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ABSTRACT

The Impact of Drama Activities in the Early Learning of Italian as a Second Language.

A study conducted on class-samples of children attending primary school

in Western Australia.

The study originates from a situation observed during the everyday class activities of LOTE Teaching in a primary school context over ten years in both Catholic and Government school contexts. The common problems encountered by LOTE Teachers were shared and discussed during formal staff meetings and Professional Development sessions organized by the employer. Many, in fact the majority, of the teaching staff seemed to complain about lack of consistent interest/participation and/or discipline observed during class activities. The staff believed this was mainly related to inconsistency of pre-organized curricula, often inadequate or scarcely formulated in order to be applied to particular learning groups. For various reasons they seemed to be uninterested in a systematic approach to a language either different from their own and/or from English. In fact English was perceived as a 'prestigious language' in a social environment that, even though depicted as multicultural, would often be contradictory to the learning of a language other than English to be used for communicative, social and economic purposes rather than mere academic ones. Consequently the intent of the study was to experiment new classroom activities, different from the curricular ones. The aim was raising average class response to LOTE learning and also eliciting interest from those learning groups who, for various reasons, seemed to be particularly difficult to involve. Action research was the selected method for the study. In fact, it was believed it would give the researcher the opportunity to put into action and test various activities during her own lesson

time. The opportunity then existed to compare and discuss her observations and results with colleagues who volunteered to try the same activities in a different context and finally present and discuss the findings at future Professional Development sessions for the benefit of other colleagues. The school principal was duly informed about the proposed study and her permission was sought for the onset of the study and the use of the school facilities – art-room, costumes, musical instruments etc. A note was sent to the parents of those children belonging to the sample class in order to inform them of the intention to carry out the proposed study and obtain their permission. Two different learning activities for the same topic were tried on two groups of primary school children. The two groups consisted of two classes of about thirty children attending grade 6. The control class was taught the unit according to the pre-existing LOTE program; the sample class was engaged in a different learning method for the same language unit. A diary of notes, considerations and remarks on the ongoing study, and children's response and attitude was regularly kept by the LOTE teacher/researcher, and observation and evaluation sheets were compiled during class activities as the study evolved. In consideration of the limited contact time of eighty minutes per week available for the lessons, the study was conducted over a period of one term. Qualitative data were collected through tables/talley sheets, the teacher's diary of daily experience and remarks, audio e video recording for simulated recall, and a final student questionnaire and test. The data were then analyzed via frequency and ranking so as to provide a basis for objective interpretation. School staff involvement was sought whenever available—i.e. the relevant class teachers - in the observation and interpretation processes. The study demonstrated that better class interaction had been achieved by applying the cooperative approach through drama performance oriented activities. The set language targets had been reached with more ease by cooperative production of written work and rehearsal. General attitude towards LOTE activities had improved as evidenced from their obvious

enthusiasm and enjoyment. Discipline was better managed by the LOTE teacher, as the children worked cooperatively to attain a common goal and they in turn tended to self-discipline themselves.

The study and its results were consequently presented and discussed with the staff of the school involved and made available to the parents. They were also presented and discussed during professional development workshops for relevant LOTE teachers employed by the same association.