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HAVE NO FEAR! ROLE-PLAYS ARE HERE!

*To what extent do **role-plays** enhance and develop boys' engagement and achievement in Spanish?*

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Abstract

What follows is a summary of an action research project conducted over one month at Belmont Hill School in Belmont, Ma. The test group, twelve boys enrolled in Level Two Spanish, ranged in ability and age, allowing the project to reach a diversified demographic. The purpose of the intervention was to offer the students a different and more engaging way to study and practice grammar and vocabulary – a necessary but often tedious task for language learners. Through creating, rehearsing and presenting role-plays, students were able to actively participate in language learning, bringing new purpose and meaning to their studies. The project surfaced as a result of general frustration with the way boys learn grammar and vocabulary in the traditional textbook context. The research attempted to improve upon the traditional passive approach to learning these skills, and to make learning more active. As anticipated, the research took several turns throughout, but ultimately attested to the original assertion: when moving around, acting, and speaking a foreign language, boys are undoubtedly more engaged and curious about what they are learning, and, as a result, achieve at higher levels. It was satisfying to watch the test group engage in the role-plays and enjoy each other's presentations. As a result of the research, role-plays and dialogues directed at specific material will become a more regular part of the modern language curriculum at Belmont Hill School.

Introduction

The most powerful vehicle for second language learning in boys is being physically involved in what they are learning—active rather than passive learning. They are more

willing to engage if there is an element of play in what they are doing. Therefore I chose to provide an engaging and enjoyable backdrop for what are otherwise banal and cumbersome topics for boys in second language: grammar and vocabulary. By creating role-plays, the students were able to fully engage in their learning and enjoy the collaboration of a partner. In the past, grammar and vocabulary has been acquired in a more lecture, teacher-focused model. This action research project gave the boys an opportunity to be creative and playful while, knowingly or not, practicing these ever so important topics. Boys yearn for meaning and real-world application in what they do. In his piece, *The Purpose of Boys*, Gurian (2005) talks about the value of “making schools an environment of relevance and purpose for boys and young men” (p. 160). The role-plays sought to make boys’ learning more personal and thus more applicable. Through making the role-plays with partners, creating an original and creative cartoon, and ultimately acting in front of their peers, the students experienced a connection to and ownership of the work they were doing.

The Research Question

Given the natural confusion a second language classroom can raise for an outside observer, I will attempt to clarify a few terms and concepts that are central to my research question: *To what extent do role-plays enhance and develop boys’ engagement and achievement in Spanish?*

Key Terms

Engagement can be defined as a boy’s willingness to become an active participant in his learning—rather than a passive spectator. Specific to learning a second language, this means participating verbally each day without trepidation or fear of ridicule. For the purposes of this research study, role-plays became a conduit for boys’ active involvement in learning Spanish. Similarly, **achievement** deals with the idea of promoting success. How do we as teachers light the proverbial ‘fire’ under our students so they *want* to find success? Instead of achievement being narrowly defined by a test or quantitative result,

this action research project defined achievement as the boys' ability to reflect back on the intervention and feel that they gained linguistically as a direct result of carrying out role-plays. This research led me to think critically about these two words and how inter-related they are. Before arriving at the concept of role-plays, I had to ascertain what I felt was most crucial in promoting boys' *engagement* and *achievement* in Spanish? Unlike other disciplines, students feel acute anxiety in a language classroom because not only is the material foreign, they do not have the option to communicate their confusion or ideas in English. Understanding this inevitable aspect of the language classroom, the teacher must create an environment that is less teacher-focused and more collaborative because the students will be more inclined to engage and take risks with their peers than the instructor. This is consistent with the claim that small group work gives students more comfort and confidence as the pressures of the teacher-fronted model are minimized (Bygate, 1988). Role-plays provide a strong medium for promoting this model.

