


2007

Exploring Content-Based Language Arts Instruction In The ESOL Classroom Through A Holistic Approach

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EXPLORING CONTENT-BASED LANGUAGE ARTS INSTRUCTION
IN THE ESOL CLASSROOM THROUGH A HOLISTIC APPROACH

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August 2007
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This project by María Angeles Cicatello is accepted in its present form.

Date: _____

Project Advisor: _____

Project Reader: _____

To my husband Robert for his support and encouragement.

To my project advisor Pat Moran for his guidance and assistance.

ABSTRACT

The activities contained in this project derive from personal efforts to implement content-based instruction with a language arts thematic unit in the ESOL classroom through a holistic approach.

Public school ESOL students and teachers alike are more than ever experiencing a tremendous pressure to accelerate English language instruction and learning in order to satisfy local/state curriculum tests, and national standards. This materials-development project correlates with the local Board of Education's Academic Knowledge and Skills Curriculum guidelines without restricting the teacher's freedom to prioritize what is most important and relevant to students' lives, respecting their self as learners, and demonstrating their efforts to learn the new language while attaining academic achievement.

The intention of this holistic approach is to offer the students the opportunity to find their desire to learn within themselves, when the content presented to them links to their prior knowledge or experiences and where the teacher, acting as a facilitator, allows the students to think, express their feelings, and understand their actions.

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Descriptors

Holistic Approach

Integrated Curriculum

Active Learning

Motivation

Instructional Materials

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | |
|------------|---------------------------------------|---------|
| Chapter I | INTRODUCTION |1 |
| | Rationale |2 |
| | Audience |3 |
| | Purpose |3 |
| | Content and Organization of the Paper |4 |
| | Teaching Context |4 |
| | Background |5 |
| Chapter II | OVERVIEW OF MATERIALS |8 |
| | Educational Philosophy |8 |
| | The Four Contexts of Subject Matter |8 |
| | An Integrated Curriculum |11 |
| | A Holistic Approach |12 |
| | Content |15 |
| | Thematic Unit: Life on a Farm |16 |
| | Goals and Objectives |17 |
| | Activities |18 |
| | Teaching Suggestions |18 |
| | Materials |22 |

| | | |
|--|-------|----|
| Field-Testing | | 23 |
| Chapter III ACTIVITIES | | 27 |
| The Subjective Context | | 28 |
| The Time Context and Ecosystem Context | | 50 |
| The Symbolic Context | | 54 |
| Chapter IV CONCLUSION | | 58 |
| REFERENCES | | 62 |

Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless.

Václav Havel

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in the U.S. public school is a significant challenge, especially in light of performance standards instituted by federal educational policies, as well as state and local mandates. For example, the federally mandated No Child Left Behind (NCLB) states that:

Limited English Proficient students have one year to pass state curriculum tests or face serious sanctions that include penalties for the school, teachers, and students (Bowling, Karen E. and Donna Robertson 2005, Introduction 3).

In my case, the challenge is more complex: how can I address my students' intellectual and non-intellectual needs and still support their individual learning processes? More specifically, how can I additionally implement a holistic learning approach in the content-based curriculum mandated by the school district?

This paper is my search for an answer to this challenge. It consists of a series of activities that address both content mandates and students' holistic development. These lessons were based on principles of holistic curricula that I adapted to a thematic unit on a farm which is part of the curriculum at my school. They show my successful attempts to make this content personally meaningful to first-grade students in the school.

This paper is also about my students' thoughts, my thoughts and teaching practices. The lessons show the kind of relationships I have developed with my students. These relationships are based on the bond needed to nurture a relationship between my students and me, which I believe involves me and my personality. As Palmer states, "We teach who we are" (Palmer 1998, 1). This paper, therefore, is about me as a person and teacher as much as it is about the lessons.

Rationale

I developed these materials to address the demands put upon my school and upon my ESOL students and also to maintain my belief in holistic education in the face of these demands. I explored this topic and wrote these activities because I have found that the mandated curriculum puts too much emphasis on the content areas, at the expense of personal connections and relevance to students. The need for this personal connection is particularly important for ESOL students, who very often come to public school classrooms without the

cultural understanding and background knowledge that they need to engage in the material. Therefore, I decided to provide my students with a material that in my view was appropriate in order to facilitate these connections and spark my students' desire to learn more.

I am committed to implementing a holistic approach in a public institution where textbooks, space, and teaching approaches totally deviate from a holistic education, in a situation where the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors of the students are constantly tested or assessed. In such environment, it is important for students to find their own meanings in what they think and do, thus becoming free and competent individuals.

Audience

I am writing this paper for ESOL teachers or mainstream teachers in either a private or a public institution who are interested in applying holistic principles and practices to a content-based curriculum. I am also writing for those teachers who are presently questioning their position in the classroom and are seeking to actualize their self-development as a person and as an educator.

Purpose

My intention in this paper is to provide information about holistic curriculum principles and practices and to show how they can be put into a thematic unit. I also want to affirm the importance of honoring students' minds and feelings and

to respect their developmental stages and readiness to learn. On this topic, Scott H. Forbes says it well:

[T]eachers who ignore the child's stage of development and focus instead on the stage they want the child to get to, end up cajoling and coercing what should come about naturally and, in the process, spoiling the very developments they wish to bring about (100).

Content and Organization of the Paper

In the rest of this chapter, I describe the situation at my school, the students, and my need for a holistic approach to the curriculum. In the second chapter, An Overview of Materials, I describe the activities in general, including the holistic principles and process that I followed in developing and testing the activities. Chapter III contains a detailed description of the activities. The paper ends with Chapter IV, the Conclusion, a summary of what I learned from this project.

Teaching Context

I teach in a public Title I school in a suburban area of metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. The community consists of middle class sub-division housing and nineteen low-income apartment complexes. The school is in the largest school system in Georgia and the largest employer in the county.

As of August of 2006, the school has a population of 1,350 students attending kindergarten through fifth grade. The following is a breakdown of the school population by ethnic groups: fifty-nine percent Hispanic, twenty-three percent

African-American, eleven percent Asian, five percent mixed, and two percent Caucasian. Seventy-two percent of the students do not have English as their native language and forty-eight percent of the student population is served in the ESOL program. Seventy-one countries are represented in the student body and twenty-six languages are spoken in the homes of these students. One hundred-fifty students are new immigrant to the United States in the 2006-07 school year. The students' eligibility for free or reduced lunch increased from sixty-two percent to eighty-eight percent over the last three years. Finally, there is a fifty percent mobility rate: only fifteen percent of current fifth-grade students attended this school in first grade.

