A View of the Past
The Fourth Decade (1993-2002)

by Lisa Harshbarger

MANY OF THE ARTICLES FROM THE FOURTH DECADE OF *ENGLISH TEACHING FORUM* discuss the impact that context has upon the success of any language teaching methodology. The efficacy of using methods developed for ESL contexts in EFL contexts was questioned by more than one author during this period, which some researchers have called the beginning of a "post-methods" era. Increasingly, teachers were urged to make their own decisions about how best to plan and implement lessons, including their use of materials. As a result, effective instruction was seen more as how well the teacher developed and taught a course that met learners' needs and presented content in a meaningful way than how well the teacher followed a given method.

Many articles published in the *Forum* from 1993 to 2002 concerned course content, encompassing more than the traditional topics of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Professional and academic content that learners would need in their future employment became central components of English courses, and project work and process writing were used to integrate target language skills and professional knowledge. During this decade, readers were introduced to new trends in continuous assessment, journal writing, corpus linguistics, and classroom use of information technology.

In addition, the meaning of the term learner needs began to broaden. Learner motivation was still important, but learning styles and strategies, multiple intelligences, and critical thinking became important as well. Cooperative learning and learner autonomy were promoted as effective ways to meet learners' needs.

In the pages of this journal, we also notice that teacher education programs began to place more emphasis upon continuous teacher development throughout one's career. Teachers are given formal and informal opportunities to reflect, engage in action research, and develop professional portfolios. The purpose of this reflective work is to encourage educators to recognize their strengths and define concerns as they make day-to-day and long-term decisions about what, when, and how to teach and why. The staff of *English Teaching Forum* hopes that, as this publication enters its fifth decade, it will continue to be an important professional development resource for English language teachers around the world.

1. The complete texts of these four articles can be found in the on-line version of the *Forum* at http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/. Complete information for the references cited in these excerpts is also available on-line.

REFLECTION IN THE ESL/EFL CLASSROOM

Ali Yahya Al-Arishi

Can an ESL/FL class be too interactive? Many of the popular interactive activities emanating from Communicative Language Teaching and the affective/humanistic domain exploit the senses through the use of sensual bombardment, physical movement, realia, and pictures in promoting language acquisition.

Classroom techniques that use an intuitive grasp of language are brainstorming, fast-writing, and talking-off-the-top-of-your-head. The conspicuous-action/spontaneous-response classroom taps two of the major sources of knowledge—sensation and intuition. But are there not situations where the third source—reflection—should be called upon? A learner needs time to do some negotiating with herself/himself. Most communicative situations do not require reflective thinking: an intuitive, automatic response suffices.

In the language classroom, I believe activities should be designed that allow for the use of introspection before, during, and after an interaction. Four types of activities can do this:

1. Complement brainstorming activities with brain-besieging activities.

Brainstorming is one of the most effective classroom techniques for encouraging interaction. However, I have found that such an approach should not be used with more introspectively oriented topics. To preface a story about friendship by soliciting immediate comments from students about what they look for in a friend often will produce vague generalizations such as trustworthiness or honesty. It is better to let students read the story about friendship; this will give them a perspective about friendship. The teacher might comment, "What does a person find in a friend that she or he doesn't find in an acquaintance?" By seeming puzzled about the answer to the question, the teacher will convey the impression that s/he is uncertain about the answer and that the question needs reflection. Hopefully the question will lay siege to the brain of each of the students, and reflection will be encouraged. The question can be returned to in a later class session; the intervening time essential for reflective things will result in interpersonal interaction of a higher quality.

2. Develop activities that encourage hypothesis-formulating.

Students need activities that allow them to use the target language to make discoveries for themselves: solve a problem, formulate a rule, or exemplify a principle. Either inductive (example to generality) or deductive (generality to example) reasoning can be used. When the journal entries of my beginning students manifest some problems with English capitalization, I point this out and append almost casually, "Of course, there are some rules for capitalization." The immediate response from the students is usually "Give us the rules."

My reply is, "I think you can figure them out for yourselves."

At the next class I give each student a handout that contains a paragraph manifesting eight rules of the English capitalization system. On the lower half of the handout, I have typed eight times, "In English a capital letter is used _____. Example(s) from the paragraph: _____." Students work by themselves in formulating the rules, although they may ask yes/no questions of me or other class members. An inductive-reasoning activity such as this builds up students' confidence in their "control" over the target language.

