Phonetics Project for Primary Education Classrooms

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Abstract
We suggest this project because through its development we can start working on those aspects that are very important in the learning of a foreign language. There are many components that make the experience enjoyable and effective for children. Colourful picture cards, Lio and Aibi puppets, rhymes, chants and games, bring life to the lessons. The many opportunities for partner work and sharing motivate children to participate and learn together.

Keywords: Phonetics project, phonemic awareness, communication, Didactic of the teaching of foreign languages

TIME ALLOCATION
This project will be developed during the whole year. We will work with this project in one session of each didactic unit.

PRESENTATION
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There are many components that make the experience enjoyable and effective for children. Colourful picture cards, Lio and Aibi puppets, rhymes, chants and games, bring life to the lessons. The many opportunities for partner work and sharing motivate children to participate and learn together.

What is more, the use of projects can turn the classrooms in general into a more natural learning environment that powerfully promotes learner intrinsic motivation, autonomy and independence. At the same time, they develop skills in communication, reasoning, creative thinking, cooperation and team work, among others. Another important aspect is that students get authentic English practice by integrating the main skills, listening, speaking and talking, reading and writing in a natural way.

At the core of the project, however, our main aim is to develop phonemic awareness. It is associated to the spoken word. Phonemic-awareness activities train their ears; children focus on the different sounds, or phonemes, that they hear in words. Much time and attention is devoted to hearing the separate sounds in words and blending sounds together to make words. Focusing on the sound facilitates the learning of letter-sound correspondence, the critical element for the effective use of sound blending when learning to read.

Phonemic-awareness activities centre around speaking and listening tasks, such as producing a particular sound, identifying a specific sound in a series of words, or blending sounds together to make words. Since the tasks are so particular, they often reduce the “risk” that many children associate with speaking in front of others. Children who feel shy when using English to communicate can take part in this project with confidence.
On the other hand, Phonics activities train their eyes and hands; children learn how to read and write the letters that represent the sounds they have learned. In short, phonemic awareness and phonics fulfil different roles in support of the same goal—to teach children to read, write and spell with accuracy and fluency.

The necessity of phonetics in the development of communicative competence is emphasized since they have to be aware of pronunciation and production patterns that take part in every communicative situation. Another important aspect is the importance of providing a good model of pronunciation for children. This is important because children are good at imitating and will pick up our model of pronunciation in those cases where there are differences between Spanish and English pronunciation. Pronunciation teaching and learning will form an integral part of language teaching and learning.

We take for certain that acquiring phonetic knowledge of the English language is too difficult for our students, but working in a coordinated way with the rest of English teachers, we will develop students’ phonetics knowledge all through the whole stage. So in this first course we are going to start with vowel sounds. Our main aim is to show students the different twelve English vowels, from the easiest ones to the most complex ones, and practice with them. Although it does not mean that, obviously, they will also practice consonants sounds; but vowels will be our main focus of attention.

The lessons presented on this project are appropriate for varied age groups, and they are flexible enough to be customised to the needs of a particular child or group.

Children are challenged in the classroom because they have difficulty using English as a means of communication. Because they are not fluent in the language, they have troubles expressing themselves and understanding others. However, our activities focus on another aspect of the English language—its form and structure. Studying the form and structure of the language does NOT require children to be fluent speakers. In fact, few young children, if any, will have any clear notion of the form and structure of English, despite the fact that they may be fluent, native speakers of the language. This means that ALL children in the class are learning a new skill when they learn about phonemic awareness, and therefore, no group has an advantage over another.

The lessons are presented as a series of varied, funny routines and games that are learned through teacher modelling and practice. There are also many visual aids (the teacher’s visual cues, phonics flashcards, flashcards with pictures and the two puppets) that help children understand the lessons.

We have chosen two puppets as the most attractive way on working with phonetics. Lio, from “soundland” and Aibi from “lettersland”.

Lio teaches children how to pronounce sounds in a funny and interactive way. Children learn that Lio speaks a “special language.” Lio produces the words slowly, so that each distinct phoneme is heard. Children listen to the separate sounds, and then produce or repeat them quickly together to figure out the word that Lio is saying.

Children are also taught to speak in Lio’s special language. They repeat, listen to a word, and then break it down to say each sound. Children work with partners to “guess” Lio’s words and practise Lio Talk, so that every child participates and learns together.

Children will look forward to Lio’s visits, which keep them motivated and interested in the lessons.

On the other hand, we have “Aibi”. She is from “lettersland” and she has got a special language too; she cannot communicate orally, only using the written language. Aibi has a magic box with 28 flashcards. Each one with a letter of the alphabet. (We will tell students that the box is magic because we can make up millions of words with just 28 letters!).

When Aibi enters in the play, both puppets interact together in the two most important means of communication. Lio speaks and Aibi writes.