Background

In the Fall of 2002, based on criteria of the No Child Left Behind Act, our school was in a hopeless situation because it was classified as a failing school for not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) according to the results of the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) in Reading, English, Language Arts, and Mathematics. As a result, in January of 2003, the entire school was required to attend the Learning-Focused Strategies training (Thompson 1983) in order to take actions to meet the required standards. These actions included a number of initiatives, many of which involved curriculum revision by the teachers, along with other tasks. Among the most significant changes that were instituted include: the creation of instructional thematic units, display of graphic organizers and content maps with highlighted key questions as their objectives and skills to be

learned, which were present in each and every classroom, identification of a variety of verbal and visual representations of content-related vocabulary, implementation of teaching strategies for reading, writing, collaborative learning, open-ended questioning to embed the content in real world situations that were relevant to the students, comparison and contrast, use of technology, and others. Teachers used benchmarks for assessment from school guidelines, and communicated progress to students and parents. Teachers met regularly, worked collaboratively, and met with specialists.

The School Administrators often made walk-throughs to ensure evidence of these practices. At the same time, the school was often showcased to other schools in the county as well as to out-of-state school officials.

All in all, the school and the teachers carried out a major revision and refocusing of content, activities and assessments with the hope to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and be removed from the list of failing schools the following year.

Even with these important changes, however, my ESOL students still need extra attention. The revised curriculum does not offer sufficient opportunities for students to develop to their fullest potential, neither are they afforded the opportunities to engage in meaningful ways in learning things that make sense in their world.

Havel reminds us of the importance of hope, and that hope needs to make sense. I have taken his words to heart and my effort at a holistic curriculum in light of the situation in my school is very much an attempt to help me and my students to create a meaningful learning experience.

In the next chapter, I explain holistic principles and how I devised the activities.

CHAPTER II: OVERVIEW OF MATERIALS

This chapter addresses the design and implementation of the activities in the thematic unit “On a Farm”, a combination of mathematics and social studies topics. It begins with a description of the educational philosophy that informs the lessons. It then goes on to describe the overall goals and objectives, the nature of the learning activities, materials used, and suggestions for teachers. The chapter ends with a summary of the field-testing.

Educational Philosophy

The educational philosophy underlying the design and implementation of the thematic unit is based on three related viewpoints: Clark’s four contexts of subject matter (1997), the notion of an integrated curriculum, and holistic teaching practices.

The Four Contexts of Subject Matter

Clark (1997) proposes that content or subject matter can be categorized in four different dimensions, or “contexts.” These contexts include: the subjective context, the time context, the ecosystem context, and the symbolic context.

In the subjective context, the emphasis is on students' personal thoughts, feelings, and relationship to the topic. In the case of the thematic unit, I considered how much my students relate to the unit of the farm and the perception they have of it. This context was explored in activities where students demonstrate an awareness of the farm, relate life on a farm to their personal experiences, and express their opinions about this topic.

In the time context, the emphasis is on students' placing the topic in different time periods. For the thematic unit, I considered my students' "what if's" and their innovative and imaginative thinking while trying to find better ways of doing things. In this context, students imagined the idea of Johnny Appleseed as an environmentalist. They also imagined themselves as promoters of positive changes in life.

In the ecosystem context, the emphasis is on students' placing the topic in a wider frame of reference, specifically to consider the topic in relation to other aspects of life in the world. In the case of the thematic unit, I created activities to help my students perceive the fragile existence of the world, so they can learn their relationship to the world and the interdependent effects of their actions. In other words, it is important that students relate the topic to a global world, in a realistic manner, the way the world really is.

Finally, in the symbolic context, the emphasis is on students' applying information from the topic in different ways, going beyond what is presented in the topic. I considered what my students wanted to know by manipulating, comparing, and contrasting information. I had students take the information presented in the unit and use this information in manipulations, comparisons, and contrasts. Specifically, I had students work on comparing and contrasting facts by creating a graph bar on their favorite apple. I also had them take information from the reading of *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type* and apply it by comparing and contrasting situations from the story, identifying which were facts and which were fantasy.

These four contexts provided the students with multiple points of engagement in the topic of Life on a Farm, and as a result, deepened their personal connections to the material and expanded their understanding by linking the material to a wider context.

AN INTEGRATED CURRICULUM

The second philosophical viewpoint that I used in designing and implementing the thematic unit has to do with the concept of an integrated curriculum. Simply put, an integrated curriculum presents the topic as interconnected with other topics, themes, and different academic subjects and provides opportunities for students to make a personal connection to the content. An important feature of an integrated curriculum is the presentation of the “big picture” (Clark, 1997) that is to say, the broader context in which the topic of the thematic unit is situated. Through inclusion of related topics within the big picture, the curriculum can follow a particular organization.

According to Clark (1997), there are seven basic components in an integrated curriculum:

1. Everything in the curriculum has to be interconnected.
2. Students are allowed to make connections in order for them to experience meaning.
3. An integrated curriculum has to establish clear goals to satisfy the students' real-life needs.
4. The integrated curriculum has to have a clear context, “frame of reference” or, as I will show, a “map”, in order to be meaningful.
5. The integrated curriculum gives priority to students' real questions that express their interests and let students seek their own answers.
6. Concepts in an integrated curriculum will be revisited as needed in ‘spiral curriculums’.
7. The integrated curriculum is explored by a “community of learners.”

I included all seven of these components in the design of the lessons and in the learning activities. In sum, an integrated curriculum places emphasis on context, questions, concepts, imagination, learning processes, and quality of instruction (Clark 1997, 73). It considers the study of the big picture, which I have found to be critically important. As Clark states:

One learns more about a puzzle by spending five minutes studying the picture than by spending hours on sorting and fitting together the pieces (Clark 1997, 33).

Nonetheless, in my experience it was difficult to create a student-centered, integrated curriculum when there were school guidelines to follow. In such a situation, it was important for me to respect any student initiative in order to facilitate my students' learning in a self-directed way, alone or with others. I agree with Stoddard's statement: "Imposed learning is shallow and temporary, while learning gained from personal inquiry is deep and enduring" (Stoddard 2004, 69).

A HOLISTIC APPROACH

The third principle is the role of a holistic approach, the essence of which involves the whole person of the student in their education.

When I think of holistic school, I think of Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner and their schools. Very few people outside these schools, including myself, know what holistic education is about (Forbes 2003, 11).

Examining six founding authors of holistic education: Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Jung, Maslow, and Rogers, I conclude that holistic schools free students to discover within themselves their talents, engage them in their learning and help them discover and aspire for the best they are capable of achieving.

Authors that have written about holistic education talk about two types of knowledge. First is experiential knowledge derived from experience. Second is competence knowledge derived from the natural stages and processes needed to succeed in life.

To acquire competence knowledge, it is important to concentrate on two teaching strategies. First, engage students in themes, topics, or situation, which ask them to negotiate and find individual meaning. Holistic educators present learning opportunities for students to learn something specific and then allow the students to continue the learning relying on their own curiosity and not on something that has been prescribed for them to learn. For example, even while focusing on the questions of the thematic unit, I can still validate and include the questions my students would like to explore cooperatively or individually. I have found that this allows my students to develop as independent learners.