Role-Plays

Role-plays enable students to incorporate grammar and vocabulary into a real-life context, giving meaning and applicability to what they are studying. Because of boys' general discomfort in speaking a foreign language, role-plays appeared to be a viable way to overcome this fear. Given that the goal of second language acquisition is the ability to communicate comfortably, oral and aural competency is paramount. As Lever (2009) contends, "instead of working through uninteresting, or sometimes tedious practice sentences to teach a new grammar structure, teachers can compose role-plays, dialogues, or plays with more characters to enable repetition and meaning, for learning" (p. 1). The ultimate objective of role-plays is to create meaning and not have learning be too abstract. To that end, carrying out pertinent role-plays in a classroom can be a powerful tool. For the purposes of this research, role-plays were defined as short minute and a half exchanges with a partner. Each partner was charged with taking on a personality and interacting in as much of a real world scenario as possible. To make the role-plays apply to what we were studying, the students needed to include both vocabulary and grammatical structures (e.g. differentiating between the preterit and imperfect tenses) in

their presentations. The culminating component of the project was to present their role-plays in front of the class, without notes. To help spawn their imaginations, I had the boys work with a website – www.makebeliefcomics.com - to create a comic strip that appeared on the board during their presentations. It helped the rest of the class follow along as the presenters interacted.

Related Research

In an attempt to understand how boys best learn and retain foreign language, their words can be our best indicator. Carr (2003) quotes boys saying: “Mucking up is what we do! You have to muck up if you’re a boy...We choose to muck around!! We choose to be this way - it’s more fun!” (p. 1). Boys are playful, restless, adventuresome...even risk takers. By creating an environment in the language classroom that encourages this behavior, teachers will be able to better harness their potential. Role-plays and dialogues enable boys to express themselves without fear of erring, find their inner voice and instill much needed confidence often missing in foreign language learners. “A dramatic presentation of a prepared dialogue involves challenge, joy, fun and a great speaking platform. Role-plays are useful for the emotional and social self.” (Lever, 2009, p. 1)

Traditional textbooks introduce grammar themes in lists to be memorized, regurgitated for the assessment and then forgotten. “This expectation to memorize lists of words is something boys see as difficult and unconnected to ‘real’ tasks” and so inhibits our ability as teachers to teach the material in the best way possible.” (Carr, 2003, p. 1) A sense of fun is probably the essential ingredient and the way to a boy’s heart. “Humor is an incredibly powerful way to reach boys — it is extremely important to them that they can make jokes and enjoy a laugh with their teachers.” (Pavy, 2006, p. 5)

Empowering the students in their own learning may enable them to find more meaning and application in grammar rather than simply learning it for the test. Role-plays also seek to practice repetition: an essential tool in language learning. As Wenden and Rubin (1987) contend: “If [the students] are taught the strategies to work out the answers for

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themselves, they are empowered to manage their own learning.” (p. 164) Over the course of this study I attempted to change the way I taught grammar related units and used methods that gave the students more meaning and connection to what they were learning.

Context

Belmont Hill is a small (550 students), college preparatory boys’ school in Belmont, Massachusetts, grades seventh through twelfth. Boys are introduced to second language in the seventh grade and then must complete up through Level Three for a diploma. Level Two seemed like an appropriate study group given that they are in the middle of their language experience and the class is often a varied group in terms of ability level. The research took place in a classroom comprised of twelve boys in Level Two Spanish. Prior to enrolling in Level Two Spanish, most boys have had at least one year of language. They have learned introductory concepts, and the purpose of Level Two is to help them find their voices in language and develop the ability to interact.

Research Approach

McNiff (2002) describes action research as “a practical way of looking at your own work to check that it is as you would like it to be. Because you do action research...it is often referred to as practitioner-based research; and because it involves you thinking about and reflecting on your work, it can also be called a form of self-reflective practice.” (p. 1) In envisioning better teaching practices, it is crucial for the practitioner to be constantly reflective about methodology. After identifying an issue, the researcher has a somewhat scientific framework for envisioning an intervention and then implementing. “It involves identifying a problematic issue, imagining a possible solution, trying it out, evaluating it (did it work?), and changing practice in the light of the evaluation” (p. 1). Cavanaugh reminds us that collecting data and analyzing it is a crucial aspect of action research that allows us to draw conclusions about our original suppositions: “In the action stage, you collect evidence before, during and after enacting your new approach. Decide how you

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can document current conditions and changes in conditions after the approach is tried. Collect the data and prepare to analyze it and learn from it". (p. 4).

My intervention deals specifically with using role-plays to engage the students, because, as Carr (2003) reminds us, boys "do not see the point unless there's some immediate, tangible, visible benefit"; [they don't] care about pleasing you" (p. 1).

Research Methods

As stated, this study involved one section of twelve boys enrolled in Level Two Spanish. All of the students had been exposed to Spanish previously, some for one year and others for several. The varying ability levels and backgrounds of the boys enabled the intervention to be applied to a wide range of participants. The class was divided into six groups, each doing two role-plays during the course of the intervention, totaling twelve one and half minute role-plays.

