

The Advantages of Having *Gapers* in Nowa Iwiczna School (especially considering teaching vocabulary)

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Introduction

Nowa Iwiczna school has been cooperating with The GAP Project for about six years now. All English teachers have been involved in the project and everyone (headmaster, teachers, students and parents) admits there are plenty of advantages of having it in our school.

The gapers not only have regular classes with most of our students, they also try to be involved in other forms of the school life. Some of them have been with the students on “green schools”, on the trips to the theatre and definitely everyone remembers Finn (from Australia) performing in front of the whole school during The English Song Festival.

However, we cannot say that working with gapers brings only pleasure and satisfaction. We have to be prepared that we never know what kind of person the new gaper is going to be, it happens that communication and understanding between both sides are quite difficult to be reached. Without any doubt there are a lot of cultural differences between Poland and Australia (most of our gapers come from the down under) so everyone involved in the project has to be very open-minded and from time to time just do not make any fuss about unimportant problems. The main idea of their being here is not to as hard as you can imagine, they should also have a lot of fun and make as much as possible from their time here.

We have to admit that our school is a very friendly and welcoming place. According to the gapers the ones who come to Nowa Iwiczna can call themselves lucky. There are plenty of other placements in Poland where there were very serious problems and misunderstandings between Australians and the school. We are also privileged to have wonderful families who cooperate with our school coordinator Wioletta Karaś and provide very good conditions for gapers, hosting them in their houses and showing them Polish way of living, traditions and culture. The teachers try to be really helpful as well, the Australians know that if there are any problems or something is bothering them, the easiest way to solve it is to ask us for help.

However, the most advantageous issue for our school is how well the gapers perform during the classes. Majority of the students, thanks to the Australians, have not got serious problems with understanding and communication in English. Of course we cannot say that all of them are fluent, but even the ones who have got difficulties in expressing themselves in English try to do their best to pick up the language, sometimes even by using body language.



Casey Armstrong with Va class, 28-10-2008

Teaching Vocabulary

Most of the teachers working with gapers focus on teaching vocabulary because we do realise they are not prepared to teach grammar (which is extremely difficult to be explained by the native speakers of the language). Vocabulary is a must for learning, although is often perceived as a tedious process. Broad knowledge of words is basic to communication. It seems to be a main factor when it comes to ability of using language. The more words learners know, the more they will be able to understand what they hear and read; and the better they will be able to express their needs, wishes or intentions when speaking or writing.

Basic areas of any language, like reading, writing, speaking or listening demand a wide range of words. Students at any levels need to be exposed not only to a variety of lexical items which they recognize, but also to words or phrases which are unknown and difficult to understand. During second language acquisition process students immediately discover that without knowledge of words they will be ignored and misunderstood in English – speaking environment. Most of them feel the need of enlarging the range of vocabulary, because words help them organise the whole learning process and relate strongly to making progress in second language acquisition.

It is crucial for the whole process to choose techniques which can attract children's attention. The goals of vocabulary teaching must be more than simply covering a certain number of words on a word list. Native speakers must use techniques that can help realise this global concept of what it means to know a lexical item. For that reason teaching process and techniques used during lesson cannot be monotonous and picked at random. Watching DVD, using pictures, objects, lyrics, gestures, games, and well-chosen authentic materials like for example interesting articles or piece of a famous book increase in popularity. Students do not associate them with vocabulary drill. Otherwise, they find them stimulating, amusing, and involving. Filling the gaps in a popular lyrics or reading a text taken from a magazine aimed at teenagers seems to be very useful in teaching vocabulary. What is more, learners have an opportunity to acquire new words in a free way.