To this end, acting as a facilitator, I do not simply convey my knowledge, but I also allow my students to think and discover knowledge on their own. I engage them in activities that spark questions, and encourage a curiosity to learn. As the

facilitator, I too think and learn with my students, while all of us navigate through the lesson with the goal of having meaningful experiences.

Second, encourage social interactions among students as a means to acquire knowledge informally. This combines cooperative learning, community building, and dialogue, which results in students' gaining competence knowledge. The use of dialogue in my classroom as a cooperative learning strategy is intended to build classroom community. To facilitate such social interaction, my approach is to avoid lectures. Instead, I create opportunities for students to interact and work on their own. I ascribe to the precepts of Lao-tzu, Tao Te Ching, who said:

The Master doesn't talk, the master acts.
When her work is done,
The people say, "Amazing:
We did it, all by ourselves!"

Third, establish a bond between the students and the teacher in order for the students to feel safe to discover the way they learn. The students need to know that the teacher fully supports their individual efforts and their personal connections to the content. This means actively showing sincere interest in their work, verbally recognizing their efforts, offering encouragement, and other strategies that create a positive atmosphere. This kind of support allows students to make individual and group choices.

In summary, a holistic approach enhances the thematic unit by allowing students to be themselves, by engaging all students in conversations, and by recognizing and valuing each student's thoughts and opinions.

These three educational principles form the basis by which I designed and taught the lessons.

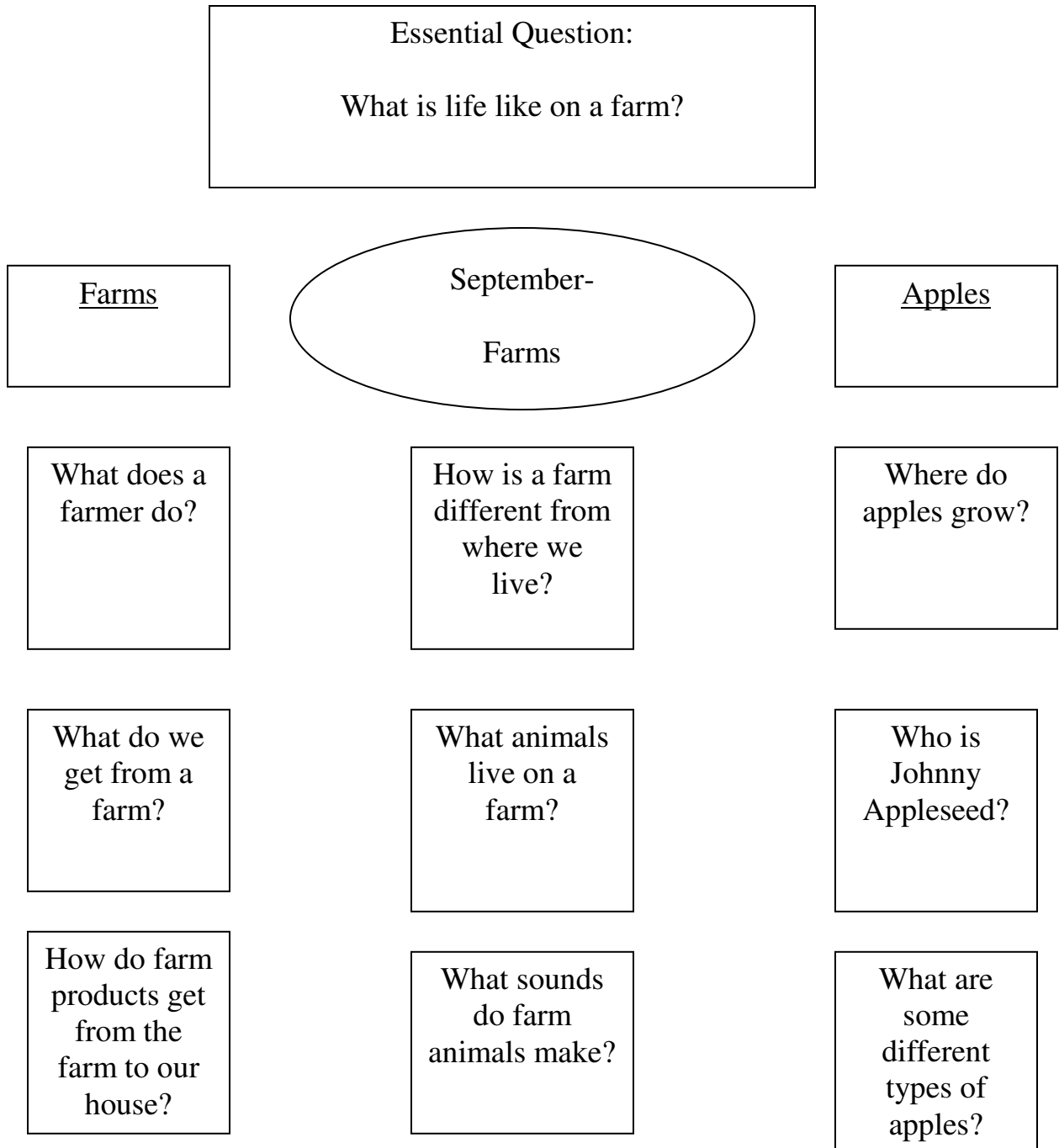
CONTENT

The thematic unit "On a Farm" is a language arts unit that integrates math and social studies. The social studies aspect of the unit examines the economic importance of agriculture with emphasis of the services and products the farmer provides. Students will also explore farm animals and their young. The math integration in the unit centers on numbers and measurement using a graph bar.

The content map of the unit in figure 1 shows the thematic schema, the content topics. It shows how one topic can be connected to another. This content map is organized in a way to allow students to construct their own meaning by connecting things with one another.

THEMATIC UNIT: LIFE ON A FARM

Figure 1. Content Map/Objectives



GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

There is a number of learning goals and specific objectives for the thematic unit.

The main goal is to help students to be academically competent in the mainstream classroom respecting the developmental stages of their language acquisition.

The second goal of the thematic unit as instruction is to facilitate access to the students' background knowledge through a contextual frame: when students recall and interpret information relevant in a particular situation according to their personal connections, language and content become comprehensible.

The third goal of the thematic unit is to encourage and facilitate a dialogue that values all students. The use of dialogue as a cooperative learning strategy is intended to naturally experiment with the language and to build classroom community.

The objectives of the thematic unit in figure 1 were created in the form of questions. The questions help the teacher organize the focus of the lessons. They also help the teacher develop the lessons according to Clark's four contexts of an integrated curriculum across the areas. In addition, the questions help the teacher focus on ways to gather evidence of the students' learning. Finally, the questions were simple to use and accessible to students, since they were posted in the classroom.

