The Outside World as an Extension of the EFL/ESL Classroom

Mark A. Pegrum
mark_pegrum [at] hotmail.com
Queen Margaret University College (Edinburgh, Scotland)

Most EFL/ESL teachers trained in any kind of communicative methodology make use of materials and resources which help to bring the outside world into the classroom. These may range from non-linguistic items, such as simple visuals or realia, through to authentic texts including newspaper articles, audio recordings of conversations or videos of recent TV programmes. Exposing students to "pieces" of the outside world has an important function in respect of providing realistic language input, establishing a dynamic and meaningful context for learning, and increasing student motivation. We are thus able to construct "an associative bridge between the classroom and the world" (J. Heaton cited in Smith 1997) and "[p]repare[ ] the learners for post-classroom experience" (Dickens et al. 1995).

However, in addition to bringing fragments of the world into the classroom, we can, if teaching in an English-speaking country, take our students out into the world, effectively using it as an extension of the classroom. Outside-world tasks are perhaps more obvious activities for intermediate or advanced students, but there are compelling reasons for embarking on such activities from a very early stage in the language learning process.

The Outside World as a Resource at Lower Levels

Krashen and Terrell argue that the purpose of language instruction is to allow the learner to "understand language outside the classroom", so that ultimately he or she can "utilize the real world, as well as the classroom, for progress" (Krashen & Terrell 1983: 1). The EFL/ESL student learning English in an English-speaking country is, it is often said, at a great advantage, because he or she is surrounded by an environment saturated with potential language input; such students "will have far greater exposure to the language and this should help them, not only in the retention of items previously encountered but also in the acquisition of new items" (Gairns & Redman 1986: 67).

And yet the problem, especially for lower-level students, is not one of obtaining input, but of "[o]btaining **comprehensible** input" (Krashen & Terrell 1983: 179). What this means is that as early as possible, the student must be taught specific skills for negotiating transactions in the outside world, including an adequate vocabulary as well as structures and patterns for standard simple conversations. Krashen and Terrell indicate:

> In the case of a second language student in the classroom, the instructor may serve as a coordinator of inside and outside the class activities so that one complements and helps the other. In other words, the purpose of the classroom instruction is to facilitate and encourage the students to interact with native speakers in the target language outside the classroom. (ibid. 181)

Teachers, then, are **co-ordinators** of inside and outside activities; naturally, the latter should not be undertaken to the exclusion of the former. As Taylor writes, the purpose of the classroom is to "short-circuit[ ] the slow process of natural discovery and make arrangements for learning to happen more easily and more efficiently than it does in natural surroundings" (Taylor 1994). It is important to ensure, however, that the activities conducted in the classroom in an English-speaking country are carried out with the aim of leading students back towards those natural -- and certainly more threatening -- surroundings, and enabling them to become independent learners. What is more, this transition between classroom and outside reality can be further facilitated if teachers take the logical extra step and actually send students out into the world to put into practice what has been learned, thus effectively commencing the "post-classroom experience" **during class time**, while learners still have the support and guidance of the teacher and/or each other, and are able to return to the classroom for direct feedback on their performance.

The traditional PPP methodology which often suggests itself as the most appropriate with lower levels follows, to use Scrivener's

scheme, a C (Clarification) -- R (Restricted Practice) -- A (Authentic) pattern (see Scrivener 1996), where Authentic activities are represented by the limited freer practice possible in lower-level classrooms. Using resources outside the classroom extends the pattern so that it might become: C -- R -- (A) -- A, where (A) represents Authentic-style freer practice activities inside the classroom, and A represents similar Authentic activities carried out beyond the relatively safe cocoon of a language school. While these activities may never be completely authentic in that their primary rationale is, strictly speaking, pedagogical rather than communicative, they nonetheless represent a far better approximation to natural communication than many classroom practices, and help to blur the boundaries of classroom/post-classroom experience to such an extent that, hopefully, the transition will be rendered relatively painless -- and perhaps even enjoyable -- for students.

The earlier students begin to engage in outside-world activities, the better, with the obvious starting point being the most necessary survival language. Clearly, at lower levels extensive preparation is required so that learners have the necessary linguistic resources and confidence to undertake the tasks set and accomplish them to a satisfactory degree, without becoming demotivated. It is perhaps best to begin with activities based more on reading, such as following signs and directions or finding places, where the majority of the talking will be discussion between learners rather than with native speakers. At the same time, the necessary language for asking questions of native speakers can be pre-taught, so that more adventurous students or groups can make use of this if they wish. Activities can then build up to conversational transactions where students are required to address native speakers.

