

Research Question:

Can students' German output be increased by forcing target language interaction - imposing short 'German only allowed' sessions three/four times a week.

Rationale

I think we would all agree that confident use of a new language requires practice and that opportunities to practice a European language in New Zealand do not often occur naturally. My aim with this research was to see if I could accelerate my students' ability to interact in German through artificially imposed practice sessions.

Many of the experts cite interaction in the target language as essential for the successful development of the second language.

Ellis, R in his "Principles of Instructed Language Learning" says "The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency." (Principle 8)

Vygotsky, L.S. in "Mind and Society" says "Thought is internalised speech, and speech emerges from social interaction."

Doughty & Pica, 1986 – "Learners need opportunities to practice language with one another."

The Curriculum Document says:

Provide many opportunities for the students to communicate with one another.

Communication skills are the foundation for language learning.

The Sample

A multicultural years 5 and 6 class of 30 students from a full primary school in Mt Wellington in Auckland. The children come from 14 different cultural groups but only one (a Romanian child) has any previous contact with German. Many of the children are already bilingual. Six students do not speak English well.

Method

Each day for the five week period of the research the children were to play a game of Memory which taught German vocabulary. During the game the children were challenged to speak only German.

Prior to the initial session the children were taught basic formulaic expressions needed to play the game.

–"your turn" "My turn" Where is? Yes no.

The German vocabulary written on the cards provided some ready German language.

The children were in self chosen groups of 4 or 5.





The time available for the game was increased each week. The children themselves kept a note of how long they could last before anyone in the group spoke English.

Results:

In the first week most students quite easily managed 5 minutes of German.

From Week 2, the time that the students had available for their games was gradually increased. New formulaic expressions were learned as the children requested them.

In Week 3 Happy Families was added as an extra game to extend the language required and prevent children getting bored with playing memory. Half of the groups played memory and half played Happy Families.

By week four the time that the children could manage had increased to 20 minutes. The groups played Happy Families one day and Memory the next.



In Week 5, the last week of the research, a computer game “Pip Teaches German” was added to the sessions. This was to cater for a new student in the class who knew no German.. One of the other children in the class partnered him on the computer.

At the end of Week 5 we had an “Ultimate Challenge” session to see just how long the students could go speaking only German.

We had to stop after 35 minutes because it was time to pack up for the end of the day. No English had been heard!

Findings:

The children took to the challenge with great enthusiasm.

Their spoken German increased rapidly.

They adapted their language to the new game once Happy Families was introduced.

Children borrowing the Happy Family cards before school were playing it speaking German.

There was a general increase in the amount of German being spoken in the classroom outside of German lessons.

Conclusions:

The time the children were able to sustain speaking only German increased quite dramatically over the 5 weeks of the study.

Many of the children in the class were observed using German outside of German lessons.

It would appear that the frequent enforced use of the target language did significantly increase the children's ability/willingness to speak in German. For that period of time we had developed confident and fluent German speakers in a very specific situation.

There were of course many questions that follow from this study.

Would this fluency generalise to any other language situations?

Would this be sustained once the frequent practice sessions were stopped?

Could this method be used for other aspects of language?

Would this method be as successful with other age groups?

References

- Vygotsky, L.S. 1978. Mind and Society. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- Ellis, R. Principles of Instructed Language Learning
- Doughty & Pica, 1986;