ACTIVITIES

In general, the activities described in the unit lessons entail the use of realia, manipulatives, visuals, and graphic organizers. They promote interactions, link words with ideas, and decrease the cognitive load of less proficient students.

All the activities entail listening, speaking, reading, and writing to accelerate the language acquisition process.

In addition, the use of authentic literature in the activities makes content more accessible. Students can either interpret stories through the pictures or read the print. When students are able to read and understand the print, they can retell the story in their own words.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

In the description of the lessons, specific suggestions are provided. In this section, I describe general teaching suggestions that can be applied to all the lessons.

To begin, all the activities used in the thematic unit are initiated by open discussion. By open discussion, I mean giving the opportunity to the students to recall what comes to mind when they hear the topic, express opinions, and ask questions. This strategy allows students to explore and improve the language while studying grade-level content.

Students enjoyed the exchange of ideas and were eager to participate. At this age, they do not seem to notice when they interrupt somebody else's conversation. This behavior has been an issue since the beginning of the school year and students still need constant redirection.

When teaching intermediate or advance students, it is important to present open-ended questions to encourage elaboration and further discussion of the theme being studied. Lower level ability groups, however need questions that require simple answers, such as yes, or no answers.

Second, I recommend including lots of language input throughout the lesson. Saturating students with language through books, songs, and poems on charts offers them the opportunity to hear and internalize language structures. This method makes it is easier for students to recognize these language structures in reading and to implement them in their writing. In fact, I discovered that the students enjoyed perusing the books and singing songs. However, the introduction of poems was a harder task for them to grasp. Still, despite such difficulties, the inclusion of additional language produces results.

Third, in all the activities, I model and restate the target language items. This offers students the opportunity to hear correct language usage and promote further elaboration of statements. Instructions also need to be concise. I have observed that English language learners get lost easily when too many

statements are given at once. Restatements help them focus on the language that is essential.

Fourth, it is important that students see the results of their work. Before they even begin a unit, showing students a finished product offers them concrete examples of specific instructions. I discovered that most students preferred to follow a model, while only a few chose to follow their own process and outlook. When I observed this, it reinforced my decision to model most activities.

Fifth, previewing and reviewing key vocabulary in activities related to the thematic unit is necessary to scaffold the content. I learned that it was easier for students to grasp concepts when brainstorming activities took place.

Sixth, I recommend including short mini-lessons that highlight key points of the lesson or give a direct instruction on a specific grammar structure. Mini-lessons on particular skills were implemented and time was provided for practice. This reinforces students' long-term memory. The mini-lessons are usually short; no more than ten to fifteen minutes per lesson. Afterwards, students are given between five to fifteen minutes to process the information and to maintain their attention. Students can process the information by drawing, writing in their journals, translating the information for themselves into their own language, reviewing it by re-teaching it to a partner or by summarizing it.

Additional suggestions include the following:

- Provide journals to promote independent practice: students respond in writing practicing vocabulary and language patterns. Later on, students can share their individual writing efforts with the group.
- Have students work in groups to establish relationships and promote shared understanding among students.
- Be flexible when using writing and drawing. Some students illustrate their writing first, while others initiate their writing through illustrations.

Finally, after the conclusion of all the activities, I recommend using a very simple feedback form for discussion as a group. Make a summary of all the activities performed in the two and a half week period. Have students indicate a plus (+) or minus (-) next to the activities they liked most and the ones they liked least.

| | |
|---|---|
| + | Listening to books read by me, sharing books, drawing, playing with magnetic manipulatives, group activities, activities in pairs |
| - | Writing in their journals, reading at home |

MATERIALS

In the development of the activities, a number of materials were used:

I used books related to the unit, such as books about farm life, farm animals, vegetables, farm buildings and equipment. Students used them regularly as reference either to find pictures they were interested in describing or drawing, or to find words they need to use in their writing.

I also used classic literature books related to the unit such as *Hattie and the Fox* by Mem Fox and *The Little Red Hen* by Bryon Barton. These books make the content more accessible and memorable, and children are always mesmerized by beautiful illustrations. I find that books with basic print are particularly effective, because students can read along with the teacher. I also recommend books with elaborate writing, such as *Who Took the Farmer's Hat?* .and *Nosy Neighbors: a Book about Animal Sounds*. These kinds of books can help them expand their vocabulary.

A world map or globe is also very helpful. Most of the time, stories refer to places, which students can look for on the map or globe.

Teacher-made visuals are very useful. In particular, graphic organizers scaffold the content for students. They also offer visual support for new words and ideas. I suggest using chart paper to laminate graphic organizers.

I make extensive use of manipulatives and realia such as pictures, plastic animals, and real fruits and vegetables. They provide hands-on experience of the content that students are learning.

I have found journals to be effective. By journals, I mean notebooks where students draw and respond in writing to topics discussed in class. They offer students opportunities for independent practice. Students can also use them with a partner.

Dry erase boards and markers are students' favorites. They love to write on the board by themselves or with the help of their peers.

Depending on the activities, students may use other school supplies as needed (pencils, crayons, colored pencils, glue and scissors).

FIELD-TESTING

I tried out these lessons with students, and based on their reactions and performance, I made modifications in the lessons.

In general, students responded with enjoyment; eagerly participating in most activities, displaying self-confidence by feeling free to take risks, demonstrating understanding of the language, and learning by doing.

- Activities that were particularly effective were:

- Sharing personal experience, as in activity one where students expressed whether they had lived on a farm or visited one, gave them the chance to bring up their own experiences and build background knowledge.
- Working in small mixed-level groups with manipulatives required peer interaction. Students had the opportunity to discover and develop the language playfully.
- Using different types of apples in activity six, instead of using pictures, gave students the opportunity to feel and describe them with all their senses.
- When students chose a topic they cared about, visualized it and talked about it as in the second activity, made it easier for them to understand their thoughts and put them in writing.
- Asking students to visualize life on a farm engaged them and helped them think and make connections.
- Asking questions and validating students' questions, engaged them and clarified misunderstandings.

- Modeling activities for students showed them the teacher's thinking and allowed them to scaffold the process of getting things accomplished.
- Sharing activities or participating in small or a big group of mixed abilities, involved students, activated their critical thinking, and allowed them to construct meaning. Students learned from one another.
- Conferencing with students allowed them to share their thoughts with the teacher and clarified their misunderstandings.
- Reading books that I love out loud, showing enthusiasm about what is being read, and sharing striking illustrations, motivated students to read the same book on their own, engaged their imagination, and enhanced their understanding.
- Having clear, specific and flexible instructional goals, made it easy for me to match books without losing sight of the students' interests.
- Comparing and contrasting information by finding differences and similarities as in activity seven, allowed students to demonstrate the ability of applying their knowledge.

- Brainstorming and visualizing life on a farm triggered direct instruction of certain words.
- Classifying vocabulary as in activity one, helped students identify the rule to follow for the categorization.

