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“I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think.”

Socrates (469-399);

Philosopher

In this article we are going to describe our experience of trying to teach children critical thinking alongside with developing basic language skills.

Nowadays children acquire far more than the factual knowledge prescribed by curricular. They need to leave school equipped to face the challengers of a changing and unpredictable world. It seems sensible to offer students activities providing real-life thinking tasks and involve them in dealing with information which they need to organize and structure.

The rational for combining the teaching of thinking skills with the teaching of a language is twofold. The first reason is concerned with the cognitive engagement of the learner in the task. The second argument is a linguistic one. Materials designed to teach a foreign language generally involve learners using the target language to communicate a piece of information to other people. What is essential is that students develop their own thinking skills such as problem-solving and decision-making ones, which therefore equips them with tools for life-long learning.

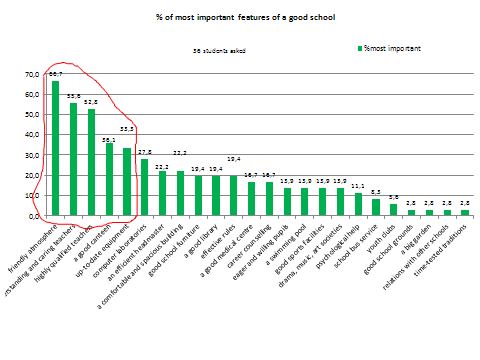
The range of activities, offered students, builds around a thought-provoking question: “What are the features of a good school?” (The idea for the series of lessons is taken from Student’s Book VIII by O.V. Afanasyeva, I.V. Mikheeva, Unit 2, ex. 3).

The outcome of the series of lessons is to conduct a survey to gather opinions on five most important and five least important features of a good school, to write a report about the survey results, to present the results to the class and to discuss them critically.

The sequence of the activities was the following:

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| activity | A short description | Learning outcome |
| 1. Conducting the survey (in 3 or 4 groups of 7th and 8th formers) | Each student was offered to choose 5 most important and 5 least important, in his/her view, features of a good school from the list of 24. (addendum 2) | * Learning some new vocabulary, * Developing the ability to arrange things in a particular order. |
| 1. Summarizing the results | The results were sorted out, summarized and presented in two tables for most important and least important features. | * Developing logical-mathematical skills to summarize and structure the information. |
| 1. Presenting the information in a graphic way | Volunteer students made diagrams using the Excel and Power Point programs – to present the information visually. | * Developing computer skills to use programs like Excel and Power Point to visualize information. |
| 1. Writing a survey report | Students learned to write a survey report according to the plan and ‘useful language’ given by a teacher. (Addendum3) | * Developing writing skills – learning to organize the ideas clearly covering two important questions: 1) What are the topics I want to write about? And 2) In what order do I want to present them? * Learning some new vocabulary 1) using numbers to express percentage and fractions, 2) using ‘small markers’ to help organize and present the information coherently. |
| 1. Presenting and discussing the results in class | Students practiced to present the survey results, to think over them critically, to ask and answer ‘Why’ questions. | * Developing speaking skills – to introduce the topic, to develop ideas coherently using ‘speech markers’. * Developing critical thinking skills to analyze, and evaluate the facts, while answering ‘Why’ questions, expressing one’s personal opinions, expressing agreement or disagreement with other viewpoints. |

Here is a diagram illustrating students’ choices for 5 most important features of a good school.



The diagram illustrates that 5 top features are ‘friendly atmosphere’, ‘caring teachers’, ‘highly qualified teachers’, ‘a good canteen’ and ‘up-to-date equipment’. The fact is that very few students mentioned ‘eager and willing pupils’ in their chosen 5 tops. So, the idea of conducting two more surveys on the subject came up : to ask the same questions to teachers and parents and then to compare the results (To realize the task students had to translate the list of 24 features into Russian and then to ask teachers of different subjects and parents to make their choice.) In such a way the 6th and the 7th points to the previous plan appeared.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| activity | A short description | Learning outcome |
| 1. Conducting the survey among teachers and parents | Teachers and parents were offered to choose 5 most important and 5 least important, in his/her view, features of a good school. | * Developing the skill to translate from English into Russian, * Developing the skill to conduct a survey and to work with information. |
| 1. Comparing the students’ views to the parents’ and teachers’ ones. | Students analyzed and compared the results presented on 3 diagrams. | * Developing critical-thinking skills alongside with speaking skills. * Developing the skills to analyze information, find out the similarities and the differences. * Learning to take into account other people’s points of view and to draw conclusions. |

To summarize the whole work it seemed reasonable to hold a revision lesson in the form of a discussion between two groups of 8th-formers. A detailed lesson plan is in Addendum1. During the lesson students presented the topic of the survey, described the results, explained their choices and compared their choices with parents’ and teachers’ ones. It is valuable that students practiced to give detailed arguments proving their opinions, to give contrary arguments. All these are sure to be important for holding discussions and debates, creating different types of writing in near future and for future real life, of course.

While comparing the three diagrams, presenting students’, parents’ and teachers’ opinions, students noticed some similarities like ‘friendly atmosphere’, ‘highly-qualified teachers’, ‘up-to-date equipment’. However, the option ‘willing students’ turned out to be the biggest difference . Both teachers and parents chose this option among the most important ones whereas just a few students mentioned it. During the discussion students could also ask questions to their teachers. Maybe for the first time some students realized that eager and willing pupils are as necessary for the educational process as good teachers.

The discussion was the major part of the lesson but not the only one. Right during the previous week (The annual event ‘Foreign Languages Week was held.) some students had a chance to gain a bit of teaching experience being teachers at primary classes. They had an opportunity to have a look at a teaching-learning process from the other side and to share their impressions with other students. Another interesting activity was a team-work task – to explain quotations about education. One more activity (optional) was – to watch a passage from the feature film ‘The School of Rock’ and to do the task – to match phrasal verbs to their definitions.

