TAKING STUDENTS OFF THE BEATEN TRACK
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ABSTRACT
During this workshop we shared a classroom research project carried out with a group of students at intermediate level. The aim was to help them become more successful language users by raising their awareness of "ready-made" language. Both the teaching of Vocabulary and Grammar were approached from a different angle in order to train learners develop the ability to "chunk" language successfully. Results and comments by students are provided.

This workshop was based on a classroom research project carried out at The Bridge, a private language school in Mar del Plata. It was conducted with a group of ten students at Pre-First Certificate level. The research flourished out of the need to help the group improve their command of the English language and at the same time help them perceive their progress.

We started by trying to see the lessons from the learners' perspective, that is, how they felt and what they thought of the methodology used in class, the input provided, and their attitude towards learning. "Learners need to learn how to learn, and teachers need to learn how to facilitate the process." (Oxford 1990: 201)

When analyzing and considering these students’ needs and the nature of language itself, we realized some traditional teaching methods employed so far were breaking the language into ever-smaller pieces. We noticed these students had the vocabulary necessary to make themselves understood but lacked the ability to use words in a wide range of collocations "... which often express complex ideas very simply and yet precisely." (Lewis 2000:16) We considered how we could become more proactive in pointing out useful language.
We found a possible solution under the light of the Lexical Approach. Thus, trusting we could help our students not only to be more fluent and accurate but also to develop more complexity in their use of the language, we decided to give this group a trial period, during which they were to be exposed to more lexical items, collocations, semi-fixed expressions and phrases, sentence heads and key words.

Grammar was also to be approached from a different angle. Language was to be seen with a more holistic view, something to be taught as a unit and not as separate pieces of vocabulary and grammar items. "A chunk can be taught as a lexical item, a phonological unit and as grammatical input." (Lewis 1997:204)

Since most of the times students are not aware of the chunks of language that texts include, our first step was to try and raise their awareness of what was in the coursebook itself. We then provided the group with tasks that a) intended to promote learners' noticing lexical items for themselves without the explicit direction of the teacher and b) encouraged the exploration of grammar through lists of examples substantially expanded both in number and range. "Students need access to a large number of reliable well-formed examples." (Lewis 1994:184)

The students organized their own vocabulary notebooks in a personalized way, according to different lexical principles suggested by the teacher. They were also trained in the use of dictionaries as an important strategy to further their learning.

Tasks were recorded and learners were helped in the analysis of their performance. Through questionnaires and recorded interviews, the students gave us constant feedback on the activities carried out. Their comments thus became available for subsequent reflection and analysis. The learners' performance throughout the process showed that appropriate language learning strategies result in greater self-confidence and in improved proficiency at least in the short term.
List of references
Lewis, Michael (1997) Implementing the Lexical Approach - Language Teaching Publications
Lewis, Michael (2000) Teaching Collocation - Language Teaching Publications

BIODATA

María Inés de Zabaleta and Mónica Rodríguez Sammartino: see “WORDS: Just the tip of the iceberg”.

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