Elyse O'Brian with Va class, 2008-10-20

Ways to Present New Vocabulary

When teacher has chosen what to teach, the next important steps are to consider what students need to know about the items, and how to teach them. Moras (web site 15.02.2007 r.) says that “the teaching of vocabulary above elementary levels was mostly incidental, limited to presenting new items as they appeared in reading or sometimes listening texts”. This was indirect and unplanned way of teaching vocabulary. Expansion of new words happened accidentally through the practice of other language skills. Nowadays the attitude to vocabulary teaching has changed, methodologists agree that it should be part of the syllabus, and taught in a well-planned and regular basis. The view that presentation of thematically linked words is the better way to teach vocabulary is shared by many teachers. McCarthy (1990: 91) claims the organization of the new words according to topics is very common in the published materials. That way of gaining the meaning of new words seems to be easy and quite knowledgeable. On the other hand, Thornbury (2002: 37) points out that too associated words may tend to interfere with each other and confuse the learners by making the task more

difficult. There is a risk that words grouped according to similarity of meaning may also include useless, sophisticated or irrelevant items. All in all, preparations for the introduction of new words must take place and there is no sense in denying that vocabulary can be organized into sets, subclasses and subcategories.

As it was mentioned above, vocabulary is acquired incidentally through indirect exposure to words and intentionally through explicit instruction. It is recommended to use a variety of direct and indirect methods during teaching process. Ur (1991: 63) enumerates several different ways of presenting new vocabulary, such as definitions, detailed descriptions, illustrations, demonstration, context, translation, synonyms, antonyms, associated ideas and collocations. Some of them are of frequent use, but teacher should mainly concentrate not on originality but effectiveness of teaching. Nunan (1995: 122) presents some exercises like cloze texts or gap exercise in which words are deleted from a text, words-in-context exercise, and context enrichment exercises. It is a sensible idea to teach words in a typical combination with other words. During the learning process students should not only understand the meaning of particular word, but have an opportunity to use whole expressions, idioms, phrases, collocations containing this word. Not simply because this is often easier way to remember, but mainly because they are also learning some very important information on how the word is used.

While choosing the way of presentation new vocabulary it is necessary to take into consideration the age of learners. Young learners will cope better with objects, games, cartoons, pictures, but older ones will be more interested in filling the gaps in popular lyrics, guessing the meaning from the context while reading article or many of them will prefer some indirect explanations. Acquiring new words demands from a student activity and involvement because that attitude accelerates the consolidation process. Words need to be remembered. Ur (2002: 68) strongly supports this view while saying that children learn well when they are active. Most students find that they memorize words better if they do something with them. The process of assimilating new vocabulary should consist of three stages: presentation, controlled practice and revision (Harmer 1991: 80). What is also advisable, those learners who are more autonomous need to be encouraged to take more participation in developing own vocabulary skills. The learner's personal abilities are of major importance when it comes to dealing with new vocabulary. Additionally, Thornbury (2002: 76) mentions one more factor like choice of sequence of presentation. A teacher has to decide whether present meaning first, than form or move from form to the meaning.

It is obvious that while presenting new vocabulary there must be a reasonable balance between new-words density, vocabulary advancement, the assimilation and practicing stages. What is also important, the ways of presenting new words should be inventive and rewarding in terms of effective teaching.



Elysse O'Brian, 2008-10-20

Using Authentic Materials: at Which Level?

Methodologists differ about what level is optimal for use of authentic materials. Some of them argue that real-life sources are too difficult for learners at elementary level. They are in favor of using them among intermediate or advanced students. Rivers (2003: 45) says that beginners would not be capable of the same kinds of interactions with native speakers and authentic materials as advanced students". This view might be attributed to the fact that at higher level, most students master a wide range of vocabulary in the target language and all of the structures. According to Jordan (web site 15.02.2007), in the earlier stages "non-authentic

materials can be used, but stresses that upon students' dealing with materials from their own subject area, authentic materials should be introduced”.

