienced, and that all of them would repeat the experience. Their expectations of the course and of the children had been met.

On the whole they appreciated the experience as being enriching on a personal and professional level. They highly appreciated the innovation and effectiveness of the methodological approach and the welcome opportunity for meeting and exchanging experiences with colleagues.

CONCLUSIONS

Feedback from beneficiaries (trainees, parents, children)

Teachers' comments

It was a nice and entertaining experience. It was a fun activity that students really enjoyed and would like to repeat. An excellent project aiming at raising

children's interest in foreign languages. It also helps improve children's self-esteem and confidence as acting out and singing makes the task easy to achieve. Fun and educational!

Parents' comments:

An interesting idea! a very inspiring combination of drama, songs and movement. Congratulations! Such projects really enhance children's motivation to learn foreign languages!

Children's comments

I liked the stories because they were interesting and I also managed to learn them by heart very quickly.

I liked the stories because I liked acting out and doing what Hocus was doing.

I liked it because it was about fantastic creatures which looked like us! I liked it because I liked Hocus. He is funny.

I liked the stories because we learned something good from them: it's good to have friends!

I think the activity was nice and I wouldn't change anything about it; I really like it and I hope it will continue. I would like to know how the story will continue!

It was interesting how they tried to give life to the story in cartoons;

It was a nice and easy activity; I never get bored; I would like to do it again;

I liked it because it was easy for me to understand English. I learnt something new and interesting.

I liked it because I felt good.

I liked it because I have never done something like this before: it's like what I sometimes do at home- watch a cartoon and act it out myself.

I liked it because we also sang and dance.

It was something new for me because I could learn new words in English and Hocus helped me.

I loved playing in a circle with the other children and the teacher.

I liked it because we could also use our hands.

I liked it because I understood everything!

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