THE ADVANTAGES OF USING WARM UP ACTIVITIES TO ENGAGE STUDENTS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS: AN EXPERIENCE FROM “GO TEACHER” PROGRAM

WARM UP ACTIVITIES IN LANGUAGE ENGLISH LESSONS

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ABSTRACT

English in Ecuador is considered a foreign language because only a few people can communicate through it appropriately. For this reason, this work will help professors to have new ideas about Warm Up strategies in order to increase English level of students in different educational public institutions. Teaching English is a constant challenge for teachers around the world, for this reason, many of them try to find new ways of making teaching more effective and productive. One of the most important stages in an English class is the “Warm Up”. It is defined as the act of exercising or stretching in preparation for strenuous activity (Thesaurus and Webster's Dictionary, 1994). When teaching English, these activities are usually designed to introduce a theme at the beginning of a class, to engage students with the topic, break the ice and to attract students’ attention through different sources like videos, songs, pictures, photos, games, and questions. In addition, they also provide alternatives to create an appropriate environment where the class is being developed. This paper presents an analysis and describes the advantages of the experience acquired in the use of warm up strategies during the International English Program “Go Teacher” (June 4 - August 15, 2012) at the University of Mississippi, Oxford-Mississippi-USA. This program is an agreement between the government of Ecuador and University of Mississippi in which 25 Ecuadorian teachers of public high schools were involved.

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KEYWORDS: Warm up strategies; Communicative Language Teaching; Cooperative Learning Approach; teaching learning process; engage; interaction.

AS VANTAGENS DE USAR ATIVIDADES DE AQUECIMENTO PARA ENGAJAR ALUNOS NO PROCESSO DE ENSINO E APRENDIZAGEM DE IDIOMAS EM INGLÊS: UMA EXPERIÊNCIA DO PROGRAMA "GO PROFESSOR"

RESUMO

No Equador, o idioma inglês é considerado um idioma estrangeiro, apenas uma pequena porcentagem de equatorianos pode se comunicar nesse idioma. Por esse motivo, este trabalho pretende oferecer aos professores idéias sobre o estabelecimento de atividades, a fim de melhorar o processo de ensino da aprendizagem da língua inglesa como língua estrangeira para estudantes das instituições de ensino do país. Ensinar o idioma inglês é um desafio constante para professores de todo o mundo, e eles estão sempre procurando novas maneiras de melhorar os processos de aprendizagem. Um dos elementos mais importantes das aulas de inglês é o cenário no início da aula, que pode ser definido como exercícios de preparação para atividades acadêmicas complexas (Thesaurus e Webster's Dictionary, 1994). No processo de ensino da aprendizagem de inglês, essas atividades são projetadas para apresentar a matéria no início da aula, envolver os alunos com a matéria, quebrar o gelo e atrair a atenção dos alunos por meio de diferentes recursos, como vídeos, Músicas, imagens, fotos, jogos e perguntas. Eles também fornecem alternativas para criar um ambiente apropriado para o desenvolvimento ideal das classes. Este artigo apresenta uma análise e descreve as vantagens da experiência adquirida durante o International Go Teacher Program (4 de junho a 15 de agosto de 2012) na Universidade do Mississippi, Oxford-Mississippi, EUA, que era um acordo entre o governo do Equador e a Universidade do Mississippi, da qual participaram 25 professores de inglês de escolas públicas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Estabelecimento de atividades; aprendizagem comunicativa; aprendizagem cooperativa; processo de ensino-aprendizagem; motivação inicial; interação.

INTRODUCTION

The experience described in this paper was taken from the pioneer group of Ecuadorian teachers who got a scholarship to take part of the Go Teacher Program in the University of Mississippi in 2012 which lasted 10 weeks where participants were involved in several English classes like Modern English Grammar, Culture and Language, Methodology and Second Language Acquisition, Academic Writing and Listening and Speaking. All these subjects emphasized how the use of warm up strategies along with the communicative language teaching
and the cooperative learning improve the English language teaching learning process.

Communicative Language Teaching aims broadly the theoretical perspective of the Communicative Approach by making communicative competence the goal of language teaching, and by acknowledging the interdependence of language and communication, Larsen-Freeman (2007). This method promotes interaction and production, because students have the opportunity to ask each other with the intention of creating a confident environment to act out, think and speak freely and naturally, Willis (1996).

The main characteristics of this method are that “everyone makes their own sense of the world” Piaget (1976); it permits to interact with other people, it takes into account social roles and social context, it is centered in the communicative approach. In this methodology, functions like predicting, inviting, promising and asking are important. It generates original and genuine information, it promotes real communication; fluency is as important as accuracy, and speaking is the most important skill, because through it, students have the chance to produce oral communication in a spontaneous way.

