

Foreign language teaching

Action research question:

How can boys' engagement and achievement in the study of foreign languages be developed and enhanced?

What's not working?

Research shows that there is an increasingly lower percentage of boys choosing to study a foreign language as an elective. In addition, many of the boys who are studying a foreign language do not enjoy the process. The team's research and literature reviews highlighted the following common reasons:

- Boys tend not to like to talk – especially about the things talked about in language classrooms, which they perceive as “feminine.” (Carr, 2003)
- Boys feel that at times the scenarios and dialogues used lack authenticity and tend to be too abstract to be “real”.
- They dislike the linear and “passive” textbook approach to learning grammar and vocabulary. Some of this may also be attributable to the lack of kinaesthetic involvement and “fun” in foreign language teaching, found in more tactile subjects like sport or woodwork.
- Foreign language learners have a significantly lower vocabulary than first language learners, making communication difficult. Boys then experience frustration at not being able to express themselves fluently in the target language.
- Second language learners also do not have the benefit of parental input for oral activities that first language learners do.
- Boys often experience anxiety and lack confidence in speaking situations in front of the whole class. They fear negative peer or teacher feedback when they use the language incorrectly or pronounce words inaccurately.
- They find reading and understanding a foreign language difficult – particularly in a scripted language like Japanese.

Action research changes

The team implemented a variety of interesting changes in their projects in an attempt to address these difficulties.

Using music and rhythm

Kerry Kettering-Goens used rhythm and music to transfer informal language to daily conversations in Spanish with a group of seventh grade boys at The Haverford School. Laura Nagle designed a project where eighth grade boys at Chestnut Hill Academy composed and recorded original French language songs, using Garage Band software, to improve pronunciation and confidence.

Kinaesthetic activities, dialogue and experiential learning

Henning Holzheuer, of Christ Church Grammar, introduced a range of kinaesthetic activities, including Australian Sign Language and Tribes, allowing boys to communicate more fluently in German, as well as introducing an element of fun and movement into lessons. Whitney Elliott created an outdoor classroom for a group of Grade 6 boys to learn French in a more experiential way at St Andrew's College, Aurora. Stewart Steffey, Belmont Hill School, introduced role plays to allow more authentic and active participation in vocabulary acquisition and language learning for a group of level 2 Spanish students.

Changing focus with art and culture

Susana Epstein, Collegiate School, New York, taught Spanish to a group of 5th grade boys using a study of various artworks and images from the internet, ipads and art postcards, as well as taking boys on trips to art galleries. Cecilia Lobato Eppler, The Gilman School, Baltimore, used culture as the vehicle to deliver the content of Spanish lessons to a group of 5th grade boys, to provide a realistic and interesting setting.

Technology

Jessica Chandler, at the Presbyterian Day School in Memphis, used *Linglanguage* to increase boys' confidence in speaking Spanish and to improve comprehension. Her sample group was a group of 2nd graders. Carolyn Bilton of St Andrew's College, Ontario, used *Rosetta Stone*, an online interactive learning software which uses images and sounds, to help students learn new vocabulary without memorizing or translating. Kelly Castellanos, St Alban's School, Washington used *VoiceThread*, a web-based programme, to improve pronunciation, fluency and confidence in Spanish with a group of 8th grade students. Nancy Marmion, St Mark's School of Texas, created a variety of online interactive speaking activities using *Linglanguage* and *VoiceThread*, as Spanish homework, for a group of 9th and 11th grade boys. Natalie Blackburn, Hamilton Boys' High School, New Zealand created an online classroom using *Moodle* to engage Year 11 students in their study of German. Paul Dyer, Anglican Church Grammar School, Brisbane, created tablet screen recordings to help a group of Year 10 boys extend their study of Japanese.

Sustained Silent Reading

Although many first language teachers make regular use of Sustained Silent Reading programmes, Sylvia Duckworth, Crescent School, Toronto, experimented with this programme with Grade 5 French second language classes.

Findings

Although findings varied considerably across projects, and not one single project could report total success, many interesting findings were tabled. The overall findings reported that foreign language learning can be fun and stimulating if it is interesting for boys. The following ten points are pertinent:

1. Boys tend to prefer **kinesthetic and tactile learning experiences** when learning a foreign language. Learning in an **outdoor classroom** removed the focus of attention from boys as they felt there was a lot more for their peers to look at and do than focus on them speaking.

2. Boys also respond well when they can be **active** in the classroom, such as in actively performing **dialogues**. These dialogues work more effectively if they are authentic in structure and content.
3. Being **challenged by new activities** is exciting and boys tend to rise to the challenge. They also love **the element of competition** in learning activities.
4. They are much more engaged if there is **an element of creativity and play** in what they are doing. **Humour and fun** are also essential to the enjoyment of learning for boys.
5. Working **collaboratively** enables boys take control of their own learning and gives them a sense of power.
6. The need for **authenticity** is paramount.
7. **Music** proved to be a particularly useful tool. Performing a song in front of peers was fun and **reduced anxiety** about speaking the language. Boys were much **more willing to take risks** in speaking the language after this. Through music, the **use of rhythm** helped boys remember words and phrases much more clearly and improved pronunciation. Music provided access to informal language and to language **patterns** in songs that can easily be transferred into conversations. They also enjoyed the **authenticity** of learning “real songs” with vocabulary that “people actually use.”
8. Using **alternative materials** as the focus of lessons, like visual images, paintings, sculptures and integral cultural aspects, rather than textbooks, has a significant impact on boys’ attention spans.
9. A **sustained silent reading programme** in a foreign language does work.
10. **Technology** is without a doubt a key factor in successful foreign language teaching:
 - It works for boys who are “digital natives.” (Prensky, 2001)
 - It allows learning in a non-linear fashion which boys prefer.
 - It teaches correct pronunciation and self-correction without fear of consequences.
 - It provides immediate feedback.
 - It allows boys to revisit materials taught in lessons in an online setting.
 - It takes the focus off the teacher and puts the responsibility for learning on the boys.
 - All boys can participate all the time.
 - Boys can learn at their own pace, without fear of peer criticism and self-correction – i.e. non-threatening learning, unlike classroom environment.
 - Asynchronous learning gives boys time to think about and plan their responses, rather than being put on the spot.
 - Using technology can address a range of learning needs – so allows for far greater differentiation in teaching and learning.

In addition, many of the projects resulted in unexpected benefits. Researchers reported that a sense of something different being done in class undoubtedly heightened the boys' engagement and achievement in learning. The process introduced boys to new things in the world, such as to art appreciation and sign language. Boys repeatedly stated how much they loved the freedom and creativity allowed by the projects. Special relationships also developed between teachers and boys, arising from close interaction on the project, and which encouraged a willingness to take risks. Positive attitudes and a real sense of pride in these special projects developed during this process.

The foreign languages team met for the first time in Philadelphia in 2010.