This way, Children systematically learn to hear a sound, then read and write the letter that represents that sound. The activities are simple, yet great fun, and contain the necessary repetition for children to build and retain their knowledge.

Thanks to this project, students can use the foreign language taking into account new sounds they do not normally produce in their mother tongue. This way, they can realize of the importance of having a good intonation and pronunciation when talking in the foreign language. As it is one of the main conditions to understand and be understood in real communication situations.
OBJECTIVES

a. To listen and produce sounds in English.

b. To relate sounds and words (with visual cues)

c. to discriminate similar sounds

d. to get accustomed to English intonation and pronunciation patterns.

As I mentioned before, this project is connected with the general objectives the Ministry of Education states for Primary Education and to the contents of this first cycle.

In order to achieve these objectives, we need to make use of those contents that may help the project be successful, for example:

a. understanding and using simple vocabulary and expressions related to classroom language and routines.

b. Reading of simple words, previously known in oral interactions (with visual cues).

c. Copying and writing simple words, previously known in oral interactions (with visual cues).

d. Using elementary phonetics aspects, rhythm, stress and intonation for comprehension and oral production.

e. Use of the graphic-phonetic correspondence to write simple words and previously known in oral interactions.

As it occurs in every English lesson, oral procedures should be given priority to the written ones because they will lead our students to oral fluency and the so-called communicative competence. And this project is a motivating way of promoting the use of the foreign language in real situations. Playing with the language is one of the best ways of acquiring it in a funny and motivating way.

ACTIVITIES

To start with this project, we should create a special place in the classroom. If there is enough space, students can sit on the floor. This setting will allow students see the materials that will be used in the lesson. We will decorate it with big and colourful letters and pictures and we cannot forget setting a special place for our puppets to “live”.

- As an ice-breaker activity, we will play different games with flashcards with our students to revise previous knowledge as usual. But now, we will add some new flashcards; new words that contain the sound we want to practice. It’s time now, to go to “Soundland” and visit Lio. Showing the new flashcards, he will say the words in his special language; focusing this way, on particular sounds.

- While Lio is talking, exaggerating the new sounds so as to facilitate their recognition and production, students are repeating and learning to use this special language; and at the same time, they can see the pictures to understand the meaning of the words.

- Lio will also teach students how to produce particular sounds. For example, when dealing with the difference between the long and short a; He will tell students: “bite an apple and you say aaaaaaaa”. And students will practice the short a sound with the help of this funny action.

- Finally, students and Lio will look for words containing these sounds and play a guessing game. Not only Lio says a word and children try to guess it; but also the other way around.

- Then, we will ask students if they want to know how these words are written. And we will go now to “Lettersland”, where Aibi lives. Aibi talks with children using the written language and they know they have to focus their attention on letters and words to understand her.

- We will hand out the different flashcards practised during the lesson among children. We are going to make letter-sound and meaning correspondences. Lio and the children say a word. The child with its corresponding flashcard stands up a sticks it on the blackboard. And Aibi looks for the appropriate letters in her magic box and put them next to it.

- Now, they will practice with Aibi how to write the letters. They will do it in the air first, and then, draw colourful letters on sheets of paper.
When they finish, we will give them some cards with pictures of the words that have been practised in class with their written form also at the back. They will colour and cut them to play with their partners and continue practising in a funny and non-stressful way.

EVALUATION

Taking into account these “physical results” we can evaluate if our project has fulfilled the objectives expected at first. Direct observation along the whole year will also help us evaluate our students’ effort, participation in class, etc.

Moreover, we can plan some activities to be used occasionally that will serve us as evaluation activities. Such as the following:

• Today Lio doesn’t feel OK. He is ill and he forgets some sounds when speaks. Children have to guess which is the forgotten sound and help Lio finish the words properly.
• Sometimes, Aibi is tired because she has to look for the appropriate letters quickly to talk with them; and she needs help. She points at a student to stand up and look for some letters in the magic box to form a particular word.

ORDER OF PHONETIC CONCEPTS

These are the phonetic aspects our students will deal with during this course. Vowels will be our focus of attention in this course, although it does not mean that they cannot practice and work on consonant sounds. As they have some previous knowledge from the preceding year, we will start revising and reinforcing the simplest and easiest vowels. They are those whose pronunciation is, in some way, similar to Spanish.

As we go on the different didactic units, complexity will increase steadily and long vowels will appear.

Rhythm and intonation will also play an important role in this project, as they are necessary for students when communicating in the English language. We will provide our students with a variety of songs and chants that will make them practice with the language in a meaningful and funny way.

Within this project, we want students to take into account the importance of having a good pronunciation and intonation patterns when communication takes place; but fluency is also emphasized since they have to articulate the new English sounds easily.