Fluency and Fun in Spanish through TPRS: An Action Research Project

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ABSTRACT

I initiated action research to improve student learning and my Spanish pedagogy. Through the process, I identified strategies of my teaching that I wished to improve, collected data on my focus strategies, and reflected in order to identify the next strategy to improve.

Elementary and middle school students are prime candidates to learn a foreign language. Throughout my research, I implemented the foreign language method known as Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS) to promote students' Spanish language acquisition and enjoyment of Spanish learning. Experts document that within TPRS, students learn Spanish through stories, dramatic play, and body movements. Using TPRS, teachers provide instruction exclusively in the target language, foster a brain-body connection, and engage students in developmentally appropriate activities.

As part of the research process, I administered a survey and collected pre and post comprehension data from elementary students to assess their enjoyment of TPRS and their retention of vocabulary. According to results, students perceived themselves as speakers of another language and enjoyed the language learning process. Also, students remembered seventy-five percent of vocabulary words taught exclusively in the target language when given the appropriate context.

Furthermore, I engaged in several different research cycles. In the elementary school, I focused on using the target language, incorporating sign language, giving clear directions in the target language, and transitioning. In the middle school, I focused on keeping students meaningfully engaged, encouraging all class members to participate, encouraging students to use the target language, improving pronunciation, and individualizing instruction for native Spanish speakers.

INTRODUCTION

The younger students are when they start to learn a second language, the higher the level of language proficiency they can achieve (Pufahl et al., 2000, p.1). Furthermore, students who learn a second language before puberty can acquire near-native second language pronunciation (Chipongian, 2000). Thus, students who are exposed to a second language in elementary school, and even the first years of middle school, are prime candidates for second language acquisition. Based on the benefits of early second language learning, I initiated an action research project in order to improve elementary and middle school students' learning of the Spanish language and to improve my Spanish pedagogy.

METHOD

Educators often use action research to reflect upon and improve their teaching practices. Action research is defined as a cyclic research method, with each cycle consisting of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Mills, 2003). In the planning stage, I devised a plan to improve my teaching. In the acting stage, I carried out the plan. In the observing stage, my university supervisor and I collected quantitative and qualitative data to assess the effectiveness of the plan. Then, in the reflecting stage, I reflected upon the data and chose another aspect of my teaching that I wished to improve. Then, I repeated the action research process, carrying out all four cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting with my new focus strategy.

Cycle 1

At the elementary and middle school at which I conducted my action research, I engaged in several different research cycles. In the elementary school, I focused on using the target language, giving clear directions in the target language, and transitioning. For my first cycle focusing on using the target language, my goal was to use the target

language as much as possible, seeing that near exclusive use of the target language is the first requirement for a successful elementary and middle school foreign language program (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004, p.xiv). However, I also knew that I needed to use the students' first language when providing background information on a complex or unfamiliar topic or when explaining a concept essential to the comprehension of the lesson (Krashen, 2006, p. 9). During this cycle of my action research, I collected data on when I used Spanish and when I used English in the classroom. I discovered that I used Spanish for about 90 percent of the instructional time. However, I did use English in four situations: to give instructions to the students, to answer students' individual questions, to resolve confusion, and to manage behavior.

Cycle 2

In order to increase the amount of Spanish spoken and understood in the classroom, I focused the next cycle of my action research project on giving instructions in Spanish. In order to achieve my goal, I planned three ways to give comprehensible instructions in Spanish. These three methods included putting pictures of the steps to be followed up on the board, constructing a sample in front of the entire class, and working through each step as an entire class. I implemented these three methods of giving comprehensible instructions in Spanish in the classroom. While implementing these three strategies of providing comprehensible instruction in the target language, I collected data on the amount of time that passed between giving the students the instructions and when the students began work. I also collected data on the number of students who were on-task, rather than confused and off-task, during work time. By reflecting upon my data, I realized that even though I gave instructions in the target language, students still knew what to do, started work immediately, and stayed on-task during work time. I even noticed students referencing the pictorial clues on the board as they moved from one step to the next. After analyzing my data, I decided that I had achieved my goal and reflected upon another aspect of my teaching in need of improvement: transitioning from one activity to the next.

