

Using Small Group Rotation to Improve Student Participation in Spanish Class

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if the use of small group rotation would increase student participation during Spanish instruction in a fifth-grade class at a school receiving Title I assistance. Students participated in small group rotation using differentiated activities. Students were placed in groups of four to five based on prior classroom performance, the instruction was broken down to ten-minute mini-lessons using differentiated activities during the rotations. Data was collected using a pretest and a posttest. The study found that the use of small group rotation made a positive impact on student participation during Spanish class.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A student's active participation in class is a key component of their educational success. When teaching a foreign language, teachers often struggle to keep students actively engaged in class. Over the past six years, the researcher has taught fourth and fifth grade Spanish in numerous schools. She has collaborated with many teachers in the same program, and all have found that the most difficult groups to engage are fifth-grade students in assigned Title I schools. Some of these students seem to struggle to connect their future aspirations with the benefits of learning a second language (Cai & Liem, 2017).

Most of the foreign language teachers have implemented some sort of positive reward system aimed at rewarding the behaviors and actions of students during the class. This method seemed to bring some positive results in the beginning, however as time passed students no longer found the rewards to be worth their time and effort.

In this study, the researcher analyzed the data collected to determine if the use of small group rotations in the world language classroom had a positive impact on improving students' participation in fifth graders in Title I schools. Working with smaller groups, students get the chance to be exposed to different activities and have one on one time with the teacher during their turn in which more meaningful connections are established. By establishing these connections, it is believed that students would become more comfortable and increase classroom participation.

Statement of Problem

Learning a second language can be a difficult task to achieve. In the classroom, the teacher engages the students to provide them with fun activities that help them use their critical thinking skills to learn the new language. When students are not willing participants in the class, limited learning takes place and the lack of engagement can prompt unwanted behaviors in the class. To that end, the purpose of this study was to analyze how the use of small group rotation activities affects the students who are struggling to participate in the current lessons. The research attempts to answer the following question: How do we improve student participation in fifth-grade Spanish class at Title I schools?

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis: the use of small group will not improve participation in Spanish class.
The alternate hypothesis: the use of small group will improve participation in Spanish class.

Operational Definitions

The independent variable in this study is represented by the differentiated activities used in small group rotations to improve student participation. The dependent variable is the student participation in the activities as well as achievement during the small group rotations as measured by student performance on exit tickets and teacher checklists.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Classroom participation is increasingly becoming a problem in students' academic achievement in school. Students' interest and participation are slowly diminishing leaving educators struggling to find the appropriate mix of strategies to help increase student participation in the classroom. Students are struggling to find valid reasons as to why they have to learn what the school is teaching them and they are having problems making connections to how it would benefit them in the moment or near future (Cai & Liem, 2017). In order to gain a better understanding of the issue, it is important to look at existing research of what defines participation and why is it important, as well as factors that affect students' participation both directly and indirectly in the classroom.

Defining Student Participation

Teachers have varied definitions of classroom participation. One definition of participation that stands out is "Participation can be seen as a process which can be divided into five classifications: preparation, contribution to discussion, group works, communication skills, and attendance" ("Student Participation in Classroom Discussions," 2016). As teachers, we often think about why students are not participating? What can teachers do to make it better? How come this worked yesterday and today it fell apart? These are questions that educators have when they are reflecting on their lessons and how student participation has affected the intentional outcome. What we often forget as educators is the student's perspective of effective participation in the classroom. Overall participation is a valuable educational tool that can be used to assess student knowledge and understanding of what they are learning (Oga-Baldwin, Nakata, Parker, & Ryan, 2017).

The Importance of Student Participation

If educators get students more actively engaged in the classroom, students become active learners and are able to start using their critical thinking skills which in turn encourages student participation more frequently. When students can share their thoughts and join the discussion, they are learning how to share their understanding with others. This gives students an opportunity to learn from one another (Shore, n.d.). Participation is a great way to get student involvement in the classroom. When students are actively engaged in their own learning process and are able to assist and share their knowledge, we are able to increase classroom participation and bring positive energy to the classroom. As stated in the article, “Students are more interested, learn better, become better critical thinkers, and have self-confidence” (“Student Participation in Classroom Discussions,” 2016, p.1422).

