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Early foreign language learning: Implementation of a project in a game –based context

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Abstract

The present paper outlines the process of introducing a pilot early Foreign Language (FL) project conducted in a game-based context. It aimed at developing young learners' early English language skills through being involved in interactive simulation and physical activities. The project, which was piloted in two second grade (2nd) classrooms of a Greek primary school, was coordinated in two major phases: the 'warm-up' phase and the basic phase of the intervention carried out through three major steps: introducing the topic and demonstrating the games, playing and interacting through games and recycling new language patterns. The results from recording and evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention project indicated the positive effects of the project on children's oral skills development in FL.

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1. Introduction

The interest in foreign language teaching at early stages has been increased for the last years in the European context, since the mastery of two foreign languages seems to be a necessity nowadays. Recent studies have highlighted the advantages of an early start in second/foreign language learning (Blondin et al, 1998; Edelenbos & de Jong, 2004; Johnstone, 2000), indicating that this dual language ability can lead to higher competency levels (Singleton, 2002), and it can confer long-term cognitive advantages and academic achievement (Bialystok, 2001)

Ages 'between' 5 to 8 can be considered as a sensitive and critical period for the acquisition of basic skills in a second language as well as for the development of perceptual-motor skills. Very young learners are keen and enthusiastic, active and interested in exploration, and they are usually less anxious and less inhibited than older language learners (Pinter, 2006). However, early age alone does not automatically guarantee success, with more important factors being the quality of teaching and the amount of time allocated to learning/teaching (Griva & Sivropoulou, 2009a). For this reason, children's openness towards other languages and cultures, and their enjoyment and 'ardour' for games must be taken seriously into account in a language course (Blondin et al. 1998; Edelenbos & de Jong, 2004).

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Current language learning theories follow the premise that children learn best through discovery and experimentation and being motivated to learn in a playful and relaxed context. Language learning can be linked with natural activities such as play, since young children can learn languages as naturally as they learn to run, jump and play (Baker, 2000). Playing games is an effective way of creating many of optimum conditions for language acquisition (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2009; Uberman, 1998). Games can fall into various categories such as ‘role play’ games, ‘physical’ games, ‘sorting’, ‘ordering’, or ‘arranging puzzles’, ‘labelling’ games, competitive and cooperative ones.

There are numerous benefits that come with using games to help students develop and improve in their oral skills. Firstly, they engage children in cooperative and team learning (Ersoz, 2000), they encourage children’s interaction (Lee, 1995), and provide opportunities for real communication by bridging the gap between the classroom and the real world. Second, games are highly motivating and help students to make learning fun and relaxed (Lee, 1995). They make the lesson ‘less monotonous’, since they maintain students’ attention and interest in the language without getting bored and sustain their effort of learning (Lee, 1995). In addition, there is a competitive element that enhances effective learning as games keep learners interested in winning (Nguyen & Khuat, 2003).

The main purpose of the proposed method was to facilitate verbal and kinesthetic learning, at early primary school level. That is, to develop young learners’ early EFL (English as a Foreign Language) skills through being involved in interactive simulation and physical activities. Integrating language and other subjects at primary school level was considered to be significant, since young children should not see language as something set apart from the rest of their learning and that it will engage the learners in real-world communication (Halliwell, 1992). In addition, children need “direct, powerful, emotional experiences and a consistent environment which offers diverse, enriching opportunities” (Bruce, 1997:113). The mastery of fundamental motor skills among children education is a potentially important contributor to successful and satisfying participation in physical activities (Salmon et al., 2005). Thus, the study aimed at:

- developing children’s basic communicative/oral skills in English language;
- stimulating their motivation for EFL learning;
- enhancing their involvement in learning through their senses by making provision for multi sensory learning;
- integrating relevant topics, which are related to students’ prior knowledge (based on other school subjects).

2. The project design and methodology

2.1. Sample

The intervention, which was piloted on a small scale in order to get detailed feedback, was launched in two second (2nd) grade primary school classrooms. In Greece, English as a foreign language is part of the state primary school curriculum from the third grade onwards. Twenty five (25) Greek-speaking students (mean age=7.41 years-old) were assigned to the experimental group receiving English language teaching in a game-based context. The control group, composed of 25 Greek-speaking students (mean age=7.56 years-old), attended a different classroom of the same school, and was taught English in the conventional ‘Presentation’, ‘Practice’ and ‘Production’ (PPP) framework.

