

ENGLISH ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Introduction

It was not easy when I first began content based teaching or teaching English across the curriculum. There were few teaching materials and it was obvious from the beginning that I would have to produce my own. There was also a need to make a choice of the most interesting topics from various subjects that I was then to integrate into my English lessons. I had to choose the way I was going to introduce a chosen topic, so that my pupils would feel comfortable and relaxed, and willing to re-learn information they were in fact already familiar with in Croatian, their mother tongue. Namely, all the chosen topics were first introduced to the pupils in Croatian during lessons with their class teacher. Working closely together, the class teacher and I helped each other a great deal, especially through the decision-making process.

The usual reasons for making a particular choice were:

- the usefulness of information,
- its frequency in everyday life,
- the possibility of using such information in a conversation with foreign visitors to our country,
- the possibility of expanding knowledge of the topic during the next few school years while working with a teacher who specialized in a certain subject.

I also needed to set the goals I wanted to achieve by teaching those chosen topics.

These were:

- developing listening skills;
- making my pupils want to use as much of their knowledge of English in their oral answers or explanations as they felt they could in their fourth year of learning this foreign language;
- developing skills of scanning and skimming while reading short English texts on a certain topic;
- asking them to make intelligent guesses while reading by comparing information in an English text with what they already knew on that topic in Croatian;
- developing their writing skills;
- by simple copying key concepts and new words, or sentences from the blackboard or OHP transparencies; or
- by writing down their own questions on a topic and answers to such questions or ones that I prepared;
- by writing short paragraphs or compositions about a chosen topic.

Besides these goals there was yet another very important one. I wanted to create an atmosphere in which my pupils would feel confident and uninhibited in their English. Essentially, where they felt competent enough to communicate new information in this foreign language and to explore the possibility of various learning strategies.

This last goal made me think about how I should treat mistakes. My objective has always been to encourage fluency, but also to develop accuracy without inhibiting my pupils. So I always try to distinguish between the occasions when it is necessary to offer correction and those in which mistakes are actually allowed. My priority is to allow the children to feel confident about their performance. In this way there is more room for peer-correction or even self-correction that I find very useful. It shows that the pupils listen carefully to each other or, by correcting their own mistakes, they employ their level of knowledge of English or even use their intuition! I always try to treat mistakes as opportunities to teach my pupils about something new or to remind them of what they already know – if not in English, then in Croatian. I never hesitate to say, “That’s a very interesting mistake!” or “I like your mistake”. Perhaps that is the reason why my pupils are never very embarrassed when they make them, and even if we laugh, nobody is upset, because mistakes are a normal part of the learning process. I myself learn a lot from my pupils’ mistakes, especially about their strategies of explaining something in English for the first time. So, mistakes can be fun when we decide to treat them with the best of our intentions, but without overdoing overdetailed correction.

During these four school years I have been using topics from various subjects like Mathematics, Basic Science, Basic Geography, Music and PE. Here I would like to present the stages of Introducing, Presenting and Revising two Basic Geography topics: Croatia – our homeland and Zagreb – the capital of Croatia.

Two topics

Croatia – my homeland

1) Introducing the topic

In my English language classroom I had the pupils’ Basic Geography textbook in Croatian and a map of Croatia showing neighbouring countries, too. They were the first clues of what I was about to teach. I said a few introductory words in English pointing to the map of Europe in the textbook and to the map of Croatia on the wall. The pupils were already familiar with these and understood what I was telling them although some of the words were new to them, e.g., “Croatia is s i t u a t e d in SE Europe.”

Then I asked them to tell me in English what they knew about our country. They either asked for a new word or stopped saying their sentence when they did not know

the word. I told them these words and wrote down only key ones on the blackboard. By the end this step, a considerable amount of information had been revised and a few key words and concepts had been recorded on the blackboard. For example, neighbouring countries, the Adriatic Sea, homeland, patriotism, flag, coat of arms, anthem, shape, borders, passport, situated, Middle European, Mediterranean, connections, ports, waterways, motorways, railway traffic, airports, crossroads, population, census, language, script, religion, currency, capital.

Then I asked them questions and by pointing to a key word helped my pupils with the answer. This time I also put a number by each entry; that helped classify the entries when the pupils were required to memorize the key words later.

2) Presenting the topic

For the next lesson I prepared an OHP transparency on which I wrote sentences in which I used the above mentioned key words.

First, the pupils read them silently and later asked me anything they could not remember or understand. Their main problem seemed to be correct pronunciation. Still, they did want to know whether they remembered it correctly or not.

Then they asked each other questions, so that the answers were those sentences they had read.

As a homework exercise for this lesson they drew a map of Croatia, neighbouring countries, and the Adriatic Sea.