After being introduced to a teacher-created script, the students were required to create their own role-play within the theme or unit we were studying. Instead of this being an isolated activity, they worked with partners, empowering the students to learn from each other, with the teacher on the periphery. I find myself increasingly cognizant of how much students enjoy working through assignments and problems together. As long as the instructor provides them with clear guidelines and expectations, their learning in the language classroom can be valuable and even enhanced when the learning is student-to-student.

Boys were assigned their partners at random and asked to adhere to the assignment sheet detailing the role-plays. In an effort not to let the role-plays dominate the curriculum, the projects were interwoven into the lesson plan, allowing the boys part of class time to work together, but also providing work outside of class. For each of the two chapters, the students had two weeks to write, practice, memorize and ultimately present their role-plays.

In order to have a certain level of consistency and transparency, all role-plays lasted one and a half minutes and had to include: pertinent vocabulary of the chapter being studied; applicable grammar concepts being worked on; and, lastly, equal participation on the part of each group member. These small parameters ensured that participants did not become sidetracked; guaranteed that all students were evaluated similarly; and allowed the students to receive valuable feedback from the teacher throughout the process to tweak and fine tune their projects.

With the goal of spawning creativity, the boys also made graphic representations of their role-plays using a comic strip website. Because of the versatility of the website—allowing the boys to create characters, objects, and speaking bubbles—the role-plays really came to life and enabled the participants to use technology in a productive manner.

Data Collection

Over the course of the four weeks, data was collected using the following methods:

-Participants self-reporting:

°Pre-intervention survey using qualitative and quantitative analysis

°Post-intervention survey using qualitative and quantitative analysis

-Field notes during direct observation

-Recording of role-plays on Flip Camera

A mixed method of questioning was used in an effort to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative part of the survey asked the participants to comment on what they saw as most challenging and exciting about partaking in role-plays, and assessed their level of personal achievement in areas that the role-plays strived to improve: e.g. speaking Spanish spontaneously, incorporating grammar into speaking, incorporating vocabulary into speaking. In order to ensure consistency, the post-intervention survey asked the same questions to see whether the role-plays had an impact.

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The quantitative or Likert scale questions were illuminating, but the most valuable feedback came from the participants' open-ended commentary and reflection regarding the role-plays.

Throughout the role-play process, field notes were taken to observe how the students were responding to the exercise. These notes proved to be a valuable tool, as the project involved independent working with partners and called for little to no interruption on part of the instructor. Both field notes and commentary were used as part of the data analysis.

Lastly, videos of the role-plays in action proved an integral part of the process. The purpose of the videos was threefold: to provide live footage of the role-plays to later be analyzed as data; to help the boys take the project seriously, knowing that they would be filmed; to keep a record of the presentations so each group could see them the following day.

The section of twelve boys did two different sets of role-plays, one for chapter six and one for chapter seven of their text. It is evident that the second time around the boys conveyed better comfort and "stage presence." Both sets of videos showed a sense of fun, exploration and humor with Spanish that is often times missed when it comes to formal, written assessments. Ultimately, one's success in a language is determined by the ability to verbally interact, pick up on another person's cues and converse comfortably. This was the end goal of the role-plays and the videos clearly reflected that theory.

Methods of Data Analysis

With regard to data analysis, there exists the possibility of reinterpreting, misinterpreting, or colonizing people's words, concepts and ideas to ultimately use them for our own conclusions (Stringer, 2004). With that in mind, both pre- and post-intervention surveys were conducted on Survey Monkey to facilitate categorization and coding for the quantitative questions. In terms of the students' written responses, or qualitative questions, trends and themes were noted to see if their experience with role-plays had

changed from their preconceived ideas before the intervention. Similarly, using field notes and videos allowed me to identify patterns and changes in the students' engagement and achievement from the first role-play to the second.

Results and Discussion

I was anxious to receive the boys' reactions to the research action project and read their thoughts. Their responses strongly supported the assertion that carrying out role-plays was a welcome change from the old/traditional way of presenting material, enabling the students to use grammar and vocabulary concepts in an engaging, fresh and entertaining manner, and to heighten their achievement as a result.