Four (4) teachers participated in the intervention: two English language teachers in cooperation with the teachers of the classrooms. They were thoroughly introduced to the methodology and application of the project in four two-hour seminars (conducted by the two researchers). Moreover, two assistant researchers undertook twelve observation sessions.

2.2. Methods and materials

The design of the project was based on five basic aspects: *cooperation, competition, verbal interaction, active participation and enjoyment*. All these were carried through an interactive learning context, where there is little or no anxiety (Collier, 1995). In a semi-natural language learning ‘classroom environment’, students had opportunities for active engagement in working together to ‘solve problems’ and use English for meaningful purposes through their involvement in ‘role play games’ and ‘physical activities’.

A topic-centred and activity-based approach was followed, with tasks aiming at linking new learning experiences and vocabulary to what had been already known about a topic. Designing game-based material for language learning can be understood as a process that involves three basic levels: a practice level, an organisation level and a production level. For this purpose, two basic types of games were included: a) outdoor physical games and b) constructions, such as sorting, ordering, or arranging puzzles, labelling games (match labels and pictures), which also involved movement.

An attempt was made to plan activities that could challenge children to use English language, without the pressure of doing it correctly or not, by interacting socially -in pairs, in small groups, or with the whole class. Factors to be considered for the design and selection of the games included the following: a) all students in the group are involved, b) students have enough time to complete the tasks, c) students know how to work in groups, d) the topics of these activities are related to everyday situations and routines, and are integrated with a broader curriculum topic, and e) they are challenging and suitable for the age of the specific class and relevant to their needs.

Activities had clear learning objectives, which were defined in the game-play and the scenarios, and were presented as follows:

- Raising the students' motivation in such a way that they enjoy their language learning. It is important that young learners do not feel under pressure to communicate until they feel safe.
- Providing a context for meaningful communication, which takes place as students seek to understand how to play the game and as they communicate about the game (Wright, Betteridge & Buckby, 2005).
- Being student-centred in that the students are actively involved in playing the games, having the leading roles, with the teachers as facilitators.

3. The implementation of the project

The project was coordinated in two major phases: in the first 'warm-up' phase, which was extended in a period of three months, a visual approach was followed in order to familiarize children with certain words and simple common phrases in English. The second one, which was the basic phase of the intervention, was conducted twice per week and lasted sixteen weeks.

3.1. First phase

In the first, 'warm-up' phase (October – December 2008), a visual approach was followed where the students were presented with words in meaningful contexts and were encouraged to play with these 'words' through a visual approach, as well as to participate in simple games. Given adequate opportunities to interact with the teacher and the peers in print-rich environments, the young children could develop vocabulary and acquire very basic oral skills. This phase aimed at developing certain vocabulary and acquiring and practicing simple common functions in English.

3.2. Second phase of the project

The main phase (January – May 2009) included 30 intervention sessions, which were focused on a specific of the following topics: 'school', 'neighbourhood', 'colours', 'personal objects', 'animals', 'places', 'food', 'transport', 'free-time', 'body', 'nature', 'seasons-weather', 'media' and 'culture'. Each session was carried out through three basic steps:

3.2.1. Introduction of the games and demonstration

The purpose of this step was to make students enhance certain vocabulary, and develop concepts and functions, as well as understand the process and the rules of the games. Its focus was on dealing with 'listening and repeating after me' instruction and on stimulating students' participation in the games.

First, the teacher 'explored' the topic with the students (Willis, 1996), either by exploiting pictures, flashcards, slides and objects or by narrating/reading pictured short stories to elicit and provide vocabulary. Emphasis was placed on the presentation and practice of discrete items of language and specific language functions. Then the

teacher gave a brief description of each game, explained the objectives, set the rules and gave some instructions about playing.

3.2.2. *Playing and interacting through games*

It is the fundamental step for performing the ‘basic’ game. The main *purpose* of this step was to involve students into the game and make them ‘produce’ the language and communicate without worrying if they are doing right or wrong.