Cycle 3

I planned two ways to improve transitions: using a chant and delegating responsibilities to students based on the animal card taped to their desk. For the chant, I would say, "Ole, ole," and students would respond my saying, "Ole, ole." By using the chant, I was able to get students' attention quickly and efficiently. In order to delegate responsibilities, I taped an animal card to each student's desk. The animals consisted of a goose, a dog, a hen, and a cat. Each day, each animal would be responsible for getting a particular material, for instance glue, for their group members or for completing a particular task, for instance handing out the construction paper. By delegating responsibilities, students kept busy and did not have time to get off task. So, after planning and implementing the chant and the animal cards, I observed that transitioning from one activity to the next was much more efficient. After this cycle of my action research, I finished my semester of action research at the elementary school and moved on to one semester of action research at the middle school.

Cycle 4

At the middle school, I quickly realized that many students seemed reluctant to participate in Spanish class, perhaps because of fear of embarrassment or fear of making mistakes. So, I dedicated my first cycle of action research to involving all students. I was able to achieve my goal by rephrasing questions into either/or or yes/no formats for reluctant students, choosing volunteers by picking name cards rather than asking for volunteers, encouraging students to volunteer in pairs, asking students to respond with a gesture or by displaying the correct manipulative, and by throwing a koosh ball to the person who was talking. I observed that students found these methods for participation less threatening and even rewarding and motivating. Therefore, I no longer needed to focus on involving all students.

Cycle 5

I decided to focus my next action research cycle on getting students to use the target language during pair work. Based on my observations, students would use the target language when I was standing near them, but as soon as I moved away they would revert back to English. In order to increase the use of the target language during pair work, I implemented three strategies. First, I focused on pre-teaching and practicing all necessary vocabulary and grammar structures before beginning the pair work. Secondly, I provided students with a "cheat sheet" that they could use as a reference when needed. Finally, I implemented a point system know as TALK. In order to get all four of the TALK points, students needed to be using the target language (the "T"), students needed to be using the target language accurately (the "A"), students needed to be listening to their partner (the "L"), and students needed to be kind partners (the "K"). When implementing one or all of these three methods, I observed that the use of the target

language during pair work improved. After this cycle of my action research project, I finished my semester at the middle school.

TPRS: Total Physical Response Storytelling

    Besides participating in the individual cycles of the action research process at the elementary and middle schools, throughout the entirety of my action research I also focused on implementing the foreign language method known as Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS). I used TPRS to promote students' Spanish language acquisition and enjoyment of Spanish learning. Through TPRS, students learn Spanish through body movements, stories, and dramatic play.

    In TPRS, students learn a body movement to correspond to each vocabulary word. Since students used body movements such as gestures and sign language to aid in their comprehension of spoken Spanish through TPRS, I was able to conduct class almost entirely in the target language, a key requirement to a successful elementary or middle school foreign language program (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004, p.xiv). Also, when students associate hand and body movements with Spanish words, they form a brain-body connection which enhances memory. Illustrating the important connection between memory and movement, the creator of the original TPR method, James Asher, explains, "There's memory in muscle" (Gaab, 2006, #1, p. 6).

    By using the stories and dramatic play of TPRS, students engage in developmentally appropriate activities, another key concept of successful elementary or middle school foreign language programs (Curtain & Dahlberg, p. xiv). The first and second graders whom I instructed were in the Mythic Layer of the Kieran Egan Layers of Educational Development. Within this layer of educational development, "The story form is the most powerful vehicle for instruction; in fact, young children require it. It incorporates the categories and processes used by the child in understanding and interpreting the world" (Gaab, 2006, #1, p. 2).