In the Cooperative Learning Approach, also called Collaborative Approach, teachers teach the students collaborative skills or social skills so that they can work together more effectively, Larsen-Freeman (2007). It permits students to learn from each other in groups; therefore, it produces a confident and positive atmosphere for interacting and speaking naturally and freely.

In this approach, cooperation leads to better results than individualistic competition; persons have the opportunity to interact and cooperate with each other. It is based on social constructivism view of learning in which students learn how to understand the world through communication. Additionally, students pick up the language best when they are actively involved in the process, and when they work in small groups, they tend to learn more retaining knowledge longer.

Both, Communicative Language Teaching Method and Cooperative Learning Approach, can be perfectly supported by Warm Up strategies because the characteristics involved in the communicative and collaborative methodology permit to carry out the accomplishments to start a class successfully, which means “to increase students’ ability to learn and feel comfortable as a member of the class” Bucholz & Sheffler, (2009), this can be achieved through the active and pleasant interaction among all students.

Warm up is the first strategy of a lesson, the engage part in the teaching cycle described by Harmer, (2013); it sets the tone for the whole class, Cotter (2000). To get the established goal in a lesson, it is essential to have a good starting in order to assure the success of the entire class, because a suitable beginning generates a positive atmosphere to develop efficiently the other two stages of
teaching English process: study and activate

An effective introductory activity prepares students to participate actively during the rest of the class, it motivates pupils to be immersed in the planned activities freely and naturally because in this stage, communication is more important than accuracy, correcting mistakes is not allowed in this phase; therefore, they feel confidence to perform spontaneously.

Some of the strategies described in this work are based on the Communicative Language Teaching and the Cooperative Learning Approach, because the professor encourages students to work in asking each other, obtaining valuable and real information to be shared among them. They are good examples on how warm up strategies generate a collaborative, interactive and positive environment to set the topic and to motivate students to participate actively during the entire English teaching process.

DEVELOPMENT

Mimics: this warm up strategy consists on guiding students to form groups in order to guess a word which is acted out by one of the members of the group. To develop this strategy, the professor has to prepare some cards with vocabulary related to the target language. To deliver the strategy, the students form groups of 3 or 4 members, each group chooses a student to mime the word in the cards given by the professor while the other ones guess it, they can change roles in order to all of them take part in the activity.

This warm up strategy is so versatile, because it can be used to engage students to any kind of lessons, from a language skill to a function one. Teachers can use the board, flashcards or slides to present the topic the students have to get through isolated vocabulary, phrases, sentences or pictures.

Using this warm up strategy helps students to be engaged to the topic, to have fun and to do cooperative work. It also improves the student’s creativity and the kinesthetic learning style, Gardner (2001)

I spot: This strategy is too easy to develop because the teachers do not need any kind of material apart from their imagination to engage students. First, the teacher establishes a context by saying their students the name of a place to guess words related to it.

To develop this strategy, the teacher says the students the phrase: “I am at ...(place), and I spot something beginning with...(any letter)”, then the student who guesses the word, hold up the hand in order to say what the teacher is thinking about. When a learner guesses the word, the teacher writes it on the board and the activity continues until the topic for the lesson is established.
To make a variation of this strategy, teachers can give learners the number of letters of the word instead of the beginning letter; it depends on the level of students.

This is a though provoking strategy, because it stimulates students’ attention, let them work with their imagination and activate their previous knowledge, Tofade, Elsner & Haines (2013)

The lovers: This funny strategy is very useful to engage large groups of students, because all of them have the opportunity to participate and get involved in it. The Lovers is also very easy to perform since the only needed resource is the imagination and creativity, and a wide range of vocabulary to tell stories as well.

To develop this strategy, the teacher pairs all students: students A and students B. Students A sit in a circle while students B remain standing next to their partners. To perform this strategy it is required a spare student standing in the center of the circle, who is called the lover. The lover has to walk around telling a story about any topic the professor has selected while making eye contact with different students, but finally choosing one of the standing ones by winking; the selected student has to run and hug the lover, and the sit student who loses the partner is punished, because he/she was not attentive enough to keep their partner. The punished student is the new lover who has to tell another story and find a new partner. The students who are sitting can retain their partners by hugging them when noticed the lover winks at them, it means they have to pay attention to the story and to the lover.

The strategy lasts until all students have the opportunity to tell a story or until the professor decides to stop it, it depends on the time. If there is not a spare student to start the activity, the professor can take the role.

Some of the topics the students can talk about in this strategy are introductions, anecdotes, movies, video games or books reviews and so on. A variation of this strategy is that instead of starting a new story, the lover has to continue with the narration of the previous story.

This warm up strategy gives students the chance to speak freely in a safe atmosphere; it also takes the advantages of the story telling strategies, since the students are engaged through placing knowledge into context, Sundin, Anderson & Watt, (2018).

