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Diversifying the Input and the Outcome: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Creating an enjoyable classroom session is considered an essential goal of teaching (Dornyei, 2001) as this can help to enhance learning outcome (Hamilton 2010; Klein, Noe & Wang 2006; Oxford & Shearing 1994). This article reflects a case study in which attempts were made to turn the classroom into not only a delightful place for language learning, but also a stage for personal enjoyment and performance for college students. The diversity in the input and outcome was achieved via the use of various materials as warmers and different types of assessment activities. Observation showed that our students truly enjoyed these activities and they manifested improved creativity, confidence and language skills development. Implications and suggestions for other class contexts were also discussed.

Keywords: Motivation, teaching materials, learning autonomy, assessment

INTRODUCTION

It has been widely believed that creating a relaxing atmosphere for the learners is an important task for the teachers (Dornyei 2001; Lewis & Hills 1985; Mitcham 2009; Tudor 2009; Umstatter 2002) because such an environment can enhance the learning outcome (Hamilton 2010; Klein, Noe & Wang 2006; Oxford & Shearing 1994).

With an aim to create a diversity of input and outcome for the students' learning and to turn their classrooms into a place not only for textbooks and exams but also for fun activities, this article reports on a case study where the introduction of authentic materials as warmers and various activities for assessment can serve these purposes in our context.

CONTEXT

The case study was conducted with 80 final-year English-major students from two classes in a three-year college in Vietnam. While 30 students were trained to become school teachers of English, the other 50 students were trained to work for the tourist industry in the local

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province. The case study lasted for an academic year and it involved four courses of British Life, American Life, Cross-cultural Communication and American Literature, with each course consisting of 15 lessons of 150 minutes each. Most of the students came from the rural areas and they experienced considerable pressure from their job prospects, families or studies, which made learning a burden to many of them. In this context, it was considered useful for the teacher to create a relaxing classroom environment to encourage the students in their learning.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

While language games are often used to motivate learners, especially younger ones (Casanave 2002; Wright, Betteridge & Buckby 2006), many of these games were not suitable to the interests and maturity of our college students. Therefore, authentic materials, namely songs, films, pictures, stories and poems were adopted for this purpose instead. These materials can provide not only lots of fun for the class (Baurain 2000; Moon 2010; Tissington & LaCour 2010; Tran 2003; Tudor 2009) but also useful input to students in language learning. For example, songs can improve students' pronunciation (Luu & Pham 2010; Salcedo 2010), films can help them to learn about cultural content (Qiang, Teng & Wolff 2007) and pictures can facilitate their imagination (Wong 2004). Likewise, stories and poems can provide them with social and cultural values (Ho 2002; Hall 2003; Miccoli 2003), promote their language (Elgar 2001; Tissington & LaCour 2010), and improve their emotional development as well as thinking skills (Ghosn 2002).

In our context, warmers were understood as short activities which lasted from 5 to 15 minutes at the beginning of each class to create a delightful atmosphere for the students. For this purpose, motivation was the main criteria in selecting materials while accompanying activities were designed to explore the content of the materials to develop students' general knowledge and language improvement. Thus, these warmers were not necessarily linked to the content of the lesson that followed and in this way, the knowledge that students learned from these warmers was more varied and not confined to the lesson prescribed by the syllabus.

Songs and pictures

In our context, popular English songs were used to provide students with some enjoyment and they served as a starting point to generate some discussion. For example, after listening to a song, students were asked to talk about the songwriter, the singer, or their taste in music and their favorite singers. This kind of information was prepared by the teacher in the form of questions for a quiz that students were expected to answer. Competitions among groups made this kind of activities even more interesting to the class. Songs which were unfamiliar to the students were employed as listening texts with language tasks like gap fill, matching or questions and answers. The songs we used included popular songs available on YouTube and video clips from Britain Got

Talent and American Got Talent which were well liked by our students.

A wide range of pictures/photos about different topics including nature, animals, people, places of interest, countries and cultures were used for quizzes, discussion or further information. For example, after watching a set of pictures about a cave newly discovered in the country, students worked in teams to answer questions on this cave. Pictures about famous places in the world or various kinds of animals were also shown and students were asked to tell what they they know about these places or animals and the teacher later gave them basic information about what they saw in the form of a quiz. Students were sometimes asked to watch photos about different people and create a profile of a character based on a photo and answer questions about this character's life, as suggested by Wong (2004).

Films and video clips

Short films or video clips on YouTube which varied from Oscar award-winning animated short films like Oktapodi (2007), Lavatory love story (2009) to inspiring advertisements were often chosen for students to watch and these films/clips served as cues for conversations between pairs about what they liked or disliked about the clips. Selected parts of longer films about different countries were also shown, for example the Iranian "Children in Heaven" or Indian's "Darling". The language in these films was relevant to the students' levels so that it did not hinder the students' comprehension. Activities such as dubbing, acting, role-playing (Qiang, Teng &Wolff 2007) were not used due to time allocation but students were asked to provide the words for silent videos like Mr. Bean series and Charlie Chaplin film clips.