    TPRS is such a successful foreign language method because it promotes almost exclusive use of the target language, fosters a brain-body connection, is developmentally-appropriate and engaging for young learners, and focuses on second language acquisition. TPRS focuses on acquisition, an unconscious process, instead of learning, a conscious process. Students are encouraged to understand, not to worry about exactness and correctness (Gaab, 2006, p.1). If students want to become fluent in a second language, they need to acquire it, not just learn or memorize it.

RESULTS

    Furthermore, as part of the research process, I administered a pre and post survey and collected pre and post comprehension data from elementary students to assess their enjoyment of TPRS and their retention of vocabulary. (See Appendix A for a sample survey and Appendix B for the list of vocabulary words.) According to the results of the survey, students enjoyed TPRS and the language learning process, perceived themselves as speakers of another language, and recognized that gestures helped them remember vocabulary words. (See Figure 1.)

    According to the post comprehension data, students could translate approximately nine of twenty Spanish vocabulary words to English. Furthermore, students could point to about eleven of the twenty Spanish vocabulary words when they were represented pictorially. Finally, when cued with the gesture we had learned through TPRS, students were able to correctly identify fifteen of the twenty vocabulary words by translating that vocabulary word or by pointing to its pictorial representation. (See Figure 2.) Since students remembered more vocabulary words learned through gestures, these results reinforce the validity of the brain-body connection advocated by foreign language expert James Asher (Gaab, 2006, #1, p. 6). Furthermore, these results indicate that students can learn vocabulary words through exclusive instruction in the target language as long as they have devices, such as gestures, that make that input comprehensible.
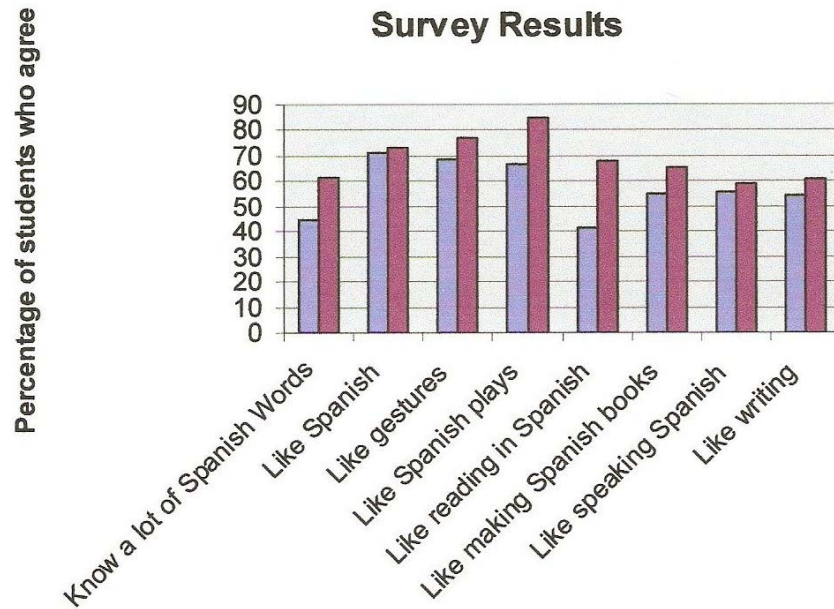
GRAPHS

Figure 1. Pre and post survey results

Pre-test survey data is the right column pictured in blue. Post-test survey data is in the left column picture in purple.
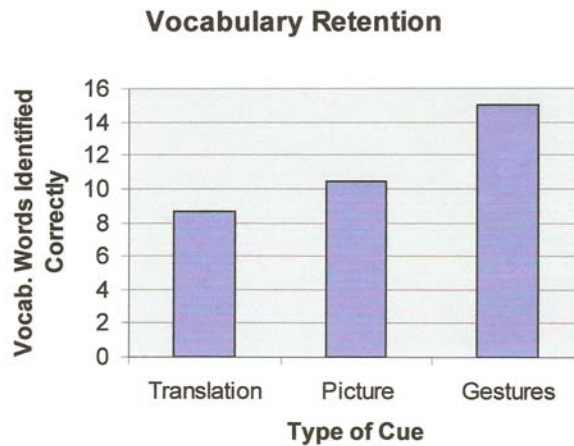

