Hogeschool van Amsterdam

FulbrightCenter

Let's Play a Game:
Building English Language Confidence Through Small Group Play and Practice

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Rationale and Research Question

- One prominent barrier to student output in foreign language education is language anxiety
- Language anxiety is a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry that is most often centered on speaking or listening tasks (McIntyre & Gardner 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986)
- Students may become anxious to speak the foreign language in front of other students or their teachers out of fear of making mistakes
- I believe it is important to create a safe and comfortable environment for students to learn and express themselves in English, which is why I chose to design my intervention with low-stakes game activities and small groups of students
- The aim of my study is to test whether or not this design can improve students' attitudes and anxiety levels towards English

Approach and Process

- Administered pre-test to two classes; one first and one second year vocational section (35 students total)
  - Eline van Batenburg's measure assessing English language anxiety
- Coded responses and averaged the data to create a score for each student
  - Higher scores corresponded to less language anxiety/more positive sentiments towards learning English; lower scores corresponded to greater language anxiety/less positive sentiment towards learning English
- Assigned students to mixed level small groups
  - Groups of 6 for the 2nd year students
  - Groups of 4 for the 1st year students
- Each Friday, half of their English lesson was devoted to small group English practice with me
  - Each group would get about 10-15 minutes per week
- During small group sessions student expectations were to:
  - Speak English at all times (to the highest extent of their abilities) to me and their classmates
  - Listen to each other without interrupting
  - Contribute at least twice
- Each week, students were given a new English speaking task or game (see Examples of Games)
  - I chose each game based on my own criteria to create a low-stakes safe and comfortable learning environment
    - Challenging for the students, but not prohibitively
    - Fun and enjoyable
    - Simple enough to do in 10-15 minutes
    - Requires the optimal amount output from students
- At the end of the year, students will be given a post-test to find if there has been improvement in their feelings of anxiety towards speaking English

Examples of Games:

- Wheel of Questions
  - Each student spins a computerized wheel which prompts them with a randomly assigned question
    - Questions were typical Getting to Know You style questions, like "do you have any pets?" or "what is your favorite holiday?"
  - Each student is then expected to read the question aloud and answer it with as much detail as possible (I occasionally needed to ask them follow up questions)
- 20 Questions
  - One student thinks of one thing like a lion or a football or Martin Garrix and the other students have to ask questions to figure out what that student is thinking of
  - HOWEVER, the students are only allowed to ask "yes" or "no" questions and they only have exactly 20 questions to find out what the student is thinking of
- I Would Like to Be…
  - Students are given four options within a category and they have to decide which of these four options would they most like to be and why
    - Ex) giraffe, cat, dog, lion
    - Ex) sun, moon, star, comet
- Two Truths and a Lie
  - Each student comes up with three statements about themselves BUT one of the three has to be a lie
  - The other students then guess which statement was the lie

Examples of Survey Questions

Students were asked to rate each statement from strongly disagree to strongly agree:

- I'm afraid my classmates will laugh at me when I speak English
- If my teacher asks a question, I would like to answer in English
- I get nervous when I have to speak English with someone
- I like to speak English with my teacher
- I find it difficult to speak English for a long time

Preliminary Findings

- Students have become more eager and willing to share their thoughts and ideas in English
- Sometimes students speak English to each other without being reminded to
- Many of the students are eager to speak English with me whenever they see me around the school outside of class time or during class time
- Students appear to look forward to participating in the new games each week

Student Scores*

Range of possible scores	28 to 140
Range of actual scores	41 to 138
Average	93.53
Standard Deviation	20.2
Average (1st year)	95.4
Average (2nd year)	92.6

*Answers were coded with 5 as "Strongly Agree" and reverse coded as "Strongly Disagree", with 3 as neutral, and 1 as "Strongly Disagree" and reverse coded as "Strongly Agree"; negatively phrased statements were reverse coded; each coded answer for the 28 question survey was then added up to create a score

Limitations

- Since I did not use a control group, my conclusions will be correlational only
- In this study I hoped to assess the effects of small group play and practice on my sample of students, however I have also taught a few full English lessons to the 2nd year students, which may confound the results of the post-test
- Any eagerness or willingness that I observe may have less to do with the intervention and more to do with the fact that they like me or want to impress me as the young American teacher

Future Directions

- I plan to continue the weekly sessions until the grant period is over, by then I will have had about 5 months working with the students on their English language skill and confidence
- Future games may include Taboo, "Who Am I?" Guessing Game, and Desert Island
- Just before the end of the grant period, in June, I will administer the Language Anxiety Survey post-test to collect new data on the students' attitudes and feelings towards English
- I will create scores from this new data and then compare them to the pre-test scores and hopefully will find high scores (meaning improved language anxiety and more positive feelings about English)
- If the results are significant, I would like to share my findings

Acknowledgments