The pre-intervention survey consisted of sixteen questions, fourteen of which used a scale and two that elicited open-ended responses. I felt it noteworthy that most of the boys were fairly confident in both their speaking and writing skills prior to the intervention: on the scale of 1-5, 1 being "poor" and 5 being "excellent," four boys marked their grammar in writing skills a "3" whereas six boys gave it a "4", and two gave it a "2." Similarly, eight boys gave their grammar speaking skills a "3"; two gave it a "4"; one answered "2" no one gave it a "1." These questions were followed by one that I would later find revealing: How inclined are you to speak Spanish spontaneously, without being asked? Four responded "very often"; three answered "often"; four said "not very often"; and one replied "not at all." As expected, the boys went into this intervention with a good foundation, but did not exude, by any means, over-confidence.

Not surprisingly, I found the two open-ended questions on the pre-intervention survey to be the most indicative. They were: "What do you find most exciting about performing role-plays?" and "What do you find most worrisome or daunting?" Some of the boys' answers to the first question were: *"It helps mix up class instead of always studying from the text"; "The comedy of them and the relaxed feel of class"; "Getting to play different characters"; "They helped me cement vocabulary and grammar from the chapter"; "Being able to seem like you are a Spaniard."* I especially liked how these answers

suggested the role-plays had the potential to instill a sense of self-confidence. Responses to the second question included: “*Forgetting a line while performing*”; “*Presenting in front of class*”; “*Forgetting lines and using poor grammar.*” I found the last response notable, as the boy expressed feeling stifled or self-conscious about proper grammar in a role-play.

As mentioned previously, in an attempt to add a little creativity to the project, I allowed the boys to create comic strips of their role-plays to be projected on the Smartboard for the rest of the class to follow along and enjoy. I did not want this to add another variable to the project, so these did not form a significant part of the analysis, and thus did not factor into their open or closed ended responses. That said, they were fundamental in exploring the boys’ creativity and helped them envision what their role-plays would look like. Lastly, they provided me with a tangible copy of the boys’ performances to reflect upon.

For consistency and to measure the intervention’s impact on the boys, the post-intervention survey contained most of the same inquiries as the pre-intervention survey. In terms of achievement, I was pleased to discover that many of the boys felt their communicative skills in both spoken and written Spanish improved as a result of the role-plays. Six boys rated their written grammar skills as a “5”, whereas zero did in the pre-intervention survey. In terms of grammar speaking skills, now three boys gave themselves a “5” and eight a “4” compared with zero and two respectively on the pre-intervention. For the question: “After having done role-plays, how inclined are you to speak Spanish in class without being asked?” eight boys answered “constantly” compared with no boys on the pre-intervention survey; four boys answered “very often” compared with four boys in the pre-; and no boys answered “often” contrasting with three on the pre-intervention survey. There could certainly be other factors at play here, such as how their assessments turned out or how they liked working with their partners, but it is evident that overall self-confidence was enhanced.

While the quantitative data provides a benchmark for the intervention's effectiveness, I found the qualitative questions more telling of the boys' feelings. In answering the first question, "Did you find the role-plays enhanced your overall learning of what you were studying?" all twelve participants responded affirmatively. They went on to say: "*Yes, they were fun ways to keep the vocabulary in our minds*"; "*You see how the topics are used in everyday conversation*"; "*They gave us scenarios where the vocabulary would be used in real life*"; "*It was extremely helpful to include vocabulary we were studying in real-life context*"; "*They let us use the vocabulary that we learned in that unit in a different way than what we normally do such as quizzes, bingo and the flashcard game.*"

It should be noted, though, that two boys did not feel particularly affected by the intervention, despite answering, "Yes" to the initial question. They commented:

"I felt that role-plays had little effect on my learning except I knew some phrases better";
"I think it would be more helpful to just study from the book, however, it did help my

speaking ability." I also enjoyed reading their responses to the question: "What do you find most worrisome or daunting about the role-plays", as it helped me to understand how their feelings changed through the process. For example, in the pre-intervention survey, fear of performing in front of the class and trying to memorize lines was the most common theme in their responses. Several of the boys, after carrying out the project, felt that this initial trepidation was not as severe as they had anticipated: "*The dialogues weren't hard to memorize if you put the time into it*"; "*The actual performance of the role-plays was most worrisome, but after the first time it became much easier and boosted my class speaking confidence*"; "*Memorizing the lines but this was minor.*"

Their answers to this question demonstrate some of the inherent challenges of conducting role-plays: being obliged to memorize lines, having to perform in front of the whole class and fear of faltering. These skills, although painful at times to the boys, are fundamental building blocks that enable a language student to get to the next level: speaking in front of an audience, captivating and engaging observers, and committing information to memory. The boys achieved a greater comfort level in speaking as a result of the role-plays and were more engaged in the activity than passively learning grammar and vocabulary from the textbook. Survey Monkey proved an invaluable tool to identify

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trends and analyze the data. In sum, the boys seemed to find the activity to be beneficial and a refreshing change of routine.

