

Graffiti for ESL Readers

Brent Buhler

[bbuhler \[at\] ix.netcom.com](mailto:bbuhler@ix.netcom.com)

Providing language support within content-based instruction requires the use of articles written within a professional community that are often beyond ESL/EFL students' normal ability. Enabling these students to incorporate the material is a process of reducing anxiety and increasing top-down reading skills. Such active reading, as characterized by Feathers (1993), consists of summarizing, reacting, questioning and arguing, evaluating and placing a text within one's own experience. It is, perhaps, the most complex skill to develop in a communicative way and in a classroom setting. Interaction between students is often minimal, with most attention paid to dictionaries, the text and the teacher. Interrupting this focus and encouraging students to dialog with what they are reading without coming between them and the text presents a challenge to the ESL teacher.

An activity I have used seems to stimulate students in my classroom to interact both with the text and with each other in a meaningful fashion. While pre- and post-reading activities allow for plenty of interchange, actually plowing through three or four page articles (often on a phrase-by-phrase basis) in class proved cumbersome and did not hold students' attention. Now, rather than assign the reading as homework, I copy the article onto 11 by 17 one-column pages bordered by wide margins, tape it to the walls and ask students gathered in groups of four or five to read and comment on it.

The students may start at any place within the article; this prevents them from clumping around the page containing the first section of the article. Additionally, this allows for predictions of previous and future content. Their "graffiti" encompasses Feathers' range of responses and provides a way for me to monitor the amount and type of interaction with the text. Ancillary to this activity's purpose of teaching reading is the discussion engendered by the students grouped around the posted pages. This discussion is both on-topic and serves to place the text within a context with which students are familiar.

As I move from group to group, I participate in their discussion, answering questions, defining words and writing my own comments on the pages. This serves to direct the students' activity by providing model behavior. I found students asking for definitions of words that they would otherwise ignore and that I would not otherwise recognize as an impediment to comprehension.

This method can be used for a variety of purposes. Posting small sections of larger articles would serve as valuable pre- or post-reading activity. Preparation time is insignificant, but the excitement and interest generated in the content matter by the students is well worth the class time and provides excellent language support as they seek to achieve mutual understanding of the text through this method of active reading.