**SAM**

### The Story of SAM

**GETTING TO KNOW SAM**

From the first time we met, it was clear that Sam hated Spanish. He joined my class in third grade, with no desire to learn the language. He was the master of avoidance and could side-step all of my efforts to teach him Spanish. At the end of the year, he transferred to a different school having learned much less than I wanted him to know.

Sam struggled in all of his classes. He changed schools three times in seven years and was absent often, creating gaps in his education. When he was in school, everything about him screamed out that he did not want to be there. Teachers were more accustomed to seeing the top of Sam’s head or the scowl on his face than his smile.

Sam was different from my students who struggle to learn or have difficulty paying attention in class. With those children, close proximity, adaptations to tasks, or more support helped them find success in Spanish class. None of those strategies worked for Sam because he was a reluctant learner; one who not only had difficulty learning the content but also did not want to learn it.

**MAKING THE MOST OF A SECOND CHANCE**

Sam was not the first reluctant learner I have taught, but he was one of the most difficult to figure out. I was given a second chance to make a difference with Sam when he returned to my school for fifth grade.

From previous experience with Sam, I knew that I needed a way to get Sam’s attention all the time and motivate him to learn, so I worked on improving our relationship. I wanted him to realize that I was an adult in his life who cared about him. I hoped, with a better relationship, he would work harder in my class and make the growth I knew I was capable of making.

The only problem with my plan was that he hated Spanish.

I was fighting against negative comments he heard at home about Spanish speakers and years of being forced to learn a language he did not want to learn. To overcome those barriers, I did something I never do: I spoke in Spanish.

I am the hard-core, Spanish 99 percent of the time Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) teacher who speaks English in class once or twice a year and only in fourth through sixth grade. Even in the hallways during the day, before and after school, I speak with the kids in Spanish. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and I knew what I gained by using English with Sam outside of class would ultimately benefit his Spanish skills in class.

I watched for Sam in the hallways and charted with him in English each time we crossed paths. We eventually got to the point where I could joke with him and he would smile. It took a while, but I saw results in Spanish class. Sam paid closer attention and performed most of the requested tasks without the passive-aggressive behavior he had used during third grade, but I wanted more than just compliance; I wanted Sam to have an active role in his education and be more motivated.

**THE AH-HA MOMENT**

I used LinguaFolio Jr. with my students in fourth through sixth grade because I want to create more reflective learners who take ownership for their learning. The language biography packet is where children record their personal language learning history, their preferred learning activities and the evaluation of their progress through the use of can-do statements: unit and program objectives written in child-friendly language.

Children monitor their progress throughout the year by revisiting the can-do statements at the beginning of the year and the end of each trimester.

Looking through Sam’s language biography and his reflections on the unit can-do statements in fifth grade showed me that, even though he made measurable growth, he did not see it. He performed fairly well in class and on assessments but marked that he could not do the task when reflecting on the can-do statements. I reminded him of his success and his achievement, but he changed his response: “I do it so I would leave him alone and not because he believed he was successful. It was then that I realized the root of the problem was his negative self-perception. He did not view himself as a good student in any area and especially not in Spanish. I needed a new tool to reach Sam.

While Sam was in sixth grade, I added a list of effective learning strategies to or language biography (see table on opposite page) that I created after analyzing the strategies used by the successful learners in my class. I developed the list because my struggling and reluctant learners needed a better tool for identifying the right strategies and even my successful learners need a reminder sometimes. Like the can-do statements, the children would evaluate their use of the strategies four times a year. For the first round of reflections, I knew I needed to guide the students through the process and discuss with them why these strategies were vital to their success in my class, and I knew that talk needed to be in English.

I speak in English so rarely that many of my kids forget that I speak English, and any time I switch to English during class the response is the same: jaws drop, eyes are wide open and there is silence. When it was time to talk about effective language learning strategies in English, I capitalized on their undivided attention to present my thoughts.

I began my speech explaining that there are not children who are “good” at Spanish or who are “bad” at Spanish; instead, there are kids who use the right strategies and those who do not. If they believed they were “bad” at Spanish, they needed to change the strategies they used and they would be more successful. After my speech, I asked the children to reflect on their own use of the strategies. I read through each reflection and when a child’s reflection did not match the behavior in class, we discussed each of our perceptions of the use of the strategy.

After our focus on strategies, I was sure that was the key to turning things around for Sam. I was wrong. I saw many of my struggling learners start to make changes that led to more success in class, but Sam continued to do the minimum and did not apply himself or seem to enjoy class at all. A few Spanish classes later, I asked Sam to talk with me in the hallway. I told him that during the next Spanish class I wanted him to focus on the strategy “I will watch Sra. Dann” and I did not care if he did anything else for the rest of the class period, just watch me. I promised him that if he used that strategy, Spanish class would be less tortuous for him.

As I watched by Sam during the next Spanish class, I whispered, “Remember, all you have to do is watch me.” For the entire class period, I saw something other than the top of his head from across the room; I saw his eyes and the spark of understanding. He understood what I said! He was far from loving class, but he experienced enough success that day to try again the next Spanish class. The successes began to build, and I saw him producing more and more Spanish than ever before.