Factors That Influence Classroom Participation in Spanish Class

Today’s classroom has vastly changed over the years, as numbers per classroom have increased tremendously. Our classrooms reflect a diverse population, and that needs to be taken into account when planning lessons. Numerous factors determine participation levels in the classroom and need to be thought of when determining a strategy that will encourage an active and positive learning environment. When students are entering the classroom, they bring with them their own life experiences, their fears, anxiety, varied personalities, and learning abilities (Gürsoy & Akin, 2013). As educators, we often think that lack of participation is due to lack of interest when often students might be dealing with outside experiences that are impacting their ability to be present in school and ready to learn (Superville, 2019).

When we think about learning a foreign language, educators might not realize that the lack of student participation might be coming from a place of fear. In the classroom, students are

asked to take risks that they might not feel comfortable taking. Students might fear the possibility of failing in front of the whole class (Dittmann, 2018). Fear is an issue many students face as they may not have any knowledge and may be dealing with insecurities in the classroom. Students worry that they may be criticized by both their peers and teachers for not knowing how to answer the questions or say the words correctly. correct words (Ahmed, 2019).

Improving Student Participation

The Importance of Building Teacher-to-Student Relationships.

Teachers play an important role in engaging students in their classrooms. Given that teachers are the adults in charge of the classroom and student safety, it is important that teachers create a positive environment for the students to feel safe and welcome. Building a positive relationship where students can connect with the teacher helps tremendously in promoting student participation in the classroom (Ruohotie-Lyhty, Korppi, Moate, & Nyman, 2018).

Some simple ways that teachers can build that positive rapport with their students are by learning students' names and creating a climate of respect and openness. Students will often work harder if the teacher puts in the effort to humanize their role in the classroom. Check to ensure that one's students are doing ok or sharing simple information allows the student to find a way to connect with their teacher. (Superville, 2019).

Teaching Strategies to Help Improve Student Participation

When thinking about ways to improve student participation in the class, there are many different strategies that teachers can use. One of the possible options is the use of small group rotations. With larger class sizes it is often difficult to connect with our students and offer more tailored instruction that would help them feel more confident in themselves. When using small groups, educators are able to provide more opportunities for students to participate in classroom

activities in an equitable manner. Students are able to engage in a small setting environment where taking a risk feels much safer. Teachers are also able to provide more one on one attention and instruction, which will increase student participation. (Ballen et al., 2019).

The organization of the classroom and management tools used by the teacher is just as important when trying small group activities. When implementing small groups, the teacher has to have a well-planned lesson that will provide engaging activities, especially for the groups that are working independently of the teacher (Mackay, 2019). Pre-planning small groups can help the teacher strategically plan activities and students can be provided with “jobs” in which they are responsible for a specific task while working independently. The use of Class DoJo, an online positive behavior program can help the teacher promote positive behaviors as well as let the students know that they are aware of what is happening in the class even though they are working with a different group (Dillon et al., 2019).

Summary

Classroom participation is becoming a problem that is affecting student's academic achievements. Student participation is mainly seen during class discussions, work completion, and active participation during class. When students are not actively engaged, learning becomes a task hard to achieve (Foster et al., 2009). When thinking about student participation it is important to think about outside matters that might be affecting their engagement during class as well as work completion. Teachers can take different approaches to help improve the situation, changing teaching strategies, including content that is relevant and the use of technology are some of the actions that can be taken to help increase student participation in class.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to investigate if a change in instructional strategies would help to increase fifth-grade student participation during Spanish class. The goal of the study was to help the researcher understand if providing targeted activities in small groups would help students maintain focus and become more active participants in the class.

Design

A repeated measure design was used to complete this study. All students in the class participated in the small group activities, so students were not assigned to control and experimental groups. All students were given a pretest to obtain a baseline score. Following the pretest, students worked on short targeted activities during small group rotations. At the end of the class, students took the posttest.

The independent variable in this study was the differentiated activities used during small group rotations to improve student participation. The differentiated activities provided more individualized support and targeted mini-lessons to reach students at their current levels. The dependent variable was student participation in small group activities and performance on each activity during the small group rotations. The researcher collected the completed work from each station as well as the exit tickets completed at the end of the class. The researcher also monitored student progress using anecdotal notes on a clipboard. In analyzing the data, the researcher compared students' participation charts from the regularly taught lessons to the small group lesson. The researcher compared student completion and quality of work and student participation, using data collected during the pretest, group rotation and posttest to test the theory.

