

Plenary

Speaking-based Writing in a Multilevel Context

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ABSTRACT

This presentation deals mainly with performance English in the Freshman English classroom, though the ideas and the conclusions are applicable in most EFL situations. In this context, accommodation of individual differences is particularly important, since EFL students typically have varying experiences in terms of exposure to speaking and writing, and this is especially true of the Freshman English classroom, where students from widely differing majors and backgrounds come together to develop and enhance their English skills. This presentation describes a speaking/writing program that moves from tasks to projects in paying attention to the academic and personal needs of students at all levels and from every major. The program takes a student-centered approach, providing speaking and writing opportunities tailored to academic English, while offering these in a non-threatening learning environment, designed to encourage collaboration and autonomy, and to promote confidence, motivation, problem-solving, and flexibility. It is hoped that this description will show how a task/project-based approach can produce effective results for Korean students at all levels.

Keywords: Speaking, writing, multilevel, tasks, projects, holistic learning

Introduction

The theme of this conference is “Accommodating individual differences in the classroom”. Accordingly, this presentation looks at the topic of speaking and writing for multilevel students, examining how a Freshman English program in particular (and programs for other learners in general) might provide satisfactory learning experiences for

students of different proficiencies, learning styles, learning preferences, and majors. In other words, it answers the question “How can we meet the different learning needs of our students?” One approach is to give students a placement test and then to stream them according to their proficiencies, as measured by the test. However, this approach does not take into account affective, cognitive, and other variables, so that it is not unusual for such classes to have a significant range of proficiencies and learning needs within them.

Another approach is to give students a needs analysis or a deficiency analysis at the beginning of the course, in order to find out what they know and what they need to learn, in terms of the syllabus. This again runs into the problem that students typically have different learning needs, even in terms of vocabulary and grammar, so that the idea of teaching everyone the same thing at the same time, even based on a needs analysis, is inefficient and can be demotivational, since there will always be students who know the lesson content, along with others for whom it is too difficult. This approach also ignores affective variables (anxiety, confidence, motivation, attitudes to learning) and learning environment itself - factors which have been identified as more important than ability: “Without a positive learning atmosphere, students may well gain little or nothing from new curricular infusions. (Mantle-Bromley, 1995, p. 383)”.

In view of these realities, the approach taken by this presentation is to recognize first of all that every learner is unique. Secondly, given the wide range of current learning needs, and the even wider range of possible learning needs in the future, the most effective strategy is to teach students to learn how to learn. Students who have successfully acquired learning strategies will be able to identify their learning or reskilling needs in the future and teach themselves whatever it is that they need to know. Thirdly, the time limitations of the language course must be acknowledged. With two hours per week of student/teacher contact time, spread over two semesters of 15 weeks, students can look forward to a maximum of 60 classroom hours in an academic year. In reality, this teacher-directed learning time is reduced by mid-term and final exams, national holidays, ‘Membership Training’ (student-led initiation camps), and student festivals (not to mention sickness) so that 50 hours is a more realistic estimate. Given that “Intensive EFL course providers estimate that 300-400 hours of study are required to rise one IELTS level” (Graddol, 2007, p. 96) and that the recommend number of hours of tuition needed to move up a level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is 200 hours, it could be concluded that most

university students would need four years of university study in order to show any noticeable progress. However, students who arrive in Freshman English programs in Korea have studied English as a means of preparing for high school entrance and for the university entrance test (College Scholastic Ability Test), which requires extensive knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, to the exclusion of performance skills (speaking and writing). Although many have often forgotten much of what they learned in school – a normal feature of test-preparation for high-stakes, utilitarian tests, they typically possess surprising amounts of lexis that can be accessed even in the restricted timeframe of two hours per week.

Overview: The situation

This brings us to the purpose of university (and other) English courses – one that is often hidden behind textbooks designed for ESL students and career-oriented high-stakes tests such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). While this purpose is rarely outlined in university policy documents or given concrete form in terms of an in-house language program (Kroeker, 2009), Sterling (2002) points out that the pendulum of educational policy around the world tends to swing around four main attractors:

1. To replicate society and culture and promote citizenship – the *socialization* function;
2. To train people for employment – the *vocational* function;
3. To develop the individual and his/her potential – the *liberal* function; and
4. To encourage change towards a fairer society and better world – the *transformative* function. (Sterling, 2002, p.25)

These four goals can be found in the official educational policy of Korea, as presented in the UNESCO World Data review of 2006, though the liberal function (number 3, above) appears to take precedence:

The objectives of Korea's education, under the ideal of Hongik-Ingan, the founding philosopher [sic] of Korea, are to help all people perfect their individual characters, develop the self-sustaining ability to attain independent lives, acquire the qualifications of democratic citizens, participate in the makings of a democratic state and promote the prosperity of all humankind. (UNESCO, 2006)

Such a humanistic view of education is at the heart of traditional education in Korea (Choi-Wan Gee, 2006, pp.