- Difficulties included:

- Sometimes students were reluctant to write. In that case, we discussed the activity first, and then the teacher modeled by writing each student's sentence on chart paper. Finally, students transitioned into individual writing where the teacher also demonstrated writing by herself.
- Some students were reluctant to read out loud the sentences about the farm that were written as a group on chart paper. As a result, the teacher first asked each group to read the sentences among themselves, before doing it individually.

This chapter described an overview of materials and a philosophical approach to holistic teaching. In the next chapter, I give a detailed description of each activity with its goals, learning outcomes, language content, materials used, procedures, comments, and teaching suggestions.

CHAPTER III: ACTIVITIES

The following learning activities are designed according to Clark's four contexts, an integrated curriculum, and holistic principles to enhance my at risk students' vocabulary development in the thematic unit. These activities provide extensive practice in developing language arts skills through listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Students first share verbally what they know and have experienced about farms and life on a farm. They express their visualization of life on a farm with their drawings and writings. Additionally, they enhance their learning by reading classic literature books on the topic.

1. The Subjective Context

Activity 1. Life on a Farm

Goals

- to understand and develop an appreciation of life on a farm
- to develop self-awareness and self-esteem.

Learning Outcomes

- to relate life on a farm to personal experience
- to visualize life on a farm
- to describe life on a farm and express opinions
- to show motivation and interest
- to list basic vocabulary terms and expressions of the farm

Overview

Students describe what they know and have experienced about farms and life on a farm in two brainstorming exercises. These activities illustrate students' prior knowledge and engage their motivation for the topic.

Language Content

- vocabulary of the farm and farm life

Materials

- dry erase board
- dry erase markers

Procedure

A. Personal Experiences

1. Ask the class this question:

Have you ever lived on a farm or visited one?

2. Collect students' answers. As each student answers, repeat or paraphrase their words so that all students can hear. If new vocabulary arises, take a moment to explain or elicit the meanings of new words or expressions.

3. Option: write down key words that portray farms or farm life.

4. End this exercise with a closure statement that expresses the value and importance of students' personal knowledge and experiences. It is important to consider valuing what each student can contribute at each moment, allowing students to ask their own questions in order to facilitate their development. Students need to feel accepted, supported and safe in order to grow with a positive self-image. After all, "It is this kind of valuing that empowers a teacher to provide the unusual support a person needs to find, bring out, and develop a unique set of latent gifts, talents and abilities." (Stoddard 2004, 50).

B. *Brainstorming*

1. Explain to the class that you are going to collect all that they know about farms and farm life using their senses. Students will sort ideas and will come up with different categories thus facilitating the opportunity for them to share and expand their vocabulary.

2. Ask these questions in sequence:

What do we see on a farm?

What do we hear on a farm?

What can we taste on a farm?

What can we touch on a farm?

For each question, write down students' answers. If necessary, explain new words or concepts. Organize the white board into sections for each question, or use another system for categorization, such as the following inspired by the Learning-Focused Strategies (Thompson & Thomason 2003: activating strategies, 17)

| Farm | Farm Animals | Farm Products |
|-------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| farmer | cow | vegetables |
| barn | pig | fruits |
| stables | chicken | producers |
| | horse | consumers |
| | donkey | products |
| | rooster | crops |
| | sheep | flowers |
| | dog | pies |

Variation: Students can write their ideas on post-it-notes and place them under the appropriate category.

3. When the lists are complete, ask students to study the words on the white board, and invite them to make any observations. Ask this question:

What do you notice about the lists?

4. End the activity with a statement that expresses the recognition of how much knowledge students already have about this topic allowing students to discover the desire to learn more within themselves.

Comments

- These exercises activate student thinking and preview or review key vocabulary that has already been introduced to the students.

- Inevitably, some students will know more than others, and it is important to try to get all students to offer something, even it is a guess on their part. It is important to engage students in order for them to negotiate and find individual meaning that will help them construct their own ideas. These ideas will ultimately be communicated to others.

- Encouraging social interactions among the students will develop empathy for others, which will help acquire knowledge informally. Allow mistakes in these interactions so that students can learn to improve their communication skills.

Students respond to this exercise in this way:

- Demonstrate initiative and independence in their spontaneous answers, are not afraid to make mistakes, and show engagement and enjoyment of their learning through their excitement.

- These exercises can be more than simple listing activities. An additional benefit is open discussion and vocabulary development.

Suggestions

- In the first exercise, the goal is to get students to speak about any connections they have to farms. It can be helpful to prompt their memories with additional questions, such as whether they had lived on a farm back in their home countries, visited the farm of a relative, or were familiar with one by having seen it in books and talked about it in class with their mainstream teacher.

- When I do this exercise, I find it helpful to use the KWL chart (I Know, I Want to Know, What I have Learned) to activate previous knowledge on the topic, which will set the purposes for their learning.

- Sometimes students will offer answers that are incorrect and have nothing to do with farms or the concept of a term is misunderstood. When this happens, it is helpful to have at hand books about farms to clarify misconceptions.

- Students will also make revisions of their statements once they delve into the

lesson and construct new knowledge by making associations. “Concepts provide a framework within which details can be more readily understood and remembered” (Clark 1997, 95). It is a way to discover lack of understanding or misconceptions. Students will add as many words as they find necessary that are related to this theme.

- It is important to conference with individual students to learn how much they know and are learning about the topic.

- The ultimate first-hand experience would be to take students on a field trip to a farm.

- I use the following quotation as a guide when I do this exercise: “It seems...to be one of the paradoxes of creativity that in order to think originally, we must familiarize ourselves with the ideas of others.” (George Kneller). This quote reminds me that students construct knowledge and enrich themselves while they interact with others and share and revise their ideas. Students develop their critical thinking when they analyze and apply those ideas in different contexts. In addition, learning becomes more engaging, when lectures are totally omitted.

Activity 2. Writing in Journals

Goals

- to use the imagination
- to promote curiosity
- to reflect on a topic through the five senses

Learning Outcomes

- to demonstrate initiative
- to demonstrate understanding of the five senses
- to write patterned sentences or
- to write thoughtful self-selected sentences related to the topic

Overview

Students draw and color what they visualize on a farm. Then, students write individually in their journals:

On a farm I see _____.

On a farm I hear _____.

On a farm I smell _____.

On a farm I touch _____.

On a farm I taste _____.

On a farm I can _____.

(Activity adapted from the Web-site www.abcteach.com)

Language Content

- vocabulary of the farm and farm life
- action words (verbs)

Materials

- journals
- colored pencils and crayons
- chart paper

Procedure

Personal Experiences

1. Ask students to visualize what they see, hear, smell, touch, taste and what they can do on a farm with their eyes closed to activate students' imagination, perception and attention.
2. Ask students to draw and color what they see, hear, smell, touch, taste and what they can do on a farm. By allowing students to have visual representations, the teacher gives them the opportunity to explore the topic in their own unique way, thus finding meaning for themselves.
3. Keep in mind your students' pace and allow them to continue to explore with this activity as much as they would like. The teacher's intuition and observation usually tell when students want to continue with the same activity or move on to a different one due to their lack of interest. This should allow students to enjoy the moment and see the purpose of the activity at a pace that they establish rather than at a pace determined for them. This way students are active participants of their own learning, not just passive agents giving them a sense of empowerment and responsibility.