3. Make use of process-oriented activities.

Unlike the rule-formulating activity discussed above, the value of a process-oriented activity lies in the proceeding, not in the end. Since I have found that most textbooks do not incorporate process-oriented activities, I have my students select and follow an unfolding newspaper story (an election or the World Cup competition) or an ongoing TV serial. A part of several periods a week is set aside for students at the small-group or whole-class level to analyze what is happening, to compare and contrast this with what has happened, and to venture predictions about what will happen in the news event or the TV serial. Working with short stories in which the ending is omitted and students must speculate on how the author resolved the story's problem is also valuable.

4. Plan the synthesizing of activities.

Not all knowledge comes neatly sequenced. The highest function of the reflective mind is to synthesize, to combine often diverse conceptions into a coherent whole. In synthesizing activities, meaning is created by each individual student.

A synthesizing group of activities that I am planning will focus on some centuries-old watchtowers that dot the mountaintops around Abha, Saudi Arabia, the location of the university where I teach. Some of the semester-long activities are:
- an outing to one of these watchtowers
- a follow-up project to the trip chosen by students

Most students will assume that the activity has been completed after this second stage, but after a couple of weeks, I will arrange:
- a showing of a video compiled from TV coverage of the activities surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall
- a brief lecture by an invited psychologist about harmful psychological barriers
- a study of Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall"

At the end of the semester, I will ask each student to make a semantic map consisting of a large number of circles in which they write the titles of activities (many more than those listed above) that they thought were valuable. At the next class I will ask them to draw lines connecting the circles, using whatever relational criteria they wish. In all classes, students need to be able to reflect on what they have done and to make their own personal synthesis.

PROJECT WORK INTEGRATED INTO ESP CLASSES

Ken Sheppard and Fredricka L. Stoller

U. S. A. ○ 1995

Project work is particularly effective in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) settings because it lends itself easily to authentic language use, a focus on language at the discourse rather than sentence level, authentic tasks, and learner centeredness. Most importantly, project work leads to purposeful language use because it requires personal involvement on the part of the students.

What is project work?

Project work involves multi-skill activities which focus on a theme of interest. In project work, students work together to achieve a common purpose, a concrete outcome, (for example, a brochure, a bulletin board display, a video, an article). Typically it requires students to work together over several days or weeks, both inside and outside the classroom, often in collaboration with speakers of the target language.

Developing a project

Although recommendations as to the best way to develop projects vary, most are consistent with the eight fundamental steps described below:

1. Define a theme. In collaboration with students, define a theme that will amplify the students' understanding of an aspect of their future work and provide relevant language practice.

2. Determine the final outcome. Define the final outcome of the project (for example, a written report, brochure, debate, video) and its presentation (collective or individual). Agree on objectives for both content and language.

3. Structure the project. Collectively identify the information that students will need and the steps they must take to obtain it (library research, letters, interviews, etc). Decide on each student's role and put the students into working groups.

4. Identify language skills and strategies. Integrate lessons into the curriculum that prepare students for Steps 5, 6, and 7. Identify the language skills which students will need to gather and compile information for their project. For example, will they need to write letters? Will they interview native speakers? Determine the skills and strategies that students will need to compile information (Step 6). Plan activities to prepare them for these tasks. Identify the skills and strategies that students will need to present the final project (Step 7). As they prepare their presentation, they may need to work on the language (written or spoken) of formal reporting.

5. Gather information. After students design instruments for data collection, have them gather information inside and outside the classroom, individually, in pairs, and in groups.

6. Compile and analyze information. Students should compile information they have gathered, compare their findings, and decide how to organize them for efficient presentation.

7. Present final product. Students will present the outcome of their project work as a culminating activity.

8. Evaluate the project. In this final phase, students and teacher reflect on the steps taken to accomplish their objectives and the language, communicative skills, and information they have acquired in the process. They can also discuss the value of their experience and its relationship to future vocational needs.

A sample project

To illustrate how these generic steps can be translated into practice, we outline a project entitled "Purchasing a Computer," designed by two ESP teachers of business English in Italy.

1. Students agree to compile and compare information about four computer models in order to recommend which system their school should purchase.

2. Students decide on the final outcome: subgroups will report on the information they have gathered at a computer trade fair and recommend a purchase. The whole class will then decide which computer to buy. Together they will write a formal recommendation and submit it to the head administrator of their school.