To emphasize the importance of students’ personal attitudes to the learning process at the end of the lesson they were offered a homework task – to read and to translate into Russian ’11 Bill Gates rules’(found in the Internet) with the following up discussion at the lesson.

Summing up, it appears to be appropriate to quote Albert Einstein: ‘Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school.’ Hopefully, thinking skills alongside with others are going to be valuable in our students’ real life.

Addendum 1

Student’s Book VIII by O.V. Afanasyeva, I.V. Mikheeva, Unit 2, ex. 3

* A comfortable and spacious school building
* Good school grounds
* Highly qualified and creative teachers
* Eager and willing pupils
* Friendly atmosphere
* A good library with video and audio materials
* A lot of up-to-date equipment
* Good sports facilities
* A good canteen
* Youth clubs
* A good medical centre
* Psychological help
* Career counselling
* Drama, music and art societies
* A big garden
* Up-to-date computer laboratories
* A swimming pool
* Relations with other schools
* Time-tested traditions
* Good school furniture
* Effective rules and regulations
* School bus service
* An efficient headmaster
* Caring teachers

Addendum 3

|  |
| --- |
| **Writing a survey report**  **Paragraph Plan**   * **Paragraph 1**: state purpose and content of your report, * **Paragraph 2, 3, 4**: summarize your information * **Final Paragraph**: end with a general conclusion or make recommendations and suggestions. |
| **Useful language**   * **To introduce**: The aim/purpose of the report is…, The reason for this report, This report was written, … * **To describe the content**: 20 students were asked … They had to …. * **To refer to a fact**: The fact is that, As expected, in reality, in practice … * **To give proportions**: one in four, six out of ten, the majority of, the minority of, a large proportion, a small number, most people say.., few people … * **To generalize**: Overall, generally speaking, on the whole, as a rule, this indicates/shows/suggests/demonstrates that…, this is indicated by…, 90% of people … * **To explain the results**: I think so because, because, as, … * **To introduce other people’s opinion**: people often argue/claim, There are people who believe/consider … * **To conclude/summarize**: Taking everything into account/consideration, to conclude, to sum up … |

Addendum 3 Lesson Plan

21/12/2013

8C, 8D forms – 24 students

Teachers: Agareva I.I., Chuprova G.V.

Duration: 45 minutes

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| № | Activity | Slides | Focus |
|  | **Warming up** – What we are going to talk about? The key word is ‘school’ – think of any words beginning with the letters in the word ‘SCHOOL’  **Watching a funny episode** – to start our today’s talk watch an episode ‘A funny teacher’ Would you like your teacher to be like this one? Why? Why not?  **Speaking** – expressing personal opinions with arguments.  Do only teacher’s qualifications matter? What else is essential for the educational process?  **Speaking** – students give answers.  **Speaking** – talking about the survey according to the plan: 1) the aim and the content, 2) presenting the results (5 most important features), 3) presenting the results (5 least important features, 4) Summing up, expressing one’s personal agreement or disagreement with the results.  **Speaking** – presenting the diagrams illustrating the teachers’ and parents’ views, a short description of the results.  **Speaking** – comparing the three diagrams – finding out the similarities and the differences, explaining, drawing conclusions.  **Speaking** - Students’ teaching experience. **Watching photos** (taken during the School Foreign Languages Week) – giving comments, sharing impressions.  **Watching** two funny videos from the lessons.  Talking about the video episodes.  **A team work task** – giving some comments on quotations. Speaking.  (optional) **Watching an episode** from the film ‘The School of Rock’ and **doing the task** – matching phrasal verbs to their definitions.  **Summing up** – What have done at the lesson? Do you think the discussion was useful? Why? Why not?  Homework – to read and translate into Russian 11 Bill Gates Rules. | 1  3(hyper link – a top picture)  4-6 (to remind the plan)  4  7-9  10-11  12-13  15-17  19  20-21  24-28  28 (hyper links on two bottom photos)  29-30 |  |

Addendum 4

11 Bill Gates Rules

Love him or hate him, he sure hits the nail on the head with this! To anyone with kids of any age, here's some advice.

Bill Gates recently gave a speech at a High School about 11 things they did not and will not learn in school. He talks about how feel-good, politically correct teachings created a generation of kids with no concept of reality and how this concept set them up for failure in the real world.

Rule 1: Life is not fair - get used to it!

Rule 2: The world won't care about your self-esteem. The world will expect you to accomplish something BEFORE you feel good about yourself.

Rule 3: You will NOT make $60,000 a year right out of high school. You won't be a vice-president with a car phone until you earn both.

Rule 4: If you think your teacher is tough, wait till you get a boss.

Rule 5: Flipping burgers is not beneath your dignity. Your Grandparents had a different word for burger flipping: they called it opportunity.

Rule 6: If you mess up, it's not your parents' fault, so don't whine about your mistakes, learn from them.

Rule 7: Before you were born, your parents weren't as boring as they are now. They got that way from paying your bills, cleaning your clothes and listening to you talk about how cool you thought you were. So before you save the rain forest from the parasites of your parent's generation, try delousing the closet in your own room.

Rule 8: Your school may have done away with winners and losers, but life HAS NOT. In some schools, they have abolished failing grades and they'll give you as MANY TIMES as you want to get the right answer. This doesn't bear the slightest resemblance to ANYTHING in real life.

Rule 9: Life is not divided into semesters. You don't get summers off and very few employers are interested in helping you FIND YOURSELF. Do that on your own time.

Rule 10: Television is NOT real life. In real life people actually have to leave the coffee shop and go to jobs.

Rule 11: Be nice to nerds. Chances are you'll end up working for one.