Conclusion

This action research project demonstrated the power of role-plays to both heighten achievement and to engage boys in second language acquisition. The most revealing quantitative answer the students gave was that all twelve responded affirmatively when asked if role-plays enhanced the overall learning of what they were studying, a clear indication of achievement. Naturally some may have been swayed by the fun of the activity versus the more teacher-centered model; others may have enjoyed a higher mark on an activity that was more creatively based versus a sit-down assessment; and hopefully some sincerely felt that using vocabulary and grammatical structures actively and repeatedly in a role-play actually did help learn and commit foreign language concepts to memory. While certainly more subjective, my field notes observed students being more engaged, relaxed and participatory when working with a partner instead of always responding to the instructor. Additionally, the two sets of videos showed groups clearly enjoying a sense of fun and adventure as they presented material they created themselves.

I did not anticipate the sense of pride the boys expressed while performing. I have taken from this project the inherent sense of power boys feel when owning their learning. Provided there are sporadic checks on the part of the instructor, role-play activities allow students to learn from each other, to feel less pressure, and to present in a collaborative way, preparing them for work environments that thrive on teamwork and going beyond a prescribed answer. By actively engaging both vocabulary and grammar in the role-play format, students were not only more personally connected to their achievement, but they took great satisfaction in presenting their final product.

Implications for Future Research

Learning a language is unique in that one must hone in on four different but all together important skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking. Students generally feel trepidation and anxiety about engaging in a language that is not their own. Therefore, it remains paramount for the teacher to create an environment that breaks down those walls of hesitation, fostering an atmosphere that promotes participation, fun, and risk. Role-plays accomplish many of these goals. “More than any other academic discipline, foreign language education is about experiencing the world in a different way. In the language classroom, drama can be a way to enter that world more fully and to help prepare students to use their skills in the theater of life” (Koning 2011, p. 38).

From this point forward, our department will continue to allow students to be self-exploratory, enabling them to make language learning personal, meaningful and, above all, fun. I will continue to find ways to incorporate role-plays in our curriculum that engage students with others. They made a very clear plea in their comments for partaking in work that does not always get assessed by a written test. Assuming a character in a role-play allows the participants to “see that it is not just filling in the blanks—they are creating something meaningful and conveying a message” (Koning, 2011, p. 35). If William Shakespeare (1599) is indeed correct in saying that “all the world’s a stage,” I will endeavor to give boys their own stage and pursue language in a way that is evocative and memorable for them.

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Reflections

I am indeed grateful to the IBSC and Belmont Hill School for allowing me to participate in this worthwhile action research project. I arrived in Philadelphia in June of 2010 after having chaperoned a two-week trip to the Dominican Republic with 18 students. Suffice to say, it took me a little while to shift gears back to the world of academia. Once we divided into groups and started talking about our ideas for this project, I was both inspired and motivated by my fellow colleagues in the group. Under the tutelage of Margot Long, we left Philadelphia having a much clearer idea of what our intervention and research would look like.

From the outset, I was impressed with my student's willingness and excitement to partake in the role-plays. On the one hand, I think they were thrilled about the possibility of studying grammar and vocabulary in a fresh and innovative way. From my daily observations, I can also say that they basked in the collaborative and student-focused aspect of the intervention. Truth be told, I was skeptical of ninth and tenth graders' ability to stay on task and learn from each other, but I am fully committed to doing role-plays more often after analyzing the results.

I must express my sincerest gratitude throughout this process to the following people: Margot Long for her excellent supervision and management of both our group and site; Di Laycock and Debbie Martin for their careful eye in editing; and my wife, Hilde Steffey, for her masterful editing job in the final stages and for weathering this action research storm while pregnant. I would lastly like to offer my deep thanks to my fellow research members for their valuable advice and encouragement over the course of the year. You are all an inspiration to me. This project has opened my eyes to the importance of being critical and reflective about everything we do in the classroom. This year long project will formally conclude with our presentations in London, but the tools and practices I've learned through this process will now become a more regular part of our departmental curriculum.

