

Making a difference to student learning in languages: An Action Research Project in the Primary School

by Tania Everleigh

In 2006 when she did the pilot programme later known as TPDL, Tania was teaching Year 7 at Murray's Bay Intermediate School in Auckland. She had a Masters in Educational Leadership and held positions of responsibility for Mathematics and Gifted and Talented. Although she had been teaching for 8 years, this was her first year teaching a language. She previously learnt German for two years and French for five years at secondary school. As part of the teacher professional development programme, Tania sat and passed the Start Deutsch 1 examination.

During 2006, 16 teachers in Auckland and Northland took part in the Teachers Professional Development Programme in Learning Languages Years 7-8 (a pilot programme of what later became TPDL). This contract between the Ministry of Education and the University of Auckland was delivered by Wendy Thomson, the Project Director, and Silvia Insley, the Professional Director. In 2006 the teachers were required to upskill in either the German or Spanish language and to sit internationally recognised qualifications in the language, and concurrently to study a methodology paper in learning languages taught by Silvia Insley and offered by the University of Auckland Faculty of Education's School of Languages, Literacies and Communication - EDPROFST 360.

As part of the methodology paper, teachers completed an action research project to show how they had used the language teaching and learning pedagogy they studied to improve student achievement in Spanish or German.

Tania chose to research "If I increase my use of the target language will this make a difference to my students' learning?" The following has been adapted from her powerpoint presentation to the languages advisers at their Learning Languages hui in Auckland in October 2006.

What the research says

Ellis (2005) maintains that successful instructed language learning requires extensive target language input. Krashen (1981) states that in a foreign language learning context it can be difficult for learners to gain extensive input. It is up to teachers to provide this and to maximise the amount of comprehensible target language input students receive inside the classroom.

Lightbown & Spada (1999) state that learners can comprehend the general meaning of many forms which they have not mastered and may never have produced. Therefore restricting classroom target language resources to those which contain little or nothing which is new may have several negative consequences.

Ellis & Wells (1980) demonstrated that a substantial portion of the variance in speed of acquisition of children can be accounted for by the amount and the quality of input they receive. In general, the more exposure they receive, the more and the faster they will learn. Sharpe & Driscoll (2000) state that "the amount of exposure to a language will influence the proficiency."

Research Process

- Analyse transcripts of two German lessons- one in which the teacher's use of target language was minimal.
- Focus on students' use of the target language in each of these lessons.
- Student questionnaire.

Lesson 1: There was minimal use of the target language by the teacher and it was restricted to only what was being taught. Students' responses during the lesson were as follows:

- ***Guten Morgen Frau/Herr.....***
- ***Guten Tag***
- ***Tag***
- ***Guten Abend***
- ***Gute Nacht***
- Don't touch!
- Stop talking!
- I got it!
- I scored five points!
- I've got my red pen!
- ***Guten Tag, Sam!***
- My turn next!

NB: The responses in bold italics are related to what was being taught during the lesson.

Lesson 2: The teacher was using the target language to give instructions where possible and using formulaic expressions in contextual situations - many that the students had never been exposed to before. Students' responses during the lesson were as follows:

- ***Guten Morgen Frau Everleigh***
- ***Wie ist deine Telefonnummer?***
- ***Ja!***
- ***Meine Telefonnummer ist....***
- ***Das ist falsch!***
- ***Sehr gut!***
- ***Prima!***
- ***Danke***
- ***Ich bin elf Jahre alt***
- ***Frau Thomson ist***
- What was that?
- ***Wie bitte?***
- ***Nein, ich habe sie nicht.***
- I don't get it!
- I get it!
- ***Wie sagt man.....auf Deutsch?***
- ***Guckt mal!***
- ***Hört zu!***
- ***Ich weiss nicht!***
- ***Du bist dran!***
- ***Auf Deutsch, bitte***

Transcript Observations

- In the first lesson the students were speaking mostly in English and many of their responses e.g. 'yes', were words that they actually did know how to say in German but they weren't using the target language. The phrases that they said in the target language were the ones that had been taught in the lesson.
- In the second lesson the teacher utilised formulaic expressions in contextual situations and also used the target language for instructions. The majority of student responses were in the target language and they were using many of the formulaic expressions e.g. *Hört zu!* that

the teacher had used but not taught during group work. Students were expecting each other to reply in German, and the phrase 'Auf Deutsch, bitte' was being used during the lesson.

