Encouraging Students to Become Stakeholders in the ESL Classroom

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Introduction

The current literature of psychology and business is filled with the term "stakeholder". The idea that a person will buy into the idea of becoming an active participant in an organization if his or her voice is heard by those in authority is a powerful one and one that has implications for the classroom. As a relatively new ESL instructor, I have attempted to incorporate this idea of empowering students to see themselves as active and necessary participants in their own learning. This article summarizes some of the areas in which I have encouraged students to become stakeholders. This article is not meant to reflect current research in second language acquisition strategies but is simply meant as a practical list of suggestions that might be of use to other ESL instructors.

Grading

An area of primary concern to students, this is also an area where students can see themselves as active builders of their own grades instead of passive recipients of the instructorÕs whims. I approach grading from a bottom up perspective. All students start out equally and whatever grade they receive at the end of the course depends on both their ability and their effort. My scheme is to base the classroom grade on 100 points and to distribute a scale of how many points equals an A, an A-, a B+, a B, a B-, a C+, a C, a C-, a D and an F on the first day of class. Points are cumulative throughout the semester. I divide an equal amount of points for the midterm and final, another smaller equal amount for a series of quizzes, and another range for any oral reports or papers or other required projects. Remaining points come from classroom participation which I define as attendance because all attendees are expected to (or are called upon) to participate in equal amounts. Students are given the leeway of missing three classes for the semester, with the knowledge that each missed class after that deducts one point from their overall number of points. Because I require no excuses for missed classes, this puts the responsibility of attending and participating directly on the student. In addition to self responsibility, this cumulative method of grading also allows students to monitor their own progress as the semester goes on and by the time they reach the final exam, everyone knows exactly where they stand with regards to their grades.

Vocabulary Notebooks

An often discussed and much used method of vocabulary enrichment, the use of vocabulary notebooks is widespread in ESL classrooms. One way of empowering students to actively participate in their construction is to allow them the option of choosing their own words to study and practice with. This does not imply that the instructor must give students complete freedom to choose any word they come across (although this approach has its merits). It can be equally effective to allow students to choose from a certain universe of words, for example words from a particular chapter in a textbook or words from a particular reading. I have the students in my classes build their own dictionaries of words over the course of the semester. They base their word entries upon the following scheme that we discuss together at the beginning of class: the word in English, the word in their native language, the part of speech, derivational endings (common suffixes that change a word from one part of speech to another), use of the word in a sentence (to illustrate at least a basic level of context), collocations (words that commonly appear together in phrases with this particular word), and a semantic map (a graphical representation of words related in meaning to the word chosen). I have had great success with this approach and have used it as a basis for quizzes in class. The two advantages of using student-chosen words for quiz material are that everyoneÕs words are different (there is no possibility of cheating) and the students have more of an affinity towards learning the meaning and use of words that they have chosen themselves instead of having had them forced upon them unwillingly.

Papers and Oral Reports

Most students, if given support and a minimal amount of suggestions and directions, will often produce very good papers and oral reports on topics of their own choosing. I have had more success with this approach than I have with assigning students particular topics. Since I also work as a college reference librarian, I have enough knowledge of the kinds of resources the library can usually offer to support almost any given topic. Because these types of projects are generally worth a fair number of points towards the classroom total, the students seem to appreciate the opportunity to collect their points based on a topic of their own choice. In addition to self selection, all the students have an opportunity to help their fellow students in this area by offering peer review and constructive comments towards each other. This seems to build a sense of positive goodwill in the classroom, that we are "all in this together" and that honest effort is both recognized and rewarded.

Classroom Based Activities

Activities performed in the classroom together offer instructors a rich avenue for empowering students as stakeholders. The "guide on the side" role for the instructor as facilitator can lead to very innovative classroom work. I had a great deal of success using language learning games that involve teams of students working together in good-natured competition with other student teams.   The phrasal verb matching game called "Grammar Reversi" from Mario Rinvolucri and
Paul DavisÕ More Grammar Games: Cognitive, Affective and Movement Activities for
EFL Students (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) offers a good
example. Students must work in competing teams to match as many phrasal verbs to their non-phrasal counterparts as possible. The teamÕs overall success depends upon the input of every member of the team. This type of atmosphere in the classroom often leads to students thinking of themselves as stakeholders.

Discussion Leaders

Another area where ESL students can take responsibility for their own learning and put it to great productive use is the area of leading a discussion. In my speaking classes, we discuss strategies that participants can use to generate a discussion and to keep it going and involve everyone in participation. Two days a week, an assistant instructor worked with a group of students to model appropriate conversational strategies, but then on the third class meeting of the week, the students themselves took on the leadership position. A new leader was chosen each week. This allowed all the students to not only hone their own leadership skills but to actively participate in building those skills among their peers.

Closing

There are undoubtedly as many ways to empower students as stakeholders in the ESL classroom as there are classrooms around the world. The suggestions above are meant to stimulate thinking in this area and to encourage us to share teaching ideas.