Participants

The school used for this research is considered a Title I targeted assistance school. 57% of the students in the school qualify for Free And Reduced Meals (FARM), while 14% of the students are chronically absent. There were 26 fifth-grade students in the class who participated in this study. The students in this group were between the ages of ten and 11 years old. This class had two students who were Native Speakers, one student who did not receive previous Spanish instruction during fourth grade as Spanish was not available at his prior school, and three students with IEP's.

Instrument

The tools used for the collection of data were created by the researcher. The researcher used the second unit of the school curriculum regarding food as the base for the study. Students were given a pretest designed to provide baseline data on student participation, followed by a posttest, that was given after students participated in Spanish instruction during small group rotations. The pretest and posttest allowed the researcher to collect data on student participation as well as completion. Students were given a worksheet that had them collect information from the lesson, i.e. students had to write down specific words from the objective and throughout the lesson. The worksheet created contained five items for the students to markdown. The researcher also used anecdotal notes to complete her data. While taking anecdotal notes, the researcher used a quantitative data method in which she tallied the number of times the students were off task, as well as qualitative data in which the researcher collected data on student work. During the small group rotation, the researcher used a variety of instructional strategies to accommodate the varied levels of each student.

Procedure

Prior to working in small group rotations, the researcher collected data using a quantitative approach, in which the researcher tallied up the number of times students were actively participating in class. The students in this group were given Spanish instruction once a week for a total of 50 minutes. During the class prior to using small group rotations, students were given a pretest. The researcher used the data from the pretest to form the groups needed for the rotation activities. Students were grouped based on their academic level and behavior, in order to be able to offer targeted mini-lessons that would maximize student participation and learning. Before students began working in their small groups, instructions about expectations were given. Each member of the group was assigned a role such as captain, timekeeper, paper collector, and everyone was part of the cleanup crew. Students were placed in groups of four and participated in four group rotations. Three of the rotations were independent activities and one of the rotations was direct practice with the instructor. Groups were able to participate in each rotation for 10 minutes, during which students completed a task and submitted the activity at the end of the class. The instructor systematically set up the room so that she had the ability to monitor student participation and behavior while working with her group. The class was stopped five minutes prior to the end of the class period so that students were able to complete the posttest. For the purpose of this research, the students were given lessons using the small group rotation for a total of four classes once per week.

During the small group rotation, the instructor monitored the class and collected anecdotal notes about student participation. During the teacher group, the instructor was able to give immediate feedback and help students with specific struggles and or concerns. At the end of each class, the researcher compiled the data collected from the pretest, the activities used in the small

group rotations, and the posttest. The data was analyzed using dependent samples t-test analysis and then used to investigate how and if the small group rotation had any positive or negative impact on student participation.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate if a change in instructional strategies would help to increase fifth-grade student participation during Spanish class. A single group repeated measures Design was used to determine if there was a difference in scores before the small group rotation activities were implemented and after the small group rotation activities were implemented. The growth from pre-assessment and post-assessment scores were analyzed using the dependent sample *t*-test. Table 1 outlines the mean scores for the pre-assessment and post-assessment. Standard deviations for the pre-assessment and post-assessment can also be found in Table 1.

The data were collected from the same 26 fifth-grade students at a school receiving Title I assistance. The data in this study show that there was a statistically significant difference in student participation with the use of small group rotations activities. The total mean score for students' participation in Spanish class before the implementation of the strategy was 1.46 with a standard deviation of 1.11. The total mean score for participation in Spanish class after the use of small group rotations activities was 2.1 with a standard deviation of .9. The *t*-value was found to be -2.2 and the *p*-value was < 0.05 when comparing the mean difference in students' scores between the pre-assessment and post-assessment.

Table 1

Dependent Samples t-Test for Fifth-Grade Students' Participation

Test	Total Mean Score	Standard Deviation	N	t	p
Pre	1.46	1.11	26	-2.2	< 0.05
Post	2.1	.9	26		

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The researcher's hypothesis was that the use of small group rotations would improve student participation in Spanish class. Based on the research conducted, the researcher found that the use of small group rotation provided some improvement to student participation during Spanish class.