Guess who: This strategy is so versatile, because it can be adapted to any level of students and to different kind of topics.

The professor provides students a sheet of paper with ten questions and encourages them to read and guess the answers. Once students have completed their predictions, they have to walk around the classroom to find if their answers
were right or not by asking them to their partners. Finally, they report to the teacher the number of questions they got right using brief sentences.

This strategy can be used with different kind of topics and questions according to the students’ level and the teachers’ needs to set the lesson: e.g., with lower level students, questions like who has a black cat, green eyes, a house in the countryside, number of brothers or sisters, a bicycle, and so on could be useful. On the other hand, for upper levels, the questions should be more complex, like who has ever done some of these activities: visit Europe, go on a safari, do extreme sports, among others.

This strategy promotes students’ interaction, and as Scrivener, (2011) points out, rapport, because one of the relevant aspects of teaching, should be connecting with the students and making them to know each other in order to create a comfortable, positive and friendly atmosphere in the classroom, which makes a lesson memorable.

Guessing the tale: This warm up strategy promotes the use of the reading and the listening comprehension skills, because the students have to read, to listen to and to share information.

To develop this strategy, the teacher has to prepare short descriptions of no more than 20 words describing some common fairy tales in pieces of paper. Then, the teacher asks 5 or 6 students, depending on the number of descriptions, to read them aloud and to guess which fairy tale they are about. It is a very good way to engage students for reading lessons.

However, this strategy can also be used to engage students for listening lessons, by asking them not to read, but to listen to the descriptions in order to guess the story. Teachers can also vary the activity; instead of descriptions, they can present to students short phrases asking them to guess not the story but the character of the tale.

Guessing strategies are very useful to engage students, especially children and teens making then not just to focus on the lesson, but on the topic to promote reading for pleasure and memorable lessons, as Harmer, (2010) says if students are not engaged emotionally, knowledge will not happen.

The consequences: this strategy could be well used to develop creativity along with writing skills. It is also funny and allows the participation of all the students in a class.

For developing this warm up strategy, the professor has to give each student a piece of paper. Then, the teacher asks students to write certain information on the top of the paper, to fold it and to pass it to their partner on their right hand, then, the teacher asks for another information in order to the students write it on the papers, to fold them and to pass them to their partner on their right hand.
The professor repeats this activity until the paper is full or until the planned questions are finished. After that, the students get their original paper and write a story based on the information on it. Finally, the students join in groups to share their stories and select their favorite one to read it aloud in class. Due to, it is made by different students, the stories result varied and funny.

If the teacher has a very big class, this strategy can be varied by making students to work in groups of 6 or 7 people in order to they answer the questions and write the story. This strategy can be used to engage students for writing lessons and even for grammar ones, it depends on the kinds of questions the teacher prepares in order to the students answer and complete their papers. One idea could be to write about famous people: the teacher could ask students to write the name of a famous male actor, then a female, then what he said to her, after that, what she answered and finally the consequence.

Though this strategy, learners are guided to develop their writing skills along with their creativity, also, they can discover the joyful of writing. Enjoyable activities help learners to develop the long term memory, Willis, (2007).

The culture quilt: This strategy let students the opportunity to share ideas about their own place of living and their culture characteristics.

To develop it, the teacher asks learners to think about their favorite places in their neighborhood, then, the students draw and color it on a piece of paper with as many details as they can. When the pictures are ready, they are joined together to make a colorful quilt, so each student describe it. To finish the activity, the professor synthetizes the importance of differences between people in a community and how these differences contribute to create a stronger and dynamic society.

This warm up strategy engages students in different kinds of lessons, just by changing the types of pictures to draw and color: occupations, housing, physical traits, among others.

The development of this strategy assures students’ holistic education, which teachers have the responsibility to promote in their learners, Universidad Católica de Córdova, (2008), because it covers the sociopolitical dimension of the human being involved in it. This strategy also takes advantage of the spatial and kinesthetic intelligence, Gardner (2010), due to it allows students to show their creativity.

Folly comments: Using this strategy, the students have the opportunity to interact with all their partners in the classroom, while they practice their listening skill, pronunciation and their ability to identify the coherence of ideas.

For developing this strategy, the teacher prepares 2 sets of cards, one containing ideas called “tell cards” and others with their replies or “answer cards”. In class,
the teacher distributes the cards randomly and the students walk around the classroom telling the phrases in their “tell cards” to every student until they listen to a coherent reply from someone with an “answer card”. The activity finishes up to all students have found a partner.

One of the reasons that make this strategy so versatile is because teachers can use a wide range of themes, which could be totally free, or related to the topic of the lesson. Another variation is to use questions and answers instead of phrases, which could vary from controlled questions to open ones.