3, 5, 6, and 7. Students will review advertisements promoting different computer models and brands to discover the criteria used in comparing computers. Students will survey school personnel to determine how the new computer will be used. They will inquire about such criteria as memory, warranty, software compatibility, maintenance, and cost. Students will decide how to obtain information about four computers on the market (trade magazines, promotional literature, computer trade show) and summarize the materials they have accumulated. Students will prepare an oral presentation that summarizes their findings and concludes with a recommendation for the purchase of a particular system. The class will debate the merits of each model and decide on a recommendation to be submitted to the school administration.

4. In the process of completing the project, student may need to practice those language skills and strategies that they determined to be important at different stages. Students will read a passage that compares computer models. They will practice skimming and scanning for key information. Students will write business letters to secure information from manufacturers about their products. Students will rehearse the formal oral presentation of a product comparison using a visual aid.

8. The teacher and students will enumerate the steps they completed, consider what they achieved in the process, and discuss the problems they encountered.

Conclusion

ESP teachers can break with routine by spending a week or more doing something besides grammar drills and technical reading. The benefits of project work also include improved student motivation and enhanced awareness of their language needs, integrated skills practice, and a more stimulating and satisfying learning and teaching experience.

TEACHING PORTFOLIOS AS ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Jesús A. Bastidas A.
1989 • COLOMBIA

In education, portfolios became popular in the mid-1980s as a logical follow-up to writing folders. A portfolio, as an assessment tool, has been defined as a purposeful and systematic collection of a student's work that demonstrates the student's progress, efforts, and accomplishments. Portfolios are vehicles for ongoing assessment which represent activities and processes more than products. The teaching portfolio (TP) could be defined as a selected collection of documents and materials that exemplifies the teacher's theories, development, and achievements as a result of a continuous process of reflection and self-evaluation. It is important to add that the TP is not a one-time collection of documents, but a means of collecting representative material over time.

Contents of teaching portfolios

Teaching portfolios will vary with the teachers who create them. Here are some of the items that various authors have suggested be included in the TP:

A. Teacher's beliefs and philosophy, or theory, of education
  Principles of human learning and language learning • Principles of language teaching

B. Program Design
  Statement about your students' needs to learn English • Goals and objectives of the courses you teach • Principles of language assessment • Statement about your role as a teacher • Statement about the use of the first language in the classroom

C. Procedure/Methodology
  Effective exercises, activities, and tasks • Effective tips for classroom management • Lesson plans

D. Professional Development
  1. Evidence of teaching effectiveness
    Students' evidence of learning • Actual products of learning • Audio and video tapes of selected lessons • Teacher-created instructional materials • Language assessment tests
  2. Evidence of growth and development
    Recent changes incorporated into teaching • Workshops, seminars or conferences attended • Articles or books you have read recently • New ideas from students, colleagues, or administration • Organizations you belong to

E. Personal Achievements
  Articles you have published • Honors and distinctions • Clippings about your class from the school newsletter or local paper

F. Reflections
  Immediate impressions or thoughts on a specific class, disappointments, and thrills • Students' evaluation data from your courses • Statements from colleagues who have observed your teaching • Results of principal's or supervisor's evaluation • Self-evaluation of teaching performance • Analysis and reflections about the results of these evaluations • A plan to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for future self-improvement

Promoting reflective teaching through the use of teaching portfolios

Although teachers can reflect on their teaching by discussing their concerns with colleagues or others, the results would soon fade from mind. Teachers who want to begin a process of serious reflection need to look for effective ways to assess their teaching practices, and the TP can constitute one alternative. The written documents are always available to be reviewed and to serve as clear evidence of the teacher's thinking, reasoning, and actions.

Once you have defined the purpose of your TP, decide on the types of entries you would include. Begin with a statement of your philosophy of education and beliefs about language and about learning a second or a foreign language. After collecting and/or writing the appropriate entries, classify them into categories and place them in your portfolio. Bozzone (1994) recommends that you date each entry and add a brief note that explains your reason for selecting it. Finally, set aside some time to revise, add, modify, or discard contents of your TP.

Murray (1994) recommends preparing and keeping the TP in consultation with others. Collaboration from colleagues, students, administrators, or professors is necessary to keep the process of reflection open to critical comments and to improve teaching effectiveness. This is particularly useful for pre-service or beginning teachers who can benefit from a mentor's collaboration.

Conclusion

Nobody can deny that the teaching profession has similar problems in most countries. Teachers are underpaid and have a heavy workload. They are so busy fulfilling their teaching responsibilities that they do not have time to question the educational reforms which are usually imposed by the governments. In addition, many teachers are so focused on teaching that they do not have time to notice if their students are learning.