On the other hand, a great number of methodologists agree that genuine materials are appropriate for learners at any levels, because they help them involve in the 'real' language. They point out the major issue by saying that teachers are obliged to provide learners with pedagogical support in order to effective usage of authentic tools. According to the findings of the survey carried out by Chavez (web site 18.02.2007r.), learners enjoy dealing with authentic materials since they enable them to interact with the real language and its use. It proves that students do not regard them immediately as demanding and that level is not crucial when it comes to participating with authentic materials. Guariento & Moley (web site 16.02.2007r.) suggest that “authentic materials should be used in accordance with students' ability and add that suitable tasks can be given to learners in which total understanding is not important”. It seems to be undeniable fact that well-chosen authentic materials help teachers create a non-threatening atmosphere in a classroom and that genuine sources are mainly responsible for learners' interactions with every day life.

Methodologists still raise the issue whether teachers are not able to use authentic materials in lower-level classes apart from intermediate and advanced levels. The exploitation of authentic sources as a useful tool in second language teaching process is still worth considering. That is why we encourage native speakers to use as much genuine materials as possible. We do know it is without any doubt a very challenging task, however, authentic materials are of high educational and informative value, real – life sources keep students informed about what is happening in the world. It means that this type of materials has positive influence not only on language skills, but mainly on general development. Lessons conducted with the use of authentic materials bring visible benefits of knowing the other language and culture.

Bringing that kind of sources into the classroom has become pretty common recently. Usage of some genuine tools can make English "come alive" for students of all ages in interesting and fun ways. They are widely available, usually very attractive and informative. Not only teachers but also learners find them very motivating and inspiring. What is more, successful dealing with interesting materials should boost learners' confidence in real-life situations when they will have to face an English speaking environment. Many teachers discover that using supplementary sources creates more positive attitude towards learning if only they are useful and involving enough to learners.



Elysse O'Brian with IIIIdG class, 2008-10-20

Few words from our gapers – Casey Armstrong and Elysse O'Brian

Being apart of the gap program, now known as latitude is an experience not easily described by words. From saying goodbye to your family, saying hello to your new hosts family, meeting other gapers from Australia and New Zealand there are so many emotions and feelings involved. Two months in, and I am still amazed by the beautiful houses in the area, and how fasts the cars are and especially how good the pierogi tastes. Our experience as gapers varies from the experience the teachers get at Nowa Iwiczna . Teaching is only one part of the Gaper experience, although a big part it is. Being a Gaper is more than being able to teach children, being able handle the early starts and bringing kids out of their shells. Being a Gaper, you also have to deal with adjusting to a different way of life, balancing your school work, your home time and your socializing. Sometimes this is not always an easy thing, but being at home with your host family is just as important as seeing the sights in Warsaw with your new friends. Most Gapers see this experience as a way of travelling as well, and

although this is also a huge part, we also have a strong responsibility to be prepared for our classes, so learning to be organized and learning to balance your life is a huge skill that we will be proud to take home with us.

It is a huge privilege to both visit and stay in such a beautiful country so rich with culture and history. Although we are teaching students from year four through to third year gymnasium, the knowledge we receive from these classes is extraordinary. It certainly isn't always easy, but it is a learning experience for as gapers, both in teaching for the first time and in just living in a country so far away and different from Australia (our possibly New Zealand).

With help from both our host families and students I am sure as Gapers both our experiences will continue to be of a positive nature until we once again have to say goodbye to the new families we have made.

It is lovely to walk down a school hallway now and recognize so many faces and exchanged greetings with children we would have never had the chance to meet without the Gap program and the hospitality of both the school and the families, particularly those whom choose to host a 'Gaper'.

As gapers it gives us a new perspective of the school and has made us appreciate the amount of effort school teachers put into our education.

Even after reading what I have written, I still feel like I haven't given the gap program enough praise, it is a definitely an experience you cannot begin to understand until you have had the amazing chance to experience it yourself. There are many different reasons why Gapers become Gapers, but we all will leave feeling the same sense of accomplishment, the same sorrow in leaving, and the same joy at having the privilege to meet all the people we met along the way.

Take a chance, become apart of the Latitude program (formal known as gap) you wont regret.