Figure 2. Comprehension data

This bar graph displays the average number of vocabulary words that first and second grade students correctly identified in their post-test. Students were tested on twenty words. The first bar entitled "translation" illustrates that, on average, students correctly translated 8.64 of the twenty Spanish words I dictated to them. The second bar entitled "picture" illustrates that, on average, students correctly identified 10.39 Spanish vocabulary words by pointing to the picture representation of that word. The final bar entitled "gestures" illustrates that, on average, students correctly identified 15 of the 20 vocabulary words when I cued them with the gestures we had learned through TPRS.

CONCLUSIONS

Next year as I head to South America to teach English to native Spanish-speakers in Cali, Colombia, I will continue to implement action research to improve my pedagogy and student learning. I will be teaching students at a more advanced level of second language learning, but I will remember all of my important revelations from my action research project – the importance of providing comprehensible input in the second language, the validity of the brain-body connection when learning, and the importance of reflecting upon my teaching in order to improve it along with student learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX A

Spanish Survey

Students were instructed to draw a smiley face if they agreed with the following statements, a frown if they disagreed, and a straight face if they were uncertain.

1. I know a lot of words in Spanish.
2. I like drawing pictures in Spanish class.
3. I like reading stories in Spanish.
4. I like speaking Spanish.
5. I like our Spanish plays.
6. I like making Spanish books.
7. I like singing in Spanish.
8. I like writing in Spanish.
9. I like Spanish.
10. Hand and body movements help me understand.
11. I can understand my Spanish teacher when she is talking in Spanish.
12. I want to learn _____ in Spanish class.

APPENDIX B

First grade students were tested on their knowledge of these twenty vocabulary words at the beginning of the semester. I compiled this list based on words the previous Spanish teacher had taught.	*First grade students were tested on their knowledge of these twenty vocabulary words at the end of the semester.*	*Second grade students were tested on their knowledge of these twenty vocabulary words at the beginning of the semester. I compiled this list based on words the previous Spanish teacher had taught.*	*Second grade students were tested on their knowledge of these twenty vocabulary words at the end of the semester.*
1. azul 2. Hola. 3. dos 4. rojo 5. Adiós. 6. piernas 7. doce 8. dieciocho 9. blanco 10. cinco 11. la puerta 12. Hace sol. 13. morado 14. mano 15. el libro 16. Hace frío. 17. amarillo 18. Hace calor. 19. cabeza 20. la pizarra	1. Mamá 2. Gallina 3. Crece. 4. Cansado/a 5. Confundido/a 6. Gato 7. Pan 8. Mezcla 9. Enojado/a 10. Abuela 11. Caballo 12. Cocina. 13. Enfermo/a 14. Hermano 15. Maneja el carro. 16. Ganso 17. Siembra las semillas. 18. Me lee un libro. 19. Limpia 20. Perro	1. sábado 2. julio 3. las manos 4. Hace sol. 5. enero 6. Hace calor. 7. diez 8. Estoy feliz. 9. veinticuatro 10. negro 11. Estoy así así. 12. el gato 13. la hermana 14. Siéntense. 15. martes 16. Gracias. 17. el pelo 18. Yo soy… 19. Buenos días. 20. rojo	1. Manzana 2. Come 3. Saludable 4. Agua 5. Pantalones 6. Bebe 7. Pescado 8. Tomate 9. Camisa 10. Me gusta 11. Enojado 12. Zapatos 13. Confundido 14. Calcetines 15. Desayuno 16. Vegetales 17. Cena 18. Granos 19. Galletas 20. Pan