We cannot forget that change begins with each one of us, and one of the first things we need to modify is our routinized way of teaching. To accomplish this we need to stop in our daily journey and reflect consciously on our job. If teachers can demonstrate growth based on their own self-evaluation and their teaching portfolios, they will be equipped to exercise control over their teaching, to critically question educational reforms, to support teaching as a respectable profession, and to demand the appropriate recognition of this profession in their society.

Materials for Teacher Autonomy

Ingrid Wisniewska

Czech Republic · 1998

Teacher autonomy is a precondition for learner autonomy (Little 1995). Learner autonomy is the ability to take control of one's own learning in order to maximize its full potential. Methodology workshops for teachers which incorporate elements of autonomy can enable them to realise the benefits of gradually introducing more learner autonomy into their classrooms.

Background

"What do you expect to gain from this course?" I ask this question of English teachers who attend in-service methodology workshops. Their answer? "New ideas" and "new materials." Relatively inexperienced teachers often believe that a handful of exciting new games is what they really need. Even teachers who have been teaching other subjects for many years come to methodology workshops expecting to receive new ideas and materials from ELT publications.

Given these expectations, it may seem appropriate for the teacher trainer to present methodology workshops based around practical, ready-to-use ideas for the classroom. In the short term, the benefits seem to be very high. At the end of the session, the teachers walk happily away with a collection of new activities, and the trainer feels the satisfaction of having "given" them what they wanted. In practice, how many of those teachers will remember the activities well enough to feel confident in using them with their students? Maybe some of the teachers will try them out in their class once, using the material just as it had been given to them, but the materials will probably not have a significant impact on their teaching.

Designing materials

I decided to refocus the aim of my training sessions to encourage more teacher autonomy while still satisfying the thirst for new ideas. I selected activities which could be used many times over if they were adapted by teachers to their own teaching contexts. Then I asked the teachers to adapt the material for their students and share the results of their work.

Here is the basic framework:

1. Teachers try out the language activity. They comment on its advantages and the potential problems of using it with students.
2. Teachers brainstorm possible themes or grammar/vocabulary areas for the activity. These are written on the board.
3. Each pair or group of teachers selects one theme or area to work with and adapts the activity for use with their students.
4. The completed work is passed around to other groups for comments and displayed on the wall and/or copied for all participants.
5. Teachers reflect on the session and how they could introduce more learner autonomy into their English lessons.

Here is an activity to illustrate this procedure:

1. Each teacher receives a task sheet. Their task is to walk around the class and ask questions to fill in the blanks with the names of other people in the group.

   Find Someone Who

   _____ Likes to sing English songs to her students.
   _____ Usually does a dictation at least once a week.
   _____ Sometimes uses video in her class.
   _____ Gives homework in every lesson.
   _____ Is never late for class.

2. After completing the activity, teachers brainstorm different topics which could be used for practise. They came up with grammar (past tense, future tense, prepositions) and themes (hobbies, food, holidays).
3. For this activity, each group had to produce from 10 to 15 sentences for a new task sheet. For example, in one workshop, teachers prepared a task sheet on celebrating Christmas that provided practice using the past tense.
4. Commenting on each others' work enables teachers to draw on the pool of experience in the group. Practical queries can come up and be discussed without the trainer having to step in.
5. Teachers can make a neat copy of their work to be displayed for other teachers to copy or photocopied for everyone. This validates the results of the teachers' work.
6. At this final stage, teachers reflect on the elements of learner autonomy they have experienced in the workshop: learners choose the topics they want to work on; they produce materials which help them in their learning; peer- and self-evaluation is encouraged.

Advantages and disadvantages of teacher-produced materials

Some advantages of this approach for teachers are:

It is empowering. Many teachers lack confidence in using their own ideas. • It is memorable. Teachers have made a personal investment of time and energy. • It is creative. Teachers working together can come up with many more ideas than any trainer, and the ideas are more relevant to their context.

One disadvantage for teachers is it takes up more (class) time. An advantage for the trainer is being able to see how well teachers have grasped the communicative principles behind the activity.

Conclusion

For many teachers, the idea of designing their own materials seems impractical. Adapting materials in a training session can show that it needn't take a lot of time. The teachers I have worked with have seemed surprised and pleased at the wealth of ideas that were produced in their groups. This approach can give teachers a boost to their confidence and be a positive and empowering experience of teacher autonomy. Let's hope it will also lead to more learner autonomy in the classroom.