4. Ask students to label each picture with their creative writing.
5. Initiate sentence structure on chart paper to facilitate writing. However, the teacher should welcome students' self-questioning and self-selected sentences to promote initiative and independence. Encourage students to use complete sentences.
6. Ask students to read out loud the sentences that were written as a group on chart paper.
7. Ask students to write individually in their journals.
8. Conference with each individual student and model writing aloud to demonstrate standard writing.

B. *Sharing in Community*

Ask students to share their observations, their pictures and their writing with the rest of the students in the group.

Comments

- These activities activate students' imagination of a farm.

- Drawing and coloring are other forms to represent meaning and express students' visions about a farm. Students displayed contentment with this activity.

- Labeling each picture with their creative writing allows students to demonstrate their increased confidence and helps them scaffold to write more complex sentences.

- Using their journals allows students to reflect not only on what they were able to do, but also to spend some time with their thoughts.

Suggestions

- To facilitate writing, play the guessing game "I Spy": when students choose an item that they have drawn and labeled in their journals and when students give descriptive clues about them, they will be able to draw conclusions and transition the activity into writing more easily.

Examples:

I am thinking of somebody that takes care of animals and plants and lives in the country.

I am thinking of something that has four legs, lives on a farm and says "Moo".

I am thinking of something that lives on a farm, has a curly tail and likes to roll in the mud.

-This activity demonstrates that it is important to be open to continuous teaching moments in everyday activities, events, and conversations meaningful to the students' lives, allowing a way to express their thoughts and emotions.

Spontaneous activities should be fleshed out from the theme that is being studied in the present moment.

- It is not my intention to shape my students, but to let them discover themselves, their likes and dislikes, allowing them to express themselves in the classroom in order to discover practical accomplishments in their lives.

Activity 3. Working with Manipulatives in Small Groups

Goals

- to cooperate with others
- to develop a sense of responsibility for his/her own behavior
- to listen actively
- to engage in discussion, share ideas, and respect opinions
- to develop critical thinking

Learning Outcomes

- to describe characteristics
- to compare and contrast animal characteristics
- to sort, classify, and categorize animals into groups with common characteristics
- to identify and match animal sounds with pictures of different farm animals

Overview

Students work with magnetic pictures of farm animals. This activity allows students to discuss animal colors, number of legs, and the sounds they make.

Language Content

Animal sounds

Colors

Numbers

Punctuation: commas and quotation marks

Materials

- magnetic pictures of farm animals

- chart with animal characteristics (similarities and differences)

Procedure

1. Introduce different animals and the sounds they make. Encourage students to name the animals, tell what they know about them and imitate the sounds they make.

Young children are noisy and enjoy making sounds. Following is a list of animal sounds students will explore:

Cows----moo,moo,moo

pigs----oink, oink, oink

Dogs---woof, woof,woof

ducks—quack, quack, quack

Horses---neigh, neigh, neigh

flies---buzz, buzz, buzz

Kittens---meow, meow, meow

sheep---baa, baa, baa

Birds---chirp, chirp, chirp

turkeys---gobble, gobble, gobble

Rooster---cockle-a-doodle-doo (Spanish-speaking students knew that in Spanish the rooster says Quiquiriquí).

2. In pairs, ask students to match the magnetic pictures of farm animals with their correct sound.

As an extension and time permitting, students could work on the following activities:

3. Students will illustrate their favorite pictures of farm animals and draw speech bubbles to write the sound that each animal makes.
4. Say: Here is a cow. Please tell me what sound it makes, how many legs it has. Point to the legs and count them. Point to the body of the cow and review its characteristics. Review the characteristics of other farm animals.
5. Create a chart with the names of farm animals and their characteristics

Comments

- The most fun part of this activity was when the students shared what the animals could possibly be feeling when they were making these sounds. This activity emerged when one of the students said that the cat was meowing because he was hungry.
- Ask students the question: "What do you think the animals are feeling and saying when they made those sounds?"

Suggestions

- Observe and consider what best facilitates students' learning.
- Sometimes it is difficult to remember names. Allow students to gather information from the classroom environment and give them plenty of time to connect information with other pieces they already have in their background knowledge.

Activity 4. Free Play

Goals

- to foster communication among students and listening with understanding
- to foster kindness, tolerance, and respect for others
- to foster decision making

Learning Outcomes

- to get along with others
- to know the names of farm animals and their babies
- to be able to identify, distinguish, and match pictures of adult animals with the pictures of their young
- to be able to discern how young animals are different from their parents or like their parents

Overview

Students and the teacher discuss young farm animals and their parents and play the baby animal name game where students and teacher match pictures of adult animals with the pictures and names of their young. The intention of the game is to introduce new names in a playful way.

Language Content

- names of farm animals and their babies
- thematic vocabulary

Materials

- picture cards
- chart paper

- books depicting farm animals and their young
- paper
- colored pencils, crayons, and markers

Procedure

1. Students and teacher talk about picture cards and talk about the young farm animals and their parents.
2. Ask students to write on chart paper as the different animals are named.
3. Have students name, write, and repeat the new vocabulary they are not familiar with, such as “calf”. Some names may be easier to remember than others. Having students name, write and repeat words they are not familiar with, will help them to remember and use these words later.
4. Students play the game of the farm animal picture cards. Place cards face down on the table. Students take turns turning over two cards to match baby to mother. If the two cards match, the student has another turn. If they do not match, card is placed down and another student has a turn.

Comments

- Students got along and worked well together. Playing games like this shows how their interpersonal skills are developing.

Suggestions

As extension activities, students can:

- Write and illustrate a page about their favorite farm animal and her baby. Ask students to write a sentence about why that animal is his/her favorite. Collect all pictures to make a class book.

- Working individually, in pairs, or in small groups students draw a line to match an adult farm animal in one column to its young in the other column of a sheet.

This activity could be replaced by a cut and paste activity.

Activity 5. Word Map Organizer (pair-share/whole group)

(Map based on the Learning-Focused ® Strategies Model)

Goals

- to foster the desire to seek information for a variety of purposes
- to foster responsibility of own learning

Learning Outcomes

- to define the concept of who the farmer is and define his/her essential characteristics
- to apply the word map strategy to understand the meaning of other unfamiliar words
- to express the vision of farm life through their drawings

Overview

With this activity, students explore the concept of who a farmer is and does and define essential characteristics. Students think about the questions, share their ideas with a partner and then with a group.