The role play and physical activities were performed in two sessions per week through two steps: a) ‘in take response’ and ‘practice; the students were encouraged to talk about what they were going to do while playing; b) ‘playing’ the game. During playing the games, successful communication rather than correctness of the language was emphasized (Hadfield, 1984). The teacher acted as facilitator by easing anxiety, creating an enjoyable learning atmosphere and encouraging students to use the target language in the classroom, as well as encouraging children’s creativity and use of imagination.

Young learners were provided with the opportunity to engage in the pragmatic, functional use of language for communicative purposes (Brown, 2000). They were involved in semi-authentic situations like ‘selling fruit at an open market’, ‘traveling by train’, ‘visiting some places (park, cinema, supermarket...’ , ‘being an animal’ etc. by performing motor tasks, such as running, going after, rolling around the floor, or imitating. At the same time, through assuming roles - such as customer/seller, driver/passenger, friends going to a place, animals in a zoo etc - the children had opportunities for interaction in any social exchange governed by certain sociolinguistic conventions (Griva & Sivropoulou, 2009b).

3.2.3. *Practicing and recycling new language patterns.*

During this stage, emphasis was placed on making children practice and recycle and consolidate certain phrases and language functions acquired in the previous steps. The children were involved in recycling through ‘constructions’, limited ‘verbal use’ and physical movement. Activities, such as sorting or arranging puzzles, matching labels and pictures, playing with objects (balls, balloons, crawls), guessing objects with eyes closed, adding a new element in a circle were included.

4. The results of the project

In order to evaluate the effectiveness and feasibility of the project, as well as its impact on children’s oral skills development, a tripartite study was conducted. The primary means of data collection were the following:

a) A pre-test and post-test; to assess whether the students improved in their oral communication skills, a pre-test and a post-test were administered to the two classes (focus and control) individually before the main phase of the intervention and after the experiment was conducted.

b) Twelve non participant observations were conducted by the two assistant researchers. In addition, diaries were kept by the teachers once a week during the main phase of the project in order to evaluate the game-based context of English language teaching and learning and to record students’ participation and involvement in activities

c) Moreover, structured interviews were conducted with the students, at the end of the project, to record their interest in the application and their satisfaction of the project, as well as the difficulties they encountered.

The outcomes from the evaluation indicated the positive effects of the project on children’s oral skills development in English as a foreign language (EFL). More precisely, the results of the post-test revealed that the language games helped most of the students to improve oral skills, since the students of the experimental class scored significantly better than the control group. They also expressed their willingness to be taught English in a game-based context and declared that they felt that they were able to communicate better at the end of the lessons compared to the students in the control group. Furthermore, it was observed and recorded that the students in the experimental group enjoyed their activities more than the students of the control group. It was revealed that the proposed method promoted students’ motivation and active participation in the games, and resulted into developing

children's basic oral skills. Games were conceptualised, by the teachers and the assistant researchers, as the 'the fun factor' of language learning (Warschauer & Healey, 1998).

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed at presenting an English language learning project, which was designed and implemented in the 2nd grade of primary education. Following a 'topic centred' and 'game-based' approach proved to be a very useful way to teach 'intentional' communication in a semi-natural context, and an attractive option for teaching English to the specific group of young learners. It has been indicated that language learning performed in a 'playful' atmosphere resulted into a) stimulating student's motivation, b) making students feel confident and c) creating their positive attitudes to foreign language learning. The young children had the opportunity to explore various experiences in different situations, to conceptualise and to develop communicative competence. The role-play and physical activities offered enjoyment to learning and fun in such a way as to make all students have active and enthusiastic participation in communicating in diverse situations. Since the purpose of these games proved to be the enjoyment of the language itself, they 'produced' a more relaxed atmosphere and reduced the students' tension and anxiety during learning. In such a context, it was ensured that all students were included in language learning effort, not only some extroverted ones.

The results of the project have raised questions about the introduction of teaching English as a foreign language in the lower grades of primary school and the training of the teachers who will take on the task of teaching English to very young learners. English could be integrated in the school curriculum for children in their first years of primary education, after considering seriously the principles of children's second language learning and adopting game-based teaching methods.

However, the implementation of this project across several second grade classrooms, in primary schools, is considered necessary in order to obtain a more complete picture about the effectiveness of the intervention and examine the prospect of continuing and extending the specific pilot project.

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