

Language Accommodation in Physical Education

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Introduction

As a new health and physical education teacher in Arlington County, one of my goals this year was to motivate my students to exercise. My personal love of exercise and sports was what led me to teaching. I wanted to show the students that exercise can be fun and that anyone can participate at any level of physical activity. It had been my experience that students feel that if they are not the fastest, strongest, or best at the activity being presented then they will not even try the activity. This was the mind-set that I wanted to overcome. I wanted the students to see that the most important aspect of physical education was to participate and have fun. If the students were participating, then they were being active and exercising.

The second goal for the year is for the students to improve their scores on the standardized fitness tests. I wanted to show the students that fifteen minutes of daily exercise would benefit them. The standardized tests would give the students concrete evidence of performance through exercise. My goal was to show the students that exercise is not punishment, but a necessary activity as important as anything else in their daily routine is. The students who score in or above eighty-fifth percentile in three of the four categories tested qualify to go on a field trip to the swimming pools and batting cages at the end of the year. By showing improvement I felt the students would correlate their success with reaching a goal with enjoyment of exercise.

Review of Literature

I decided that a language accommodation was in order to establish a connection with students. If I could connect with the students, then I could motivate them to follow an exercise regimen. I read in the *Bilingual Research Journal* that, "the use of psychological tools such as spoken language and written language mediates all human learning" (Brock, 1998, p. 2). The article also stated that "studies of classroom discourse highlight students as members of communities, as incumbents of social roles, and seek to explain their use of language to achieve self-identification and conduct their activities." Both of these statements related to my goal: to change the students' mind-set about physical education and break down barriers with students, by forming a bond of trust.

In an article in *ESLMAG*, I read that

not all English learners are the same. It is certainly the case that different learner populations have distinct goals regarding the English they need. They may require it in varying degrees for oral or written communication, formal or information contexts" (Ebsworth, n.d., p. 2).

I found this article interesting regarding my plans of language accommodation in physical education because of the informal nature of the class and the use of language as a motivational tool. Another article in *ESLMAG* focused on the progress of English learners, stating that repetition is the best for learning, and to celebrate progress (Prager, n.d., p. 4). Both of these ideas would be incorporated into my project.

Project

To start the year, I designed a daily workout for the students. The workout took about fifteen minutes to perform, five days a week. The daily workout utilized a different major muscle group throughout its full range of motion and followed with a few minutes of stretching. Being a new teacher, I soon realized that the majority of students already had an opinion of exercise and how much physical exertion they were going to put out. After a few weeks of struggling through the exercises, the students were given the first rounds of fitness testing. I observed the effort of the students during the tests as well as the results in each category. The students were already more aware of the competition with other students than the goal of the test, which is to compete with one's self to do the best that one can on the test.

After the first round of fitness tests I decided that I needed to connect with the students in order to achieve better performance from them. A quick look at my class reflected the student body at Gunston. Thirteen students were Hispanic, seven African American, six whites, and three students of Asian decent. The entire student body of Gunston is forty percent Hispanic, twenty-seven percent African American, twenty-three percent white and eight percent Asian. Aside from the thirteen Spanish speaking students, six other students were enrolled in the immersion program which is housed at Gunston for a total of nineteen fluent Spanish speakers out of twenty-nine. I then decided that when the students do the exercise routine, they should count in Spanish. That one decision turned the exercise portion of the class around. The students who did not speak Spanish knew enough of the language to count out loud and quickly learned the numbers up to twenty. While teaching my class I always did the exercises with the students to model the exercise, but by counting in Spanish, the majority of the students began doing the exercises more vigorously, and more importantly, would keep count.

As my comfort level with the new format increased, so did the use of the Spanish language. I was careful to limit how much Spanish was spoken during the class because of my unfamiliarity with Spanish as well as the unfamiliarity of the non-Spanish speaking students in the class. I did not want the Spanish speakers to form a clique, which would alienate other students and me. I would ask the class the Spanish word for what activity we were doing, for instance while we were doing push-ups, I would ask for the Spanish word for up and the class would respond with "arriba" for up, and "abajo" for down. Occasionally I would ask the class for the same word over and over. By distracting the class they would focus on helping me while doing the exercise. A good example is by counting in Spanish: "uno, dos, tres, cuarto, cinco, what comes next?" Occasionally I would purposely

mess up the count to encourage the students to count louder: “uno, tres, cuarto”. The students kept up with the count, for if a repetition was missed, we started the exercise over. The students had taken the focus off their perceived misery of exercise and began doing the exercises and focusing on the use of Spanish during that time.

After the third week of doing exercises in Spanish, some of the students began greeting me in Spanish: “Buenos dias” or “Hola, Senor Wilson.” At this time I felt a connection had been made. As a class we began to use more Spanish words including, “la pelota” for ball, “rapido” for hurry up, “bueno” for good, “no bueno” for no good. At this time I was again careful to monitor the formation of cliques or for persons to become offended by the use or misuse of Spanish. I was pleased to observe that the students would help each other with pronunciations of words. The native Spanish speakers were delighted to teach the non-Spanish speakers as well as me. When I conducted class in English, the Spanish speakers would respond by speaking only English.

During the pre-testing for the National Physical Fitness Standards, a total of eighteen boys and eleven girls were tested in this class. The students were tested on abdominal strength, aerobic capacity, upper body strength, and flexibility. During the abdominal strength test, students are instructed to complete as many bent-knee curl-ups as possible. A total of twenty-one students completed the abdominal portion of the test in the wellness zone for their age giving the class a seventy two percent passing rate. In the aerobic capacity test, students must run a measured mile in the least possible time. Fifteen students completed the mile run in the wellness zone for their age giving the class a fifty-one percent pass rate. In the upper body strength test, the boys must complete as many pull-ups as possible while the girls must hang on the pull up bar with their chin over the bar as long as possible. Sixteen students completed the upper body test in the wellness zone for their age giving the class a fifty-percent pass rate. The flexibility test consists of a sit-and-reach test to measure lower body flexibility, measured in centimeters. On this test, the students performed very well with nineteen students in the wellness zone, for a class percentage of sixty-five percent in the wellness zone.

After eight weeks of the exercises with cues in Spanish, the test results showed dramatic increases. In the pre-testing, twelve of the eighteen boys scored in the wellness zone for abdominal strength while in the post test seventeen of eighteen scored in the wellness zone; an increase of twenty-eight percentage points. The largest gains were made in the aerobic capacity and flexibility tests. In the aerobic test, the scores increased from fifteen in the wellness zone to twenty-one, while in flexibility the scores increased from nineteen in the wellness zone to twenty-seven. The two tests combined represent the students’ least favorite activities.

Conclusion

I found the use of Spanish language cues to be a very effective tool. The technique allowed the students to take the focus off the activity the students dreaded doing and turned the activity into a productive and educational activity. This class of students also showed an increase in motivation towards the exercises as compared to my other classes in which the Spanish cues were not used. I would also point out that this technique might not work for every class. This group of students was unique that there was a mix of native Spanish speakers and immersion students. Not all classes would have the same composition. In addition, the improvement in scores that this particular class achieved was remarkable; however, most of my class improved their scores to some degree. The most remarkable aspect was the vigor with which the students went about their daily routines. Discipline was less of a problem and participation was dramatically higher than other classes. The accommodation of language allowed me to connect with the students and empower them to overcome an obstacle that was preconceived in their minds about exercise.

References

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