

Participatory Learning Techniques for Socio-cultural ESP Students

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Introduction

The lack of interest in English language courses on the part of learners is a problem that ESP teachers face at the university level. While teaching second year Socio-cultural students at the University of Guantánamo, Cuba, we realized that they were not so motivated towards the use of English. One way of encouraging them to practice English language skills was to organize the class into small groups to develop some participatory techniques. Through these useful techniques they could practice the contents by using the foreign language in cooperative situations. Cooperative learning experiences also result in positive attitudes toward the subject area and in high levels of self-esteem.

The idea of involving learners in participatory techniques really worked and they felt more enthusiastic. Participatory techniques contribute not only to the development of oral expression, but also to the integration of other linguistic skills. As Byrne (1986) stated, students learn better when they develop activities that involve more than one skill.

In this work we illustrate three examples of participatory techniques: My Socio-cultural Knowledge, What do I know about Cuban Culture?, and Who Knows Best?

My Socio-cultural Knowledge

Procedure

1. The teacher tells the students that he or she will provide a definition of some important concepts that have been studied in class and they will name the concept.
2. The teacher describes or defines the concept and the students have to identify the term.

For example:

It consists of the ornamentation of interior or exterior wall surfaces through the painting of conventional or pictorial designs, either flat or in relief.

(Mural painting)

3. The student who first names the term will be the leader of the team.
Note: These terms have been covered previously in class, students have read about them in texts and on the Internet. Therefore, they should be able to identify them.
4. Now the teacher forms small groups (4-5 students). A set of cards that include concepts from the course is placed face down at the front of the room and a member of each group is asked to come up and select one. The teacher shares the concept with the class (the definition). Teams must then analyze the term.
5. The members of each team work cooperatively to prepare a written exposition including all the information they can procure according to their knowledge (They are given 20-25 minutes to do this). In this step they have to interact using English all the time. The professor supervises this.
6. The head of each team writes down all the ideas given and discussed by the members of his/her team and then with their help he/she writes a coherent text.
7. The team leader or another student from each group will read the text to the whole class.
8. Finally, the best exposition will be selected by taking into consideration the quality of the information, the most complete synopsis, and logical order of ideas.

What Do I Know About Cuban Culture?

Procedure

1. The teacher writes a list of elements that make up the Cuban culture (music, architecture, painting, cinematography, cuisine, literature, etc)
2. The teacher puts a little box on the desk with some small pieces of paper in it, each containing a different aspect of the culture.
3. The class is divided into five teams.
4. One student from each team goes to the front and chooses a little piece of paper. Her/his team develops activities about the topic selected.

Team Number 1 - Architecture

The students discuss in their group what they mean by architecture, what they know about architectural styles in Cuba (Hispanic model, neoclassic style), and their opinions on the following:

It is said that architecture is one of the most important attractions for tourism in Cuba.

Team Number 2 - Painting

The students have to discuss the following:

- Their thoughts about the different kinds of paintings since the aboriginals (cave paintings, religious kinds of paintings associated to Catholic liturgy, modern painting).
- Their thoughts on why painting is said to be one of the most genuine expressions of the fine arts in Cuba.
- Their thoughts about why it is said that Cuban painting has assumed a critical role in defense of features that are characteristic of the Cuban identity.
- Their thoughts about famous Cuban painters and paintings.

Team Number 3 - Music

Students explain, in their own words, why people claim that out of all the expressions of art, music is undoubtedly the one that has had the most influence on the shaping of the personality of Cubans.

- They refer to Cuban musical rhythms (son, boleros, mambo, the cha cha, etc)
- They discuss what they know about famous Cuban musical bands and singers.
- They compare Cuban music with that from other countries.

Team Number 4 - Cinematography

The students speak about the role of Cuban cinematography, the films they like the most, and their favorite actors.

Who Knows Best?

Procedure

1. The class is divided into small groups.
2. Some cards are placed upside down on the teacher's desk containing questions concerning a cultural aspect.
3. One member of each team goes to the teacher's desk and picks a card. Then he/she reads the question aloud to his/her group.

4. The question selected for each team is analyzed by the members collectively.

Example of Questions

- What is meant by "community culture"?
- What is cultural promotion?
- What is socio-cultural investigation?
- What is meant by cultural intervention?
- What do you mean by art?

5. The team leader of each team takes notes so as to write an answer to the question. (They interact using English all the time, while the professor supervises and facilitates when necessary). Also they have to compare points of view on the same concept.

6. The responsible person or another volunteer from the team goes to the front of the class and reads the answer to everyone.

7. The teacher gives each team leader a piece of paper containing one correct answer, which has been taken from the original source, and it is also read aloud to the class.

8. In a collective manner, the whole class analyzes and discerns which answer relates most to the original one.

9. The class determines the winning team.

Note: This technique can be developed using any bibliography containing important concepts Socio-cultural students must master. It could be on concepts related to other subjects of the curriculum as well (Interdisciplinary approach).

Conclusion

The participatory techniques presented were welcomed by our students and allowed them to develop and integrate linguistic skills. These kinds of activities also led students to develop collaborative behaviours. The students were able to make valuations, give opinions and use the foreign language freely. Furthermore, these techniques brought the teaching-learning process alive, since they were highly motivating. Most of these techniques led, in one way or another, to the strengthening of values, which is something quite necessary for the interaction and performance of future professionals in a global society. They, of course, could be adapted and applied in English classes for intermediate and advanced students.

Reference

- Byrne, Donn. (1986). Teaching Oral English, London: Longman