During our next two classes, the pupils copied either key words or short sentences in their notebooks. After having reminded themselves of each of these by reading it aloud and practising it orally, they had a chance of writing everything down in order to be able to revise at home, too.

3) Revising the topic

There are many ways of revising a topic, but for the purpose of this article and the Project video-film, I chose three that my pupils liked the best.

It is also important to note that when it comes to revision, my role as a teacher is merely to observe and help when necessary. It gives me the pleasure of enjoying my pupils' knowledge. It is also an opportunity to evaluate and assess what they have learned, which is sometimes more difficult when it comes to oral rather than written checking of the level of their knowledge.

It is worth noting that the pupils are used to various classroom procedures, and can work independently on their own without my involvement, except for the explanation of each activity at the very beginning.

The three activities were all done as group work during which the pupils took active part in practising all four language skills while revising what they knew about their homeland.

In the first activity called, *Find your pair*, the pupils were divided into two groups. Each group had a set of eight cards, one with questions on Croatia and the other with the answers to these questions. Since each of the pupils had one of the cards only, which might be either a question or an answer, she/he had to find her/his pair. Subsequently, they sat together with their pair partner and read the cards aloud. In this way they checked each other and revised at the same time.

The second activity was *Give the right explanation*. This time there were four groups of 4. Three groups had a minute to prepare oral explanations of the words given on three sets of cards. Group 4 then decided whether the given explanations were correct and complete, and they also gave 1 point for every explanation they liked.

Make your own questions was the third activity and it gave the pupils the opportunity to write, too. They worked in two groups of 6 and one group of 4. Groups 1 and 2 had a minute to write down two questions on Croatia on the OHP transparencies. Since they had to answer each other's questions orally, Group 3 decided whether the answers were correct.

Zagreb – the capital of Croatia

1) Introducing the topic

I asked the pupils to bring picture postcards of Zagreb, the street directory, books on Zagreb and souvenirs of our city to school. I also advised them to go to the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) and ask for leaflets and brochures about our capital – but printed in English.

With all of these in the classroom we started with the street directory of Zagreb and first found the street where our school is.

2) Presenting the topic

We looked at the postcards and decided which of the sights were near the school and which were further from it. The pupils also attempted to translate some sight names into English. They checked their guesses in the brochures in English that they got at the TIC. (I am sure that one day when they travel abroad, they will know how to read and use leaflets and brochures for tourists and will be able to find their way wherever they are and learn about other people while enjoying their stay in a foreign country.)

The next step was repeating what they knew about the importance of the city today. Then we went into the past, the city's beginnings 900 years ago, and its development through the centuries.

It was fascinating how much the pupils could say in English! They were very motivated to say as much as possible to an imaginary group of foreign tourists visiting Zagreb.

I prepared the OHP transparencies with the information that seemed very important to my pupils in the last exercise. They copied them in their notebooks and read them out aloud afterwards.

3) Revising the topic

The pupils were asked to work in groups of 4 while choosing two key words, or concepts, or years, or facts that they wanted to put on a separate sheet of paper. After the groups exchanged the sheets, their next task was to write down two questions, one for each of the above. Then they exchanged the sheets once again and gave oral answers to the questions.

The next step was to write down those pieces of information that they thought should be on the tourist information board in our classroom. I prepared small sheets in various colours and my pupils decided what was important and who was going to write each piece of information. The result was a board full of maps and postcards of the sights of Zagreb accompanied by those multicoloured sheets displaying important information for tourists.

My role at this stage was passive. I only helped my pupils to arrange everything on the board, so that they could concentrate on the rest of the task.

The last step was a dramatization: *The sightseeing*. One pupil volunteered to be a guide to a group of English speaking tourists who asked a lot of questions. That was great fun!

Conclusion

The approach of introducing topics from other subjects into language lessons has some advantages worth mentioning.

- It gives learners a unique opportunity to experience the real use of English in the foreign language classroom.
- It is interesting for both learners and teachers to use existing skills and knowledge while encountering familiar topics in English.
- It facilitates the process of learning English, especially to expand vocabulary.
- It helps indirect learning by making pupils concentrate on the task and not only the language. This means it is close to *acquiring* English through exposure and use.
- Different ways that are employed in other subjects to present their topics can be adopted and make your English lesson not only useful but very interesting, too.

- It gives the learners a holistic view of knowledge.
- It will be easier for those pupils who would like to continue their education in secondary schools with bilingual programmes to enrol in such schools.

It is a time-consuming process to prepare English lessons with topics integrated from other subjects. Some teachers are quite sceptical about it all. However, it is worth the effort and it can be fun!

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