Poetry and short stories

For our warmers, none of the literature with linguistic or content challenges to our students was chosen. Instead, poems which were readily understood and appreciated by our students, such as those from Life in Words and Words in Life (edited by Maley, Mukundan & Rai 2009) or Asian Poems for Young Readers (edited by Maley & Mukundan 2009) and selected haikus were introduced. For example, after reading the poem "Can You Let Me Pass the Exam, Please?" (Appendix A), students were asked to work in pairs to talk about the backgrounds of those learners and to identify the most or least acceptable excuse(s) in the poem. They were also required to role play selected scenarios from the poem or to create new excuses, making use of gestures, facial expressions and voice effects to increase efficiency of the excuses given. In these warmers, language activities developed from the poems varied from simple comprehension or interpretation questions to creative writing. One useful activity was to ask students to recite the poems in two different ways to show different moods or different personality.

Short stories were another source of materials that were used to enrich the students' feelings, living experiences

and literary appreciation. In the form of PowerPoint slides, illustrated with music and pictures, the stories chosen often highlighted human values, such as love, friendship, sacrifice, gratitude, patience and optimism which students could relate to their own experiences. Students were often asked to talk about their favourite character in the story, to share their impressions or raise any questions that they might have about the story.

ASSESSMENT

In addition to the written exams which made up half of the total course score as required by the college, another half of the score came from other tasks, such as presentations, quizzes, storytelling, portfolios and minidramas which had been used effectively in a similar context (Le 2001).

Presentations

For courses such as "American Life" and "British Life", students worked in groups of three or four to give a presentation on a topic of their choice about the USA or the UK. The topics students chosen included Oscar awards, Disneyland in the USA, the Boeing company, places of interest in London, popular British music bands and famous castles in the UK, etc. The teacher was also available for guidance during the preparation stage so that students could give informative and interesting PowerPoint presentations. Criteria about content structure, language use, voice, body language and visual aids (Bishop & Kimball 2009) as well as timing were specified to the students in advance.

Story telling

As our students were trained to become teachers or tour guides, storytelling was considered a highly useful skill for them. Therefore, it was chosen to form part of the assessment of the American literature course. In pairs, students talked about a film or a story of their choice which varied from such famous films as Gone with the Wind, King's Speech or Frankenstein to great stories like After Twenty Years (O' Henry), A White Heron (Orne Jewett), Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat (Roald Dahl) and Snow Goose (Paul Gallico). To help students with their storytelling skills, sample videos on effective story telling on YouTube were also shown and analysed. Apart from clear language, other requirements regarding the use of voice, illustrated pictures and music were emphasized and assessed in their performance.

Minidramas

As a group activity, mini-dramas were used in the literature and cross-cultural communication course where students were asked to produce part of a story they had read or a scenario they had experienced. While the students were expected to write their own scripts and directtheir own mini-dramas, the teacher offered to help with script editing or giving guidance on staging. Stories students chose to perform for the literature course included The Magic

Barrel (Bernard Mullamud), Soapy and The Cop (O'Henry), Story of an Hour (Kate Chopin) while mini-dramas for the cross-cultural communication course were built on critical incidents that students had read or experienced.

Quizzes

Quizzes were another form of assessment which the students were allowed to choose in place of a presentation on a topic for the course on American or British Life. These quizzes were required to encompass information that the students had learnt during the course and students were asked to add excitement to their quizzes with pictures, sound effects, as well as small awards for correct answers.

Portfolios

As a good way to enhance learners' autonomy, portfolios (i.e. Le 2004; Zhenhui 2005) were used as an assessment activity where our students were asked to produce a collection of useful materials for their future jobs either as teachers or tour guides. Students worked in pairs to collect materials on some topics of their choice about the UK/US and inter-cultural interaction. With the guidance and feedback from the teacher, students learnt to select and arrange the materials to professional "products" which they could use as reference materials for their future job prospects. . However, in the literature course, students' portfolios comprised individual work which consisted of poems that they liked or had written and summaries of the stories that they read as a form of extensive reading for the course.

NON-ASSESSMENT TASKS

Poetry writing

As a way to develop students' abilities to the maximum, students were encouraged to write poems. Since these students had never written poems in English language before, they were advised to imitate the forms of the poems introduced in the warmers to relate to their own experiences. For example, students were asked to use the form of the poem "Can You Let Us Pass the Exams, Please?" to write about students' excuses. Another example in the Appendix was the poem Blue (Saito 2008) which inspired the students to write about their own perceptions of different colors. Nearly all students wrote their own versions and the teacher organized a session for the students to share their poems with their class.

English performances

Like poetry writing, music performances were a voluntary activity. These classes were encouraged to give English musical performances and were encouraged to organize celebrations like New Year, Christmas, or Halloween with activities such as singing, dancing and dramatization.