Language Content

- thematic vocabulary

Materials

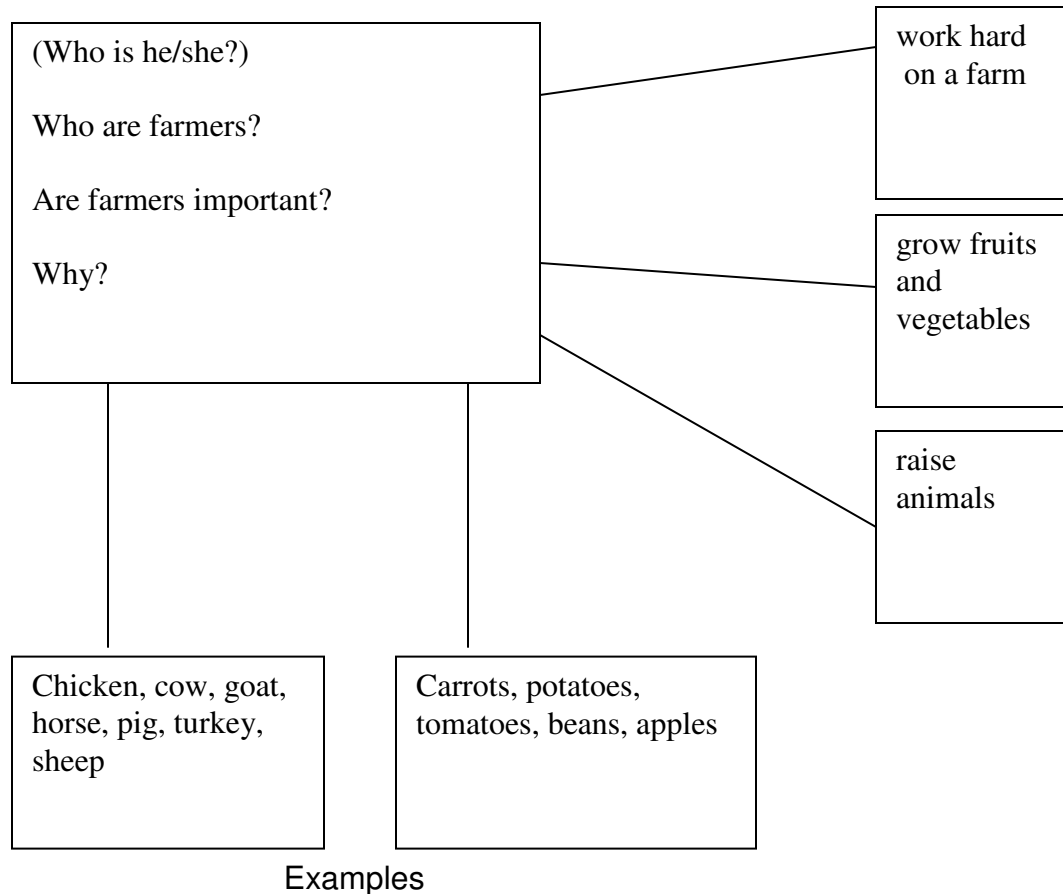
- chart paper
- journals
- graphic organizers
- markers

- pencils

Procedure

1. Discuss with students the word map (graphic organizer) and its three components (word definition, what the word is like, and examples)
2. Use the word “farmer” in the word map to model how to use it.
3. Ask students to brainstorm who the farmer is. Write responses on chart paper.
4. Ask students to discuss what the farmer is like, describing what he does. Write responses on chart paper.
5. Ask students to brainstorm some examples of what the farmer does. Write responses on chart paper.
6. Ask students to use the word map as a prewriting tool to write sentences about the farmer.

What is he/she like?



(Map based on the Learning-Focused ® Strategies Model)

7. Once students share their sentences, ask them to take what they are thinking about the farmer and personalize it by asking them: “Would you like to be one?” “Why?” “Why not?”

8. The previous activity can evolve into the use of a Venn diagram through which students can compare as a whole group living on a farm and living in a city.

9. Ask students to illustrate their sentences with a drawing of a farm.

Comments

- These types of graphic organizers help students to link new words to their background knowledge. They are excellent tools for previewing new material. It is also a way for the students and the teacher to discover misconceptions and lack of understanding.

- Students expressed that it would be fun to play on a farm with all the animals around, but the life of a farmer was very hard and therefore, they preferred to live in the city.

- It was interesting to see that in their drawings of a farm, farm animals were shown throughout, but the farmer was missing. The students sometimes drew themselves among the animals. In pairs and later in a whole group, students shared their drawings and said what farm animals they liked best and why. I asked student the following question: “Do these animals have qualities you would like to have?” I realized that this activity was hard as soon as I proposed the question. Students do not have a grasp of English to express and explain for example that a dog is a loyal friend or a lamb is a docile animal. They all had blank looks on their faces and after explaining few qualities, I realized that students were not able to name qualities and much less apply them to themselves.

- These activities emerged spontaneously from students' behaviors, which I then presented sequentially.

Suggestions

- If a particular word entails an abstract concept and it is hard for the students to express its meaning, it is better to start by stating some examples and then go back to the definition of the word and its characteristics; therefore, gathering information that the students already know.

2. The Time Context and the Ecosystem Context:

It is important to use children's literature while teaching thematic units. Not only do students remember books vividly, but also they enhance their learning. In my classes, children take home leveled reading books that they can read independently. Besides reading the leveled books in class and at home, I also read authentic literature, which I share with my students. For these books, students usually need my support or peer support, which they get during reading aloud, in choral or echo reading. Students also have opportunities to read silently which promote the idea of being a life-long activity. Using all these modes of reading (listening, oral, and silent), students develop mental imaging of what they read, recall information, are able to make predictions and inferences to create meaning, and to improve their reading skills with the ultimate goal of developing a love for reading.

In this farm unit, I chose two books: one of them, *Johnny Appleseed*, has a simple sequenced narrative that clearly presents a beginning, middle, and end. The other one, *Click, Clack, Moo Cows That Type*, will be discussed in the symbolic context.

Activity 6. How Plants Grow/Johnny Appleseed

Goals

- to appreciate nature and understand the importance of treating the environment with care
- to develop a love for reading

Learning Outcomes

- to understand how plants grow from seeds
- to learn how to take care of plants
- to listen attentively to a story and show understanding of it
- to be able to ask questions, make predictions, draw conclusions, summarize, and communicate ideas to others

Overview

During the study of the farm, students have been growing plants in transparent containers with their mainstream teacher to be able to see what is inside a seed, the different parts of a plant, study how they grow, and learn about the needs of plants and how important it is to care for them. I thought this activity would link to the reading of the story of Johnny Appleseed: a man who loved apples and traveled around the United States planting seeds so other people could enjoy them. When the first settlers came to the United States a long time ago, there were no apple trees anywhere.

