

Teaching Spanish Vocabulary to Elementary Students in a Fun Way

by Edelma Concha-Piqué

Department of Languages, Literature, and Communications

Augusta State University

March , 2000

This presentation focuses on teaching vocabulary and expressions related to farm animals to elementary school students of Spanish. Students learn animals' names, the diminutive form, animal sounds, colors, and sentence structure using small felt figures, gestures, songs, games, and hands-on activities. These activities have been piloted with positive results on first-grade children, once-per-week sessions lasting approximately 15 to 20 minutes each.

Rationale

This method of vocabulary learning turns classroom into a positive and fun learning experience. It follows the natural approach to learning a second language by providing students with real-life experiences geared to learning vocabulary in a meaningful context, making language both more significant and more memorable. It also encourages students to be active, enthusiastic and animated. It avoids repeating boring drills, memorizing long lists, translating, and learning vocabulary in isolation. This method also increases the students' interest in the subject, thus, motivating them to pay more attention and to learn more.

Materials are presented in a simple and comprehensible way. Gestures and visual aid are used to reinforce comprehension. As a consequence, children easily understand the essential meaning of what is being communicated. This gives students a sense of self-confidence and accomplishment. The method also avoids boring drills, memorizing long lists, translating and learning vocabulary in isolation. Materials are organized within the farm context and carry out a message. Even though the students are constantly challenged with the learning of the new language, all the activities in this method are achievable to avoid frustration. It is important to avoid activities that could frustrate the young learners because they may lose interest in the subject.

The first activity is introducing the animals' name to students. As the teacher posts the felt animals, she says the animal's name. Students connect the figure with the word. This activity is very important for second language students because it promotes forming a mental picture of what it is said. Students learn from the very beginning to think in the foreign language. Thus, avoiding translation. Then, the teacher introduces the diminutive form of each animal's name for later use in the farm song. Sentence structure accompanied by gestures is taught afterwards. Finally, teacher plays an audio- tape about the farm animals and children attempt to sing as they mimic the actions.

The second activity consists of games. The teacher has three different games that relate to the same theme "farm animals". The first game is called "roll the ball". Students sit in a circle with the teacher in the middle holding a ball. The teacher rolls the ball to any student randomly. A student catches the ball. Then, the teacher shows an animal figure to the student who has the ball. The student has to say the Spanish name for it. If the student doesn't know the animal's name, the teacher will ask "Who knows?" (¿Quién sabe?). The process is repeated until everyone has a turn. This game keeps the children's

attention on the subject since they don't know who will go next. The **second activity** is called "wave". Children sit on their heels in a circle. Each child will have a turn in order. As teacher points to a felt animal, the first student to go, rises to his knees as he gives the answer and goes back to his original sitting position so another student can have his turn. As each child lifts and sits, it creates a wave along the circle. This is a fun activity because children get very excited and want to do it fast to create a nice smooth wave, and they don't get bored, sitting passively. The **third game** is a contest. Students are separated into two groups. They compete against each other for the most points. The activity starts when the teacher points to a student and shows an animal figure and asks "What is it" (¿Qué es?). If the student gets the right answer, his group gets a point. Young students love to compete, but they also hate to lose. To keep excitement and participation at a high level, the teacher should make sure both groups win and that each child feels competent and reassured.

The third activity involves children working individually doing exercises with paper, crayons, glue, and scissors. The first exercise of the third activity is the coloring of pictures. Children are given farm animal pictures to color. The second consists of matching, cutting and pasting. This exercise can be done in two ways: a) Children are asked to cut the names of the animals, which are written at the bottom of the page, and paste them according to the animals' names, or b) Children can draw a line from the animal to the animal word.

This communicative approach provides a language-learning environment free of anxiety. Research has shown that children learn better when they feel secure and free to experiment with the new language. The group and singing activities used in this method provide a way to decrease anxiety. Children feel more relaxed if they work within a group because they influence each other and have an easy time achieving certain tasks such as learning new words and expressions, since each student contributes to a common goal. In addition, singing is particularly a good way to put children at ease. Most children are natural singers and are not too shy when it comes to a familiar tune.

Finally, the variety of activities using the communicative approach is essential for maintaining students' interest and attention; thus, avoiding boredom. With the farm animals' theme, the teacher is using different materials that are interesting and that are arranged according to the students' age. The use of colorful felt (flannel) animals on a board makes the learning process more animated. The use of audio-tape brings enthusiasm to the class. Playing games like the "wave", "rolling the ball", and "group contest" keeps the activity level high. The cutting, pasting and coloring are also hands-on activities that most children enjoy doing. All these activities give a sense of excitement and novelty to the animal theme. In sum, the activities increase the students' interest because the students are constantly involved in different learning tasks. As the children's interest in the subject grows, motivation for language learning increases, and children pay more attention and learn more. These are the key strengths of learning vocabulary the fun way using the methodology presented here.