My favorite Sam memory happened near the end of his sixth grade year. In the fall I administered a writing assessment where the students wrote a friendly letter, entirely in Spanish, to a pretend child in Mexico. They could not use any resources, just what they remembered. In the spring, the students took the assessment again, and once it was scored, I passed back both the fall and the spring assessments. Sam wrote one sentence for the fall assessment. He filled three-fourths of the page with text on the spring assessment. Before I collected the papers from everyone, I asked Sam to hold up both of his assessments and show the class why he should win the award for most improved. He showed his peers both papers and made his case: “It all clapped for him, some of them with mouths gaping open.”

Not every day is a perfect Spanish class for Sam. If he misses several days of school, getting back into the groove requires a prompt from me: “Remember to watch me, and you will understand better.” The bad days are now few and far between, but I know when I see the top of his head instead of his eyes I have a better tool to get him back on track. He occasionally raises his hand and gives answers, which is progress. More importantly, he has learned that when he applies the right strategies he can be successful in my class, and I hope it is a lesson that he applies to other areas in his life.

**APPLYING WHAT I LEARNED**

Sam taught me a lot about how to better reach my reluctant learners. I am now much more proactive than reactive. I pull the kids aside much sooner and talk strategies, and then I pile on the positive reinforcement. When they slip, we immediately start talking strategies to get them back on the path to learning. Some kids catch on right away and others need more time, more attention and more love. I am grateful for the second chance to reach Sam because it made me a better teacher for all of my students.

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Communicating in Languages Other Than English

Part I

by Tammy Dann

STANDARD 1.1: STUDENTS ENGAGE IN CONVERSATIONS, PROVIDE AND OBTAIN INFORMATION, EXPRESS FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS, AND EXCHANGE OPINIONS.

This standard focuses on interpersonal (between people) communication. If you visit your child’s language class you may see methods, strategies and activities that were not used when you learned a foreign language.

Total Physical Response combines listening with physical movement. Actions are used to represent vocabulary taught in the second language. This is a very engaging way to introduce new vocabulary in a meaningful way.

With the Natural Approach, teachers work to make the language meaningful and memorable. In the beginning, the focus is on listening. The teacher uses a sequence of questions that gradually shift students from the listening to the speaking mode. This method is similar to the way in which your child learned his/her native language.

Some teachers use passwords or language ladders. These are selected phrases that are memorized as chunks. They are taught, and then posted with a visual to help the child remember the meaning of the words.

Rhymes, chants, and songs are fun ways to teach children chunks of language. Often when a child cannot remember a word in the target language, the teacher only needs to hum the song where she learned the word and the child will be able to produce the forgotten word. These also provide insight into the target culture.

In the early second language class, you may see partner and small group activities that are designed to allow your child to practice the language with different peers. There can be information exchange where the children are interviewing and conversing with each other, finding similarities and differences, or following and giving directions. These activities are student-centered and build on students’ language skills and interests.

What can I do at home?

• Have your child teach you the actions and vocabulary that s/he is learning at school.
• Read a list of vocabulary from your child’s teacher and create your own passwords or language ladders in your home.
• Have your child teach you any songs, chants, or rhymes s/he is learning at school.

STANDARD 1.2: STUDENTS UNDERSTAND AND INTERPRET WRITTEN AND SPOKEN LANGUAGE ON A VARIETY OF TOPICS.

This standard focuses on the interpretation and understanding of written and spoken language. It involves one-way listening and reading in which the learner works with a variety of materials.

Listening is considered by many teachers and researchers to be the cornerstone of language development (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004). As children are beginning to learn a language, their teacher will focus on developing their listening skills in the language.

In order to develop students’ listening skills, teachers must use the target language for classroom instruction.

Storytelling is often used in a language class. At the beginning of a child’s language class, the teacher will tell stories containing large number of visuals and actions to help convey the meaning. By introducing stories in the target language, the teacher is able to introduce vocabulary in a meaningful way and he/she can also teach certain aspects of the culture from which the story comes.

Reading allows children to draw on their own experiences. They will often work with longer texts and authentic materials. Many of the pre-reading strategies used by the classroom teacher are used by the language teacher.

What can I do at home?

• Look for authentic literature such as newspapers, websites, and magazines in the target language to share with your child.
• Look through the materials together to find familiar words. Make a list of words you both recognize.
• Use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words.
• Listen to songs or watch TV shows in the target language with your child.
• Simply buying videos and asking your child to watch them alone will not help to develop any second language skills on his/her part.
• Listen for and write down for familiar words. Discuss with your child what you hear.

CONCLUSION

The three modes of communication do not occur in isolation during instruction. Your child’s teacher will have a variety of activities that help your child develop his/her interpersonal and interpretive skills in the target language.


NNELL can assist teachers, parents and administrators with learning and advocacy efforts. Contact your State Representative today at http://www.nnell.org/state_reps.shtml. We would love to hear from you!

This article was written by Tammy Dann. It is full of tips and resources that can be found at www.nnell.org. Teachers may reproduce it and send it home in their students’ backpacks. Send suggestions and comments to Janine Erickson, NNELL’s Early Language Advocate. She is currently NNELL’s membership secretary.

You can read more about the Communication Standard in Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century, available from ACTFL.

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