

Second Language Literacy Through Student-Centered Learning

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This paper presents one way to introduce high intermediate university students to the challenges of conducting research in a foreign language using authentic materials. Theoretically, the approach used was based on whole language learning, a holistic approach that stresses student-based learning, as well as the use of authentic-materials. Practically, the class described was a reading and writing course offered at Rikkyo University, a private university in Tokyo, that concentrated on the students conducting research on a topic of their choice.

Dimensions of Learning

For learning to be successful, it must be conducted as a multi-dimensional activity. That is, straight teacher-to-student instruction has value (albeit limited value) but the addition of other dimensions such as student-to-teacher, or student-to-student alter the learning environment and enhance learning from a variety of directions. Here, the divisions separating "student" and "teacher" are removed: teachers at times learn and students at times teach. Through this multi-dimensional approach the class does not end with the bell or the calendar, but continues into the everyday lives of the participants of the class.

Geometrically, we can visualize this approach as advancing from one-dimensional rote learning (A + B), to the two-dimensional lecture learning (teacher to student instruction), to a three-dimensional student-centered learning (student and teacher project work). The latter three-dimensional learning potentially allows for a depth in the learning process through the students and teachers active participation in the learning process, a participation that allows for an unlimited amount of creativity to be used in the learning process. It is through this creative participation in third-dimensional, student-centered learning activities that both students and teachers advance to fourth-dimensional "eureka" discoveries.

A quick look at the deficiencies in first and second dimensional learning highlight the advantages of third-dimensional learning. First dimensional learning presupposes that learning is most successful when the material to be learned is simplified. Kenneth Goodman has argued that the breaking down of language into pieces actually makes learning more difficult. Simplification alters or destroys the context around which the language has been created, thus eliminating the contextual clues that help the language learner understand what is being said or written. Second dimensional learning adds breadth through the lecture or reading exercise but disregards the depth that can be gained through student participation in the learning activity. It seems certain to us from our personal teaching and learning experiences that hands-on learning has a longer residual effect than hands-off learning.

A Practical Application of Student-Centered Learning

The above discussion suggests that for a learning environment to produce successful learners, two essential conditions are necessary: 1) active student participation in the total learning process, and 2) the use of authentic materials. The course to be described in this short discussion strove to accomplish these two points. The class was offered in the second term after students had completed a writing course stressing the basic fundamentals of writing. They were also required to read extensively from newspapers and magazines. In this class the students would be performing research in English through searching periodicals and books for information on their topics, discussing their reading on the topics chosen in small groups, and finally producing a 5-7 page research paper on an area related to their topic.

The class met once a week for 90 minutes; there were about 30 students in the class. By the end of the term students were to:

1. establish a study plan from which to research their topics,
2. conducted weekly discussions on their topics in small groups,
3. submitted a book report on a work related to their topics,
4. make an oral presentation on their topics, and
5. complete a research paper on an area related to their group topic.

The class focused not only on learning about the individual topics of the students, but also giving participants an idea of different learning strategies.

Students were placed into groups based on the topics they chose. Topics tended to reflect the "hot" stories occurring at the present time. Some chose areas that were directly related to their major field of study. Students in the class being discussed here chose musicals, environmental issues, and health issues as research areas. In other classes students have researched such areas as cloning, brain death, North Korea, aging, and women's issues. Here, the teacher's role was critical in first helping the students choose a topic that was not too narrow or too wide, and second to help them find resources pertinent to their research topic. Students discussed their topics during class time; teacher participation in these discussions helped the students formulate ideas and (at times) liven up the discussion. From around the middle of the term we found it worthwhile to begin instructing students on research paper writing. Students were evaluated on their attendance, their participation in discussions, the quality of their book reports, and the quality of their research papers.

Merits and Demerits of the Class

First the merits. We were pleasantly surprised at the amount of work that students put into the class. Most of the work was done in their groups and was based on plans they had set. This gave them a sense of independence in, and responsibility for, their learning. The hard work of a particular member of the group filtered through to the other members of the group. Students also gained knowledge of a topic of their choice through the use of the English language; here English became a tool for, rather than the focus of, their study. Finally, we were impressed by the gains students made in their writing over this relatively short three-month period. Different drafts they submitted clearly showed student-improvement not only in their grasp of the fundamentals of research writing, but also in their thinking processes as well.

The class also had its share of problems as well. There never seems to be enough good English resources for the students use. Here it is pivotal that the teacher help students search for the materials that they need. Student absences also posed a problem and hampered the progress of the group. Also, some students preferred to work alone rather than in a group. Other students rejected this open classroom requesting a more traditional classroom environment. Flexibility in allowing students to work alone if they prefer, and mixing in traditional learning activities acted to help relieve these latter two problems.

Summary

Students' reaction to this style of learning was for the most part positive. Even the top students found it challenging; most felt satisfaction over having completed a research paper, something many had not even done in Japanese much less in English. One student wrote that through this class she "really felt that I was studying at college." Other students have commented that they enjoyed studying "live" English as opposed to the "dead"? English they encountered in past English classes. What we would like to stress here is that it is the students, and not the teacher, that gives the language its life. This we believe to be most meaningful, and most useful, in the learning processes involved through the approach described above.