

Reaching the habit of reading for pleasure -A preliminary action research report-

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Abstract

When you find out that you can improve the way you are teaching, because you realize that some objectives are not being reached, it is a good time to develop an action research. In this case, students did not have interest in reading and they found it very boring. I got some data to understand why they had not reached the habit of reading for pleasure and I decided to implement some changes in my daily activities. This was the first time I carried out an ARP following the steps that can be seen in the current article.

Key words: Reading, library, group work, parents' implication, Action Research Project

Resumen

Cuando descubres que puedes mejorar la forma en que enseñas, porque te das cuenta de que los alumnos no están alcanzando algunos objetivos, es un buen momento para desarrollar una investigación-acción. En este caso, los estudiantes no tenían interés en la lectura y la encontraban muy aburrida. Obtuve algunos datos para entender mejor por qué no habían alcanzado el hábito de leer por placer y decidí llevar a cabo algunos cambios en mis actividades diarias. Ésta era la primera vez que realizaba un PIA siguiendo los pasos que se pueden ver en el artículo actual.

Palabras clave: Lectura, biblioteca, trabajo en grupo, implicación de los padres, Proyecto de Acción-Investigación

1. The diagnosis

It was my first year with this group. They were in the fifth level of Primary School and I had taught other groups at this age before for years. I had some responsibility for them as a teacher and a tutor. After working with them for the first term, I noticed that they did not read for pleasure, that their reading skill was clearly below the degree other students in the last years had by the end of the first term. It seemed to me that they were not used to reading by their own. I also realized at the beginning of the course that they did not even know how to use the dictionary to look difficult words up. Some of them had difficulty in remembering the alphabet.

From the very beginning I asked them to read a book appropriate to their level. Most of them bought the book, and we all started reading it in the classroom all Thursdays in order to introduce them into both the book and the use of the dictionary. The first three chapters we read gave us some interesting words to work on synonyms and polysemes. They were asked to illustrate the book with the characters' pictures and the environment of the story and they did it in the craft activities class. But when they were requested to read the next two chapters by themselves, they failed to comply with the task.

2. The questions

I knew their dislike of reading but I figured out that there was something I had to do as soon as possible to help them get the habit of reading, learn to use dictionaries with ease and just read for pleasure. The central question was:

- How could I change the situation?
- What strategies would be useful to increase their regard for reading?

First of all, I made a simple questionnaire to find the initial data for my action research. From the questionnaire I tried to discover their attitudes to reading. The questions should be open and would make them think about their own habits (by introspection).

These are some of the questions in the questionnaire:

- What do I like reading?
- What book or books have I read completely that I can remember?
- If I had to read a book, what would I like to read about? Who would be interested in what I write?
- Since when do I have the library identification card?

There were issues that I could test immediately. For instance, three students stated they would finally get the card in the library. After deeper reading of the answers I found that the book I proposed for reading was the first one they had ever read completely and that they had not read much before. At the same time they assured me that they had checked the dictionary when they did not know a word and they knew the importance of reading. However, they are not accustomed to using the dictionary or just reading for pleasure.

I decided to get new answers from interviews with my students, asking them questions like these: “What do you like to read?”, “When do you read?” or “What do you think if we read a free book in groups?”

3. The plan

After thinking about the situation and the answers given by the students, I decided to focus the action research on four main hypotheses:

To choose their own reading will favour their implication

- Would it be more motivating for them to choose their own reading?

To read in groups freely selected will increase motivation

- Would it be better reading in groups working on a same book (or kind of text democratically chosen)?

To introduce a family in the reading context will help them with difficulties

- How could I improve home conditions for reading?
- What could be done in the family context?

To discover the local library as a place of enjoyment that will open their minds to diversity

- How can I encourage them to go to the library?
- Would it be interesting to visit a near library all together?

4. The actions

Each of the objectives planned should be faced through positive actions. Then, these were the actions that I resolved to undertake:

Main action: Data gathering

- To gather information about the process in my diary.

Action 1

- To give my students the possibility of selecting their own texts.
- To make a list of interesting books that could be chosen by indecisive students

Action 2

- To make students participate in the project
- To favour the formation of groups according to their likes and preferences

Action 3

- To get information from parents about their children's habits of reading
- To meet parents at school to talk about the project and their implication
- To receive proposals for improvement

Action 4

- To arrange a visit to the library "Cardenal Cisneros" with the group in the morning.