Questionnaire

1. Has having the teacher speak to you in German helped you to learn the language?
2. If yes- in what ways do you think it has been helpful?
3. What words/phrases have you heard the teacher use that you now use as well?

Responses to Questionnaire

Question 1: Yes- 92%; No- 8%

Question 2:

- When the teacher speaks to us in German I can understand almost everything and that makes me want to learn more.
- When the teacher speaks in German we are expected to speak in German too which is good practice.
- When the teacher speaks in German I listen to the words and if I know what they mean I can begin to use them too.
- I learn lots of new German words by listening to the teacher speak.
- The teacher sometimes makes mistakes and then I know it's okay if I make mistakes too!
- I can listen to how the teacher says something and then I know how to say it correctly.
- It is good to hear the language and what it sounds like!

Question 3:

- *Wie bitte?*
- *Hört zu!*
- *Guckt mal!*
- *Auf Deutsch?*
- *Danke*
- *Sehr gut, Prima, Fantastisch, Toll*
- *Du bist dran!*
- *Wie sagt man.....auf Deutsch?*
- *Es ist richtig?*
- *Ja, nein*
- *Zehn Minuten!*
- *Fertig?*
- *Zehn, neun, acht, sieben.....*
- *Schnell!*
- *Setzt euch!*

NB: These were the most popular answers to this question.

Classroom observations since increasing teacher use of the target language

- Students are utilising many of the formulaic expressions and classroom instructions that the teacher uses in the target language, not just in German lessons but in other curriculum areas as well. The majority of these expressions have not been specifically taught.
- Students are constantly wanting to know when the next German lesson will be.
- The students are using more German in the lessons and if they don't know how to say something they want to say they are asking the teacher to help them (in German).
- The students will often use the phrase, 'Auf Deutsch, bitte,' in response to anyone who speaks in English during the class, so they are expecting to have to speak in the target language too.

Conclusions

- The teacher's increased use of the target language has had an impact on student learning of the language.
- Students are more motivated to learn the language and are also increasing their use of the target language. Thus an increase in language input has led to an increase in language output.
- Students are using words and phrases they have heard and understood, and are not simply regurgitating what they have been taught.
- Students are starting to expect more from each other and are challenging themselves to say things in the target language that they have not heard or produced before.

Implications for language teaching

- Teachers need to be confident in their use of the target language.
- There is a need to maximise the use of the target language inside the classroom. Ideally this would mean that the target language would become the medium as well as the object of instruction.
- Create opportunities for students to receive input in the target language outside the classroom. This can be achieved by making resources available to students e.g. games they can play before school and at lunch time, and providing learner-training in how to make effective use of the resources. This can also be done by providing extensive reading programmes based on carefully selected books and / or reading materials suited to the level of the students.
- There needs to be a review of the pre-service programme for language teachers, given that teachers' knowledge and use of the target language has an influence on student learning of the language. Therefore in order to maximise student learning, teachers need to have the opportunity to develop their own knowledge of the target language before they begin to teach

REFERENCES

- Ellis, R. (2005) *Instructed Language Acquisition: A Literature Review*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Ellis, R. & Wells, G. (1980) Enabling factors in adult-child discourse. *First Language*, 1, 46-82
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. (1999). *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Sharpe, K. & Driscoll, P. (2000) At what age should foreign language learning begin? in Field, K. (Ed) (2000) *Issues in Modern Language Teaching*. London: Routledge Falmer, pp72-86.