

Five Minute Lesson Fillers

Shelley A. Spencer
spencer [at] m.tjk.ac.jp
Tokyo Jogakkan College (Tokyo, Japan)

This article discusses the benefit of interspersing language classes with lesson fillers. The author reminisces on how such a technique is used in military training, and recalls a similar application on a language course she attended as a student. She has since used the technique with success in her own language classes.

Introduction

Teacher training recommends offering variety in lessons, for such reasons as: "A varied lesson, besides being more interesting and pleasant for both teacher and learners, is also likely to cater for a wider range of learning styles and strategies, and may delay onset of fatigue by providing regular refreshing changes in the type of mental or physical activity demanded." (Ur, 1996, p. 216). This article looks at the benefit of supplementing lessons with short lesson-fillers to also achieve these aims and to address the following situations: to achieve initial class focus; not enough time to start the next topic; the students are tired; some students have finished their work; to change the intensity or focus to give a moment of respite; extra time remaining etc. I was alerted to this practice whilst a language student in Germany recently (Spencer, 2003), and wish to describe my instructor's techniques and the value to me as a student.

Background

The idea of using small training segments to fill in time or energise the atmosphere was taught to me during my military service. As part of my role, I was trained in the military's methods of instruction, and requested to always have a repertoire of short, five minute teaching segments up my sleeve. These segments were considered important morale boosters, and we were expected to take the initiative in the field to use them to keep the troops' spirits up. Because of the impromptu nature of these segments, they allowed the presenter to show creativity and more of their personality and human side than usual, so it was also a time of lightheartedness and bonding with the troops. As teaching materials, we had a few items in our kit, but also used whatever items we found in the nature around us. Based on these experiences, I think it worthwhile for language teachers to also have a basic repertoire of lesson fillers at hand.

Benefits of Lesson Fillers

I was reminded of the above military technique whilst attending the language course in Germany. The instructor always had in his file some short teaching segments to offer at opportune moments - to start the day, between changes of topic, after lunch, to change a tense atmosphere, spare time remaining etc. As a student, I found these short teaching segments most beneficial. Precisely because they were short and to the point, I remembered them better than the longer teaching segments! Of significance was the instructor's approach: these short segments were generally presented as a form of "brain teaser", requiring us to try to solve something, and thus creating in us the "need" to learn something (akin to Ichiyama's "guided-discovery learning activities" [2002, p. 23]). We therefore looked forward to hearing his solution. He sometimes walked around the classroom, spending a moment listening to each student try to solve the problem, and we enjoyed that personal contact. These segments also refreshed the mind for subsequent study. They were generally instructive, not merely for the entertainment value. Below, I discuss some fillers he used, my reaction to them as a student, and where I have trialed them with my classes.

Examples of Lesson Fillers

To lighten the mood, the German teacher displayed (on OHP) a cartoon with the caption missing, or distributed a comic strip with the punch-line missing. To complete these was actually quite difficult, requiring appreciation of humour and play on words. Students worked individually, then each person offered their solution to the class. Finally, the teacher revealed the original solution. There

followed further explanation of the humour, word choices, colloquial expressions, and grammar. (Ideally, there was some content students could apply immediately.). I tried the missing punch-line on my classes (as a warm-up task while students were being seated and attendance taken), and found that the advanced students could "get" the joke and produce creative solutions, whilst the lower levels struggled, spoiling the effect. One cartoon used some grammatical structures we had been studying, which then led into homework checks and last lesson review. Another cartoon used some useful colloquial English. Alternatively, place a complete (simple) comic strip on each desk prior to student arrival, and enjoy their delighted reactions (especially with favourite characters such as "Mickey"). Some students commented they wanted to learn more about "American humour".

Another common device was to present an OHP slide showing a few sentences with grammatical errors. These the German teacher gleaned from listening to students speak, or from their essays, making them all the more personal and relevant. He generally grouped them according to a theme, and revealed them one at a time. In pairs, students tried to determine and rectify the error, then discussed solutions with the class. Again, this was creating in us the "need" to learn, so that we looked forward to the teacher's solution, which was always accompanied with further explanation and examples. If that particular grammar point still proved problematic, or the class requested more practice, he would prepare future segments. As a student, I found myself very interested in mastering grammar points. As well as reviewing grammar, these short segments provided "bonding time" with a classmate. I have found that Japanese students typically make common mistakes, so they can all relate to the examples you give them. They seem interested to know their mistakes, with a slow, thoughtful explanation, and time to discuss and digest. The trigger for giving a lesson-filler could be when you hear the students make such a mistake (eg "He's a safety driver." "Let's go to the movie with me." "It was very fun." "Almost Japanese been gone to the Hokkaido.")

Yet another device was to present a long-winded sentence of around 80 words, which students must simplify (in pairs) to the minimum number of words (good practice in adjectives, adverbs and alternate word choices). Again, he would visit each group and discuss progress and reasoning. Finally, he presented the best solution, imparting specific teaching points. (The pair with the best solution usually received some chocolates!) I have found this to be a good little exercise to encourage group work and a bit of friendly rivalry between groups, but admittedly, it takes time to explain the requirements of the exercise.

Gap-fill narratives were beneficial, whereby the class was given a short text, and had to guess the missing words. Words that were problematic for the students were used, such as prepositions, verbs (particularly a verb that can be used in many different contexts, eg "change" in English), or the correct form of a word (noun, adjective, adverb eg "safety, safe, safely"). Another interesting alternative is to give a story with only the first letter of every word showing. Interspersed amongst the words are some pictures as hints. Students must guess all the words to make the story. This is useful if applying some grammar they have been studying, and especially for providing further examples of prepositions, or past and future tense.

Other segments served to help us in daily life. For example, noting our difficulties ordering second drinks or handling tips in restaurants, our teacher used lesson-fillers to instruct us in such cultural rituals.

An idea I have used with success is to allow students to present their own impromptu segments (eg demonstrate some origami, explain a recipe, teach the steps in drawing a favourite anime character, or some form of "show and tell".) It's surprising what hidden talents some students have, and what innovative things they can think of to demonstrate.

Conclusion

Because these segments were so short, all students seemed totally absorbed in them. The moments of personal contact with the teacher were appreciated, as well as opportunities to befriend other students. Importantly, these short bursts of learning gave us a feeling of success - a great motivator. Longer periods of study can produce frustration, as they serve to highlight a student's shortcomings, whereas these short segments provide small moments of success to restore that balance. They produced many "Aha!" moments, with the satisfaction that accompanies new understanding and achievement. These little moments of alertness and success enabled us to better focus on the next teaching segment. Ur believes "This [success] is perhaps the single most important feature in raising extrinsic motivations. Learners who have succeeded in past tasks will be more willing to engage with the next one, more confident in their chances of succeeding, and more likely to persevere in their efforts." (1996, p. 278)

These short teaching segments can obviously be adapted to one's specialty and student interests and needs. Rather than as mere diversions or for entertainment value, the lesson-fillers here had instructive aims and attempted to raise standards. Therefore the timing and content was important, guided by some concern for the students. Both my military and language classroom experience showed

that these short teaching segments were effective means of recharging energy and boosting morale. As a student, I found them invaluable.

References

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