Implications of the Results

The research was conducted using one class in a Title I school. The findings show that using differentiated activities during small group rotation has helped improve student participation in Spanish class. Most of the students who participated in this study reported that they enjoyed the class more and were able to complete the small activities that were assigned to them. The few students who did not enjoy the small group rotations mentioned that they would rather work independently and do not enjoy working in groups. An increase in the amount of preparation time for class set-up as well as managing transition times that translated into a loss of instructional time and focus were some of the implications that resulted from the implementation of small group rotations. To help with transitions, the teacher could use timers to help students visualize how long they have for each session and how much time they should take between transitions. Having a picture to represent where each group needs to be might help with a smoother transition process during the small group activities.

Theoretical Consequences

The research was based on the theory that using small group rotation would improve student participation during Spanish class. Allowing students to work in smaller settings would provide a better environment that would help the increase of student participation (Ballen et al., 2019).

Even though the research showed some improvement, it consequentially created new challenges. Students were not used to the routine of working in small groups during Spanish class, this highlights the importance of having a well-planned lesson that engages students during independent work (Mackay, 2019). The researcher had to spend part of the class time to reteach new expectations for the class and for each activity. The research was conducted with only one group. More research would need to be conducted to test the effect small group rotation would have on other classroom environments.

Threats to the Validity

As mentioned earlier, the research was conducted in one class. A wider set of classes would need to try this approach to confirm its success. Even though most of the students did well during the small group rotations, new challenges arose with time management, particularly when students were not ready to move on to the next activity. The pre-assessment and post-assessment were all created and graded by the researcher. This may have created some bias in the questions used as well as the scoring for the data collected. Spanish class is conducted once per week for a total of 50 minutes; therefore, the time spent implementing this new approach was very short. In order to increase the validity of the procedure, the timeframe for the treatment should be increased to solidify results. Using small group rotations can be difficult to assess by oneself. The addition of an administrator to observe the lesson would provide valuable feedback that would help the teacher improve the new strategy implemented as well as provide an objective point of view and feedback on student participation. In addition, this is something that should be tried out for a whole semester or even more due to the short amount of instructional time with the students.

Connections to Previous Research

Jaimes (2016) used a positive reward system to research if it would lower student off-topic conversations during Spanish class. In the study, the researcher concluded that a significant change had happened to student participation and that the use of a positive reward system significantly lowered students off-topic conversations. Similar to Jaimes's study, this study focused on the increase in student participation during Spanish class. Some of the differences between the two studies are the population, Jaimes's study focused on a group of 15 middle school girls, while this study focused on fifth-grade students in a school that receives Title I assistance. This study focused on the use of varied teaching strategies using small group rotations. Both studies were successful in finding a possible solution to help increase student participation during Spanish class.

The results from the research implicate that it is possible to improve student participation in a world language classroom. Learning a second language can be a difficult task, the study conducted shows that using small group rotations to teach a foreign language could make a difference in the classroom with the improvement of student participation. More research on how differentiated teaching strategies and the use of small group activities could help improve student participation in class would need to happen to collect more data using different classroom settings and varied populations to obtain a wider overview. Implementing small group rotations as a strategy to increase student classroom participation during Spanish class over the course of the year would help collect more definitive data.

Implications for Future Research

The results of the research imply that it is possible to improve student participation in a world language classroom. Learning a second language can be a difficult task, the study conducted shows that using small group rotations to teach a foreign language could make a difference in the classroom by helping to improve student participation. More research on how differentiated teaching strategies and the use of small group activities could help improve student participation in class would need to happen to collect more data using different classroom settings and varied populations to obtain a wider overview. Implementing small group rotations as a strategy to increase student classroom participation during Spanish class over the course of the year would help collect more definitive data.

Conclusion

This study examined whether the use of small group rotations during Spanish instruction would increase student participation in class. The study collected data from 26 students in a fifth-grade class in a school that receives Title I assistance. During the research process, the teacher created small groups of four to five students and created differentiated activities that students worked on collaboratively during small group rotations. The research found that student participation increased with the use of small group rotations. During the small group rotations, students were more engaged in the activities, they were able to work with fewer distractions and able to focus more on the activity. The finding from the research are counter to the null hypothesis of this study that the use of small group rotation would not improve student participation. This study shows that allowing students to work in small group rotations can increase student participation in class.

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