5. The documents

I had to create some documents to get data for the action research. Some of these documents would be:

For the main action

- A diary

For Action 1

- A reading list for indecisive students

For Action 2

- List of students' choice for reading and groups

For Action 3

- A questionnaire for parents about their children's reading habits
- A notification for a meeting to talk about the project

For Action 4

- A questionnaire for the whole process of visiting the local library

6. The data

I took notes for my diary regularly. I also represented the data obtained in some graphs to make them easy to be analyzed. The main sources of data have been the questionnaires, the diary (observations registered) and the meeting with their parents. I focussed my note-taking on five points that were general attitude to reading, sections for reading at home, type of preferred readings, daily habits of reading at home and attainable reading materials for children.

Parents thought that their children do not read regularly and that is probably the reason why they do not like reading. They admitted their children read a little and they do not ask their parents for books. Children were not used to reading at a specific hour in the day and they did it when they wanted to. It was also evident that they did not have a particular place for reading at home. However, parents' response was completely positive and they showed their engagement easily. Some of them helped their children read regularly. Parents

thought their children preferred reading fiction books, followed by textbooks and comics. Finally, they highly valued our visit to the library “Cardenal Cisneros”.

This action research dealt with attitudes. It was not easy to find out how deep my students attitude would eventually change. It was a short period of time, but even so, I think that some important ideas were drawn from my concern on this project. In my diary I took data linked to the real action and our daily vision of the goals achievement. That is what I will try to reflect in the next section.

7. The reflection

I had reached the new starting point. Before going into the unfinished process of learning and unlearning in which I was immersed, I had to stop for a while as I did in the diagnosis stage to review my notes. I had to write some ideas about what I had done till then.

Idea 1

Reading is a long process. My students are starting to get engaged in it. They have delayed, in some way, but the question here is not speed, but feeling, and this is a long-distance race.

Idea 2

When students work together to achieve the same goal, they are more motivated. I could see my students enjoying pair work at school and at the library. At the same time, they learn to share.

Idea 3

If you choose what you read, you are supposed to be interested in that reading. However, I feel that my students need some advice to select what to read. At the moment, not all of them have been fascinated by something in particular. They seem to be lost on choice. Perhaps, some of them should be encouraged to read a specific book, but I think that they simply need more time to find “that” reading text that finally links them to real pleasure. If they are pressed to choose, they will eventually reject reading.

Idea 4

Parents play an important role on their children’s habits. They need to be aware of the importance of reading. The more children see their parents’ interest in reading, the more attractive reading will be for them. Moreover, children need a wide range of material to read at home (not only computers, television or videogames). Therefore, when parents have met to talk about reading with their teacher, students have realised that reading is crucial.

Idea 5

A local library is a good meeting point where children can read in silence and where they can have a look at lots of different reading materials that may catch their attention and interest. Indeed, when we visited the library, they agreed it was a great experience. For some of them it was the first time and others saw that library as something new, a modern building, prepared to receive them.

8. The conclusion

I cannot avoid starting the conclusion by saying that this research is the beginning of a new investigation. When I started this action research, I proposed to find useful strategies to increase my students' regard to reading. I think that I have found some, but I still wonder how far they will work in future. Some parents suggested proposing a specific reading assignment for each month and to score the children's achievement. But I wonder if this is the way to appreciate reading. There have been better suggestions in the way of giving children variety of reading to choose, as a classroom library or the school library may be. I think that these two last points can be assessed in the next action research. It will require new actions. I have decided to give more attention to the classroom library, but this first stage has to be completed. I have one more year to give my students the opportunity to read for pleasure.

Emilio Ortiz Pérez graduated in a Master's Degree in "Teaching English as a Foreign Language" from the University of Alcalá in 2008. He also got the degree in "Computer Engineering" from the same University in 1993. His experience in teaching English has been increased through more than twenty-five years in State or Public Schools in Spain. He started teaching English before he got the degree in "Elementary Teaching" in 1982. At the moment he is preparing his doctoral thesis on Science in Bilingual Schools.