

Learning a Second Language in a Meaningful Way



Percorso per apprendere la lingua Inglese
per le classi del Liceo Scientifico

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Introduction

There is no recipe for motivating students, because making the best of any situation is a personal decision. However, it is easier for students to be motivated if the subject is relevant to them and they find a value in it. Students' motivation has been found to play an important role in their learning strategies, critical thinking, problem solving, conceptual change and learning. The active involvement of students and students' motivation are the pillars of the PROFILES project. (Bolte, Streller, Holbrook, Rannikmae, Hofstein, Mamlok Naaman, & Rauch, 2012) To accept the requirements of the project involves changing the way of teaching. The teacher's priorities are firstly the students and what they learn, and thereafter the syllabus to be carried out.

Recipients

The five classes of High School

The didactic approach

A method engaging these four basic criteria are used:

1. The more exposure and opportunities to practice language, the better for making real progress.
2. Learning a language amounts to learning by doing. This is best accomplished by imitation and drill in the classroom where the students can see and hear the teacher. The teacher serves his students best when he/she gives them utterances in the new language to imitate and checks their imitation. Because language learning happens "as a result of the reactions among the elements that go into the crucible—the teachers and the learners" (Pawlak, Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2014, p. v)
3. There is nothing wrong with including material that has been previously studied, since recycling (old stuff) has been proved an efficient learning tool. In the course of their 5 years of secondary school, the 'old stuff' gradually decreases from approximately 70% to 0% in their fifth year.
4. Motivation through extra-curricular activities.

Students and their parents know that the oral test has 5 components. What follows is decisively condensed.

1. Reading/reciting. I explain that intonation varies according to the situation. The pupils become aware of this and find it entertaining being able to perceive that diversity which is constantly there but seldom noticed. I ask them to read using correct pronunciation as well as appropriate intonation. My advice to them is to listen to the recordings and repeat out loud for 10 minutes every day rather than one or two hours the day before their test.

2. Questions. Text books as well as literature set books contain dialogues and reading passages with relevant questions. The marking parameters are based on accurate grammar structures, correct pronunciation and complete sentences.

3. Translation English Vs Italian. In order to enter further into contact with the language, this testing method includes translating what has already been recorded (old stuff). The reading is done at normal speaking speed, never at reduced speed, while the pupil verbally translates with his book closed. From the 3rd year onwards I use unseen passages (new stuff).

4. Translation Italian Vs English. Using the recycling logic I select grammar centered sentences in English (40 – 50) from the text book. The pupils then list them to the text with an Italian conversion. During the test I show them the Italian version to be translated into English. The pupils may translate differently providing it is correctly translated.

5. Reciting a poem. There are two poems to be learnt by heart and recited each school year. Any poem learnt by heart but not recited receives a negative mark.

Thanks to a clearly explained methodology, the pupils, knowing exactly what the teacher expects from them, often interact in supportive groups and develop sociable relationships. Weaker students who live in small villages may even be helped by a stronger fellow student living nearby.

Motivational activities

Songs: The pupils know that if the second phase of their testing is satisfactory, they can sing their favourite song in class using karaoke taken from the Net. They often lack confidence and are shy, however, singing a song in front of the entire class is motivating and when I say, 'ok, now sing your song', their eyes light up with happiness.

(Bolte et al., 2013) Furthermore, the students find it stimulating to do even better when the class applauds their singing.

The game:

Who wants to be a millionaire? The students are divided into groups according to the cooperative learning method. All questions are asked in English and concern history, geography, mathematics, sport, cinema, and music. All topics contain elements of great interest aimed at provoking their curiosity. Their level of attention is at its peak. (Hidi & Renninger) It is not unusual to hear a pupil saying 'Quiet or else we won't understand'. The questions often include new numbers or lexicon which I spell to them. During lessons distractions may occur but while playing the game no one loses their concentration as they know it may penalize their team.

Historock:

The musical. It is a complex play and not easy to explain in just a few lines. Its name derives from a syneresis (history + rock). The original idea was inspired on the working field – the classroom. In fact, I have to thank my pupils for the reaction they had when, from a historical point of view, I presented the Irish problem and mentioned the Cranberries' song, 'Zombie'. Their level of attention immediately soared, even if for only a few minutes. They had a very similar reaction when I introduced a sonnet by W. Shakespeare and told them it was the title of one of Sting's CDs. Henceforth, Blake and Jim Morrison, J. F. Kennedy and Simon and Garfunkel, Aung San Suu Kyi and the U2, as well as dozens of others. Through these linkages the students become far more involved in learning about William Blake, W. B. Yeats, Hemingway, etc.

Taking part in this activity entails months of hard work for umpteen students. Nonetheless, many pupils compete so as to be able to participate. Parents even ask the Headmistress to put their children in my classes in order to be able to take part in this musical.

Conclusions

Teaching this way means having to work harder for the same salary. Even though money is a component of the reward for the teachers, it is not all of the reward. Also students are required to a greater commitment. Students love this approach because besides English they may learn a way to be engaged that appeals and also a style

useful for learning other subjects. Many of my students are among the best students of the school.

References

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