Language Content

- vocabulary from the *Johnny Appleseed* story

Materials

- *Johnny Applesed*, by Lindbergh, Reeve & Kathy Jakobsen Hallquist
- classroom wall map of the United States
- chart paper
- markers
- different types of seeds, plastic containers, soil, water

Procedure

1. Read the story of Johnny Appleseed. Stop regularly throughout the reading to make sure students understand it and to allow time for discussion.

2. After reading the story, ask the following questions:

What is Johnny Appleseed's real name?

Why did people call him Johnny Appleseed?

Where did Johnny Appleseed travel?

Why did he travel far?

What did he use for a hat?

Where did Johnny Appleseed plant apple seeds?

What would have happened if he had not planted any seeds?

What part of the story did you like best? Why?

Allow students to ask questions that they may see as important in the situation.

3. Ask the students to find on the wall map the states that Johnny Appleseed visited on his travels: Massachusetts (where Johnny was born), Maine, New

Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Indiana.

4. Explain that when Johnny lived back then, the places that he traveled were wilderness areas, not states as they are known now.

5. Provide students with different types of apples to taste: Red Delicious and Golden Delicious apples, Fuji and Granny Smith.

6. Ask student to survey their friends to find out what kind of apple was their favorite.

7. Ask students to graph their favorite-apple survey.

Comments

- Students enjoyed listening to the story and seeing the colorful pictures. After I read the story to the students, I distributed a short version of the “All Aboard Reading” series by Scott Foresman (level 1) so that students could read the story on their own in small groups. Considering the “time context”, I formulated the following activity that could be implemented, but because of time constraints, it was never developed: Johnny Appleseed was a good friend to the Native Americans and to the early settlers in America. He lived in harmony with nature

and cared for the environment by planting apple trees. If you were Johnny Appleseed, what would you do to care for the environment?

Suggestions

- For first graders, try to use versions of books that are short, in order to not lose students' attention. Also, share other versions that are longer, but with more appealing illustrations.

3. The Symbolic Context

Having this context in mind, students tasted different apples, surveyed their friends to find out what kind of apple was their favorite, and created a graph.

I chose this activity because it entailed comparing and contrasting facts and proceeded with the reading of the second book: *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type*.

Activity 7. Book- *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type*

Goals

- to appreciate humor in books through their writing content and their illustrations
- to understand negotiations in human relations

Learning Outcomes

- to be able to compare and contrast things from the story that were facts or fantasy

Overview

Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type is a humorous book about cows that go on strike and negotiate things with a farmer.

Language Content

- vocabulary from the book *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type*

Materials

- *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type* by Simon & Schuster
- white paper
- pencils
- colored pencils

Procedure

1. Read the story *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type*
2. Ask students to tell what things were real/facts in the story and what things were fiction/fantasy

3. Discuss the illustrations and the facial expressions of all the characters involved. The book contains beautiful and engaging watercolor pictures that lead to many discussions.

4. Ask students to work individually and fold a white paper in half to draw on one side something from the book that is real and on the other side something that is fantasy.

5. Ask students to share their illustrations and ideas

Comments

- The repetition of some of the book's sentence structure makes the book catchy and interactive. Students loved to read the book. It also has engaging watercolor pictures. Students loved to compare and contrast through illustrations things from the story that were facts or fantasy. This activity allowed students to compare and contrast information.

- With these activities, students used their developing English, listening, speaking, reading, and writing right from the start. All four skills were integrated and exercised simultaneously.

Students' Feedback

- I received this feedback from the students after the conclusion of all the activities (considering the students' age, I created a very simple feedback form

that was discussed as a group). First, I summarized all the activities done in the three-week period and students told me whether they belonged to the + or – according to the ones they liked the best to the ones they liked the least.

| | |
|---|---|
| + | Listening to books read by me, sharing books, drawing, playing with magnetic manipulatives, group activities, activities in pairs |
| - | Writing in their journals, reading at home |

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Starting this project by exploring a holistic approach and an integrated curriculum allowed me to observe, in the implementation of the thematic unit, how much of my own teaching derives from these perspectives.

Thinking and reflection were key elements in the planning of the thematic unit. It was important to have clear what my students were going to be presented with. I believe the objectives, in the form of questions presented in the content map, were of significant value, and made sense to the students. These objectives required students' thinking and action and sparked their inquiry process when they asked questions and made comments.

I observed that students created meaning for themselves. I believe the lesson had value for them and was worth learning. The activities were coherent and offered a continuity of what was being learned, giving students the necessary practice needed to reinforce things that they had learned before, thus giving knowledge a chance to anchor. Activities also evolved naturally, allowed students to have freedom to draw forth their potential, and once again, allowed me to observe their personalities. Nobel Prize recipient, Albert Schweitzer once said that every person has a "cathedral within". I hope I tapped into my students'

unique complex beauty and intelligence. I want them to become self-reliant and grow into socially responsible human beings.

Students showed initiative over their own learning and I always invited their inquiry when questions were raised. Therefore, I believe I respected my students' identities, and promoted interaction and inquiry.

I observed that the success of the lesson depended heavily on the continuous process followed and the materials used. This was demonstrated by the level of engagement the students displayed. The process followed and the materials used facilitated my students' learning and influenced their attitude towards me. I believe both reached all the students in the classroom.

During the implementation of the activities, I was present, self-aware, flexible, and listened to my students. Not all students were working on the activities at the same pace, but I believe I allowed them to finish at their own rate.

A trusting learning environment between the students and me and among the students was apparent. Students shared thoughts in open conversations where they reflected, interacted and collaborated. I understand that learning is a social activity before it becomes cognitively assimilated. My students showed that they care for one another and they see that I care about them.

So what did the thematic unit have to do with my students? I am aware that I cannot change the school curriculum. The thematic unit gave them the proper amount of structure and context from which to learn. I was able to observe how students were learning. Students had the chance to see the theme through all the different students' perspectives and learned facts and possibilities about the life on a farm. I consider the thematic unit a tool to learn and not the ultimate goal.

Comparing and contrasting information as in the case of life on a farm and life in the city, allowed me to see how different characteristics compared and contrasted. Students were invited to ask questions and seek information. My intention with the lesson was to try to help students to build and grow from their own strengths. Students expressed their personal interests and did not display moments of apathy.

Reading and sharing books gave students the opportunity to put in writing their ideas and since writing for some of them is such a dreaded task, the desire to share their thoughts helped them overcome this deficit. They built on the asset they have of oral language to improve their writing. I believe that presenting students with a great variety of reading materials is a great tool to gaining knowledge.

I started this project with a desire to explore “compulsory education” possibly in a different light and I conclude by saying that I am aware that there are many things I cannot change: classroom setting (considering I teach in another teacher’s classroom), textbooks, time constraints, curriculum, and student grouping. However, I discovered that I am not doomed to be a certain type of educator in a system dominated by imposed constraints. As Václav Havel said: “It is hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and continually try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless.”

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