13, 15) and must be taken into consideration at every point of the educational process. It therefore forms the basis of the program under consideration, providing an holistic, whole-person perspective on the acquisition of language and communicative competence. Contemporary philosophers such as Krishnamurti also present a humanistic rationale for education in terms of individual growth:

Though there is a higher and wider significance in life, of what value is our education if we never discover it? (...) as long as education does not cultivate an integrated outlook on life, it has very little significance. (Krishnamurti, 1981, p. 11)

Postman (1995) also offers a humanistic perspective:

Schooling can be about how to make a life, which is quite different from how to make a living. Such an enterprise is not easy to pursue, since our politicians rarely speak of it, our technology is indifferent to it, and our commerce despises it. Nonetheless, it is the weightiest and most important thing to write about. (Postman, 1995, p. x - foreword)

As can be seen from this brief outline, humanistic educational policies in Korea have had to co-exist with and even take second place to utilitarian or vocational considerations of supply and demand, which require secondary students to prepare for the high-stakes tests that represent the only gateway (for those who are not wealthy enough to bypass them) to educational and financial prosperity. One might hope that the stated goals of English programs would place more emphasis on the socialization, liberal and transformative purposes (Sterling, 2002, p. 25), but the broad umbrella of 'Conversation English' does little to define the approach that might be taken by instructors, or the outcomes that might be expected. Given this lack of official direction, it might seem difficult to suggest an appropriate teaching approach. However, viewing the predicament from a different perspective, it could be said that such a lack of direction provides a certain starting point, since it offers a measure of freedom. This was the attitude adopted in the program under consideration, in which a task/project-based syllabus was employed as a pedagogically sound and effective means of promoting positive affect and autonomy through a student-centered, self-directed approach, empowering students in the acquisition of the technical language required in their major fields of study, as well as providing for the development of oral and written English skills.

Ideas and practices

The presentation will show how this philosophical foundation was built into the program, and will consequently offer suggestions about approaches that can be taken in multilevel EFL classrooms. These approaches and techniques can be summarized as follows:

1. Meaning-based learning (adapting the curriculum to student academic and job needs)
2. Student-centered learning environment (including self-assessment and peer editing)
3. Tasks as the unit of instruction, leading to speaking/writing projects
4. Flexibility (suiting the instruction to the students)
5. Multiple, graded reading passages
6. Assessment as a measure of effort and growth (cognitive, affective, social, and linguistic)
7. Website containing links for follow-up reading/writing/watching, etc., as well as teacher resources and grammar activities (www.finchpark.com/KNUFLE)
8. Databank of teaching resources for each Unit of the textbook.

Conclusion

Educational reform has become a popular topic for policy makers in East Asia (Mok, 2006) and a number of measures have been introduced in Korea at secondary level (Kroeker, 2009), though the outcome has usually taken the form of intensified reliance on standardized testing. In such an environment, in which top-down reforms have done little to change the attitudes or achievements of students, this presentation suggests that task/project-based learning offers a student-centered, top-down (local language curriculum) and bottom-up (individual teaching approach) means of developing higher-order thinking skills at secondary and tertiary level, ultimately fostering the qualities to be found in ‘the well-educated person’. It is also argued that the project approach has a number of benefits for teachers and students, including a lifting of workload from the former and increased responsibility for the latter.

Finally, it is suggested that the task/project syllabus is effective in the Korean context, and that projects are particularly effective for students who have proceeded from a TBLT approach, for the following reasons: i) projects

encourage students to take responsibility for learning; ii) projects allow students to choose their own learning path (e.g. to learn how to give a presentation in English about an aspect of their major); iii) projects promote holistic learning, in that students are at the center of the learning process and are accountable for their achievements; iv) the teacher is freed from the role of language model, and becomes a learning resource and counselor; v) assessment is by self- and peer-evaluation, which itself is a consciousness-raising experience, and which tends to be more meaningful and reliable than teacher-based assessment; vi) projects allow for process and product; vii) proficiency level is not a problem (beginners employ the L1 to a greater extent than advanced students, as long as they are on task when doing so); viii) projects allow students to learn whatever is relevant to them (the appropriate thing at the appropriate time for the appropriate student).

These findings result from research carried out in universities in Korea and Japan, but it is suggested that the benefits of the task/project-based approach are applicable at the secondary and even elementary level in Korea, as evidenced by the inclusion of project-based activities in school textbooks, the popularity of the iEARN (International Education and Resource Network) collaborative project network in Korea and the wealth of links to student projects (student-made movies, dramas, blogs, wikis, newspapers, etc.) on the Japan-based Internet TESL site: http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Student_Projects/.

Whatever the pressures of modern education, the need to address negative affect and to educate the whole person, while preparing students to live and work in a high-technology global economy cannot be ignored. As Wikis, Blogs, social networking sites and e-learning sites become the day-to-day communication agents of the young, it is vital for state education to maximize such learning opportunities and incorporate them into the curriculum. Because of its flexibility and student-centered focus on autonomy, the task/project-based approach offers a means of achieving this goal and of relieving the ever-increasing burden on the teacher. While it is to be hoped that education reform will eventually lead to a system in which highly qualified teachers are allowed to satisfy curriculum goals according to their own methods and philosophies. As Stoller (2002) points out:

Although project work may be easier to implement in second language settings because of more readily available content resources, teachers in foreign language settings have already proven that with adaptation and creativity, the project approach can be successful and rewarding for teachers and students alike. (Stoller, 2002, p. 117)

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BIODATA

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