The effectiveness of this strategy is because it can be used to form pairs and groups to make cooperative work along the class. Through it, teachers can promote students’ interaction, change the class mood and get an idea of the group’s personality, Scrivener (2011). The interaction is easily allowed when students speak to each other until finding their partners. The fact that they are in movement and talking can change the classroom atmosphere, turning a boring classroom into a dynamic and friendly one. Also, by paying attention to the body language and eye contact, the teacher has the opportunity to get an idea of the students’ personality, which is so important to keep in mind when planning future lessons.

The perfect picture: as a warm up strategy, it integrates the use of technology and nature, because students have to use a device like cellphones or tablets to take pictures of striking and natural elements around the classroom. It also promotes language production and team work.

Due to educational institutions have different rules about the use of cellphones, to develop this strategy, the teacher has to assure that the students have access to these devices in advance. In class, the teacher groups students in teams of 3 or 4 learners, according to the class size, then, each group is challenged to go outside the classroom and take a picture of any natural element, at that point, the teacher has to explain the characteristics and qualities the picture needs to have: it can be photographs of small creatures, like ants or a complete landscape. After taking the picture, the teams go back to the classroom and plan how to describe their photo by brainstorming and organizing ideas coherently, then, they select a reporter who has the responsibility of describing the perfect picture in front of the class. Finally, the students choose the best photo and the best description.

This strategy is flexible because it can be used to engage student to different topics in a lesson, due to the teacher can ask for pictures of natural or manmade elements, people activities, among others, depending on the lesson. To maximize the use of technology, in case they have access to internet and other devices like projectors, students can share their pictures through any app they are used to with all their partners; otherwise, they can share the photo with the teacher in order to be prompted on the board.
Using this warm up strategy the teacher has the opportunity to adapt authentic material for language teaching and to take advantage of the use of technology to motivate students extrinsically, which makes learners to feel confident enough to get their goals, Ur, (1991). Besides, this strategy encourages team work too, due to students have to agree on the picture to take, the description to do and the leader who has to present the description.

The riddle: this warm up strategy integrates the receptive skills to solve problems in a cooperative way using oral communication, because the students have to retell information to share with their partners and to agree on a solution.

In advance, the teacher prepares short problems or stories in small pieces of papers to attach them on the wall outside the classroom. To start the strategy, the teacher groups students in teams of 4 or 5. The learners in each team take turns to go out, read a part of the text, memorize it and go back into the classroom to tell the information to their partners. Once the teams have all the information from the text, they have to solve the problem and tell the class the solution.

The interesting characteristic of this strategy is that the professor can vary topics, from solving riddles to math problems. The riddles can differ depending on the students’ level: they can be as simple as guessing the names of fruits from the description of their appearance to solving complex crime mysteries. The math problems could be as easy as solving basic mathematical exercises to matching prices with electronics, and so on.

Reading and listening skills along with the negotiating ability are mainly involved in this strategy, because the students have to discuss and agree on the best solution of the problem they read and listened to about. The need of retelling information activates the students’ short term memory, which is essential in the learning process of language because it helps to familiarize with the new vocabulary, Thom & Galhercolle, (1999). Keeping in mind the differences between students, Gardner, (2010), this strategy also promotes the interpersonal and logical mathematical intelligence, since learners have to work cooperatively to solve problems.

DISCUSSION

The “Go Teacher” Program offered a relevant experience for the English teachers who participated in the first cohort, because, among other activities, participants had the opportunity of experiencing the benefits of the warm up strategies and how their development contribute to engage students for a whole lesson.

The warm up strategies described in this paper are organized according to the memories of the participants in the “Go Teacher” program, but a more detailed description and organization could make them more useful for teachers to easily
select and include them in a lesson plan. Aspects such as students’ levels and learning styles, skills and resources could be deeply detailed in a further research.

CONCLUSIONS

For the success of a language lesson, teachers have to select warm up strategies according to appropriate methodologies which should be students centered promoting interaction as Communicative Language Teaching and the Cooperative Learning Approach do; Through the CLT, the students are able to confidently express themselves in a natural way to get and give information, and thanks to the Cooperate Learning Approach, learners are capable to work in teams to negotiate topics in order to get agreements and to develop the interpersonal intelligence supporting each other.

Warm up strategies are the key to success in the teaching learning process of the English language because through them it is possible to achieve the goals and covers students’ learning needs. To establish appropriate methods, techniques and activities in a lesson could determine the success of it. Warm up strategies have become in the appetizer to have fruitful classes, they assure that the students feel connected with the whole class time. They provide dynamism, interaction, cooperation, naturalness and spontaneity in students’ performance. They create a pleasant, fun and positive environment in the classroom and they foster students’ production.

Bearing in mind the importance of warm up strategies and how useful they are to engage students, it is strongly advisable to organize and plan these strategies within the lesson in order to involve and motivate high schools’ students, so the English classes become in an unforgettable experience.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