DISCUSSION

The warmers and the assessment in our context seemed to have resulted in a desirable outcome for the class. The first change was a very relaxing atmosphere

observed in the classroom, with the warmers helping to break away the monotony of the lessons. The impact of this change was witnessed in students' positive attitude towards learning by going to class earlier than expected, eagerly waiting to watch a film/video clip, to read a story, or to listen to a song. These students even asked for these activities during the break time. In addition, videos like Mr. Bean and Charlie Chaplin's series created wholehearted laughter while award-winning films were often useful in developing the students' critical thinking skills. The variety of materials helped the teacher to introduce various kinds of knowledge and skills to the students which ranged from social knowledge about films, music to cultural knowledge about countries, to language and academic skills, such as presentation, research, and computer skills.

The pleasant and supportive atmosphere is believed to increase students' voluntary participation in class activities (Goll, 2002). In our case, students' increased involvement was manifested not only during the warmers, but also during the lessons that followed, and in their assessment.

For example, the students' presentations and quizzes included a wide range of illustrations with pictures, stories, video clips, and music, which suggested some influence that they gained from the materials shown for the warmers in the class. In addition, their storytelling and acting performances showed remarkable creativity in writing scripts, selecting and developing scenes, and preparing props. Likewise, their poems, irrespective of the quality, were well received by their peers, which increased the students' self esteem, especially with less proficient students who never thought that they could write poems in English.

In summary, the introduction of the warmers and various assessment activities seemed to play a big role in transforming the classroom from a serious place for lessons and exams into an inspiring environment where students enjoyed their learning. In addition, the input was not only restricted to the lessons and the outcome was not only seen in formal tests and examinations. Though the whole working process was an excitement for the teacher who witnessed positive change in the classroom, it was still a challenge for the teacher to be in constant search for interesting materials for the warmers. In addition, the diverse assessment tasks required the teacher of additional time to assist the students in their tasks.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, teaching ESL is not simply teaching a school subject (Stockton, 2001), but it also aims to equip learners with practical knowledge and skills beyond their classroom to prepare them for lifelong learning.

Despite our observation and findings obtained in this case study, the adoption of these activities in other contexts may need further experiment in other contexts. In this process, adaptation of activities can be necessary to suit the students' abilities, needs and interests, as well as requirements

about time, assessment and facilities of each institution. To ensure higher rate of success, it is highly recommended for the teacher to collect a bank of inspiring materials for the warmers. Newspapers and television programs can be a rich source of materials that can add updated information to the students' knowledge and create awareness and involvement in current issues in the society and the world. Another recommendation is to ask the learners to conduct warmers for their class as this can reduce the workload for the teacher and increase the students' responsibility and autonomy. In addition, assessed tasks should also be designed to meet the needs' and abilities of the students to avoid unnecessary pressure on them. Since assessment is generally considered important to the students, students should be involved in the discussion about the form of assessment adopted, and that their opinions need adequate consideration.

As William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) once said, "Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire". Thus, these activities deserve a trial in other contexts to create a new and effective atmosphere in class and make a useful difference to our teaching and learning of English language in an ESL context

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APPENDIX

Sample poems

Can you let me pass the exam please?

Tan Bee Tin

Dear Teacher
I'm stressed
Because English is not my mother tongue
And I live in a foreign country
And my cat died the day before my exam.
Can you let me pass the exam please?
I failed your exam
Because my pen broke down.
Just when I knew what to write
And the invigilator said, "Time".
Can you let me pass the exam please?
I missed your exam
Because my relatives arrived in town
And I had to show them around
And I forgot that we had the exam.
Can you let me pass the exam please?
I was sick
Because my mother was sick
And my stomach also got sick
Because of food we ate last night.
Can you let me pass the exam please?
I was depressed
Because my son failed his exam
And my wife ran away with another guy
And my boss gave me too much work.
Can you let me pass the exam please?
I did badly
Because the library barred me from
Borrowing books due to unpaid fines.
And the light went out just as I decided to study.
Can you let me pass the exam please?
Can you let us pass the exam please?
Because we already failed your exam twice
And we know you can pass us
On "Confessionate" grounds as we confess.
Can we all pass the exam please?

Source
Maley, A., Mukundan, J., & Rai, V. (Eds). 2009. *Life in Words and Words in Life* (pp. 16-17). Bagbazar, Kathmandu. Bhundipuran Prakashan.

Blue

Blue the sky
where the doves fly.
Blue the sea
where the fish swim.
Blue your eyes
where I lose myself.
Blue the moon
that comes every night.
Blue the flower
that I give you.
when I think about you.
Blue the flag
from my country.
Blue the crayon
I wrote your name with
on my heart.

Source
(Saito, A. P., 2008. Between me and the world: Teaching poetry to English language learners. *Teaching Artist Journal, 6*(3), 197-208.