The Outside World as a Resource for All Levels

Building bridges between the classroom and the outside world, and facilitating students' entry into that world, has many benefits -- not only for lower-level students -- including:

- whatever language students encounter in the outside world is authentic language
- by engaging in real transactions involving relatively limited areas, and with sufficient preparation, students are exposing themselves to input which is largely comprehensible because they themselves are initiating the transactions and have some idea of what kinds of responses to expect
- when well-prepared, students can gain a lot of fruitful listening practice and vocabulary reinforcement from television shows, films, lectures, etc.
- a knowledge of how to execute everyday linguistic transactions has obvious survival value for students newly arrived in a country where they may not speak or understand very much of the language, which can be a disorienting and even frightening experience
- students may also gain practical information, such as how to find their way around, where to purchase certain products or even how much it costs to send letters to their own countries.
- students may gain a great deal of cultural knowledge and insight
- once initiated into the international anglophone cyberspace community -- whether through net surfing, emailing or webpage building -- they will be able to participate in it long after having finished their studies, and continue to refresh and develop their language skills in this way
- the early development of a degree of competence in dealing with everyday linguistic transactions is inherently motivating, partly because of their necessity, but also because students rapidly see their own progress as they extend their ability to deal with one area after another, and thus develop the confidence to begin to explore on their own
- this puts them on track to becoming independent learners, who can make use of the English-speaking environment to learn in their own time

The following list details some of the most successful activities I have used or seen used. It is not exhaustive, but gives an indication of some of the main areas on which we can concentrate. The activities are not necessarily restricted to the levels suggested, nor is the language to be learned/practised limited to those areas mentioned; these merely seem to me the optimum levels and most obvious focal points for these different resources. Many activities can also be used, possibly with some modifications, in non-English-speaking countries. A few, such as those involving guest speakers, entail bringing the outside world into the classroom rather than vice versa, but are included because they relate strongly to other tasks mentioned; and while the internet is, strictly speaking, outside the classroom, the means of accessing it -- a computer laboratory -- may not be.

Activity: Identifying Objects in Streets & Parks

- Level: Elementary

- Focus: Vocabulary Building; Direct Question Forms

A relaxing walk through the streets or a park on a Friday afternoon provides the ideal opportunity for students to ask the names of objects and actions which they find too difficult to ask about in class. I have often taken students to local parks and asked them to bring along exercise books, in which they were then able to note down a wide variety of words and expressions which **they** wanted to know: **ducks, swans, benches, blossom, path, to lie, to laugh, the sun is shining, there are many clouds**, etc, as well as asking for explanations of signs such as **No bathing allowed**. An extension of this idea can be found in Julie Vickery's "Nature Hunt".

Activity: Following Maps & Directions

- Level: Elementary -- Upper Intermediate
- Focus: Understanding Directions; Asking for Directions; Giving Directions

Lower-level students can be asked to follow simple directions in the streets and identify places they find along the way; higher-level students can be sent to find things without a map, so that they have to ask for directions. In fact, once they have done such a quiz, students can even be asked to work in groups to compose their own directions-based tasks for other groups of students, an activity I have always found to be hugely successful, though it requires extensive preparation and guidance from the teacher. An extension of this kind of activity is a treasure hunt, where students follow directions to find further information leading them to a certain goal; the information could be in the form of signs put in place earlier by the teacher, or at a more advanced level might involve students finding certain people and asking them for directions. Again, such an activity is likely to be very popular with students, but involves quite a large amount of organisation and co-ordination on the part of the teacher.

Activity: Visiting Shops

- Level: Elementary -- Upper Intermediate
- Focus: Vocabulary Building (Products, Numbers, Prices); Question Forms; Spelling; Comparative Forms

At lower levels, students can carry out simple activities such as finding products or prices in a supermarket; at an intermediate level, students can be asked to seek out examples of products whose names contain intentionally misspelled English words, eg. Kit **Kat** (chocolate), **Irn-Bru** (soft drink), **Wispa** (chocolate bars); at higher levels, students might be directed to find more obscure items which they have to ask for, or to compare overall prices and value in different stores. For instance, one successful activity I conducted at upper intermediate level involved students going into the shopping district of a city and finding the best low-cost shops in which to buy a variety of different items, from shoelaces and lighters to guidebooks and foreign newspapers. The winning group was the one with the lowest "shopping bill" at the end.

Activity: Interviews & Surveys

- Level: Elementary -- Advanced
- Focus: Direct & Indirect Question Forms; Vocabulary Building (depending on subject area(s) selected)

At elementary level, students can interview native speakers (often a teacher or teachers with a timetable break who are invited into the classroom), recording the answers to questions such as **What is your name?** and **Where are you from?** At higher levels, students can work in groups to compose their own interview or survey questions which they then ask people in the streets outside the college. Students can be invited to ask about subjects in which they are particularly interested, or which relate to the fields they hope to study in the future.

Activity: Visiting Museums, Art Galleries, Historical Sites

- Level: Elementary -- Advanced
- Focus: Vocabulary Building (depending on subject area(s) selected); Listening Skills; Question Forms

At lower levels, students might be asked to find items, names or dates, or to respond to art in a simple way, eg. by ranking paintings in order of age or personal preference, or even just identifying the subject of paintings listed on a worksheet. At higher levels students could go on a guided tour -- one activity very popular with exam students I taught in Australia involved a tour of the Aboriginal art collections in the Art Gallery of Western Australia -- and could be encouraged to ask questions of the tour guide. Many museums

(eg. The Tower Bridge Museum in London, Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh) provide worksheets for completion on the spot and in follow-up sessions, or alternatively these can be made up by the teacher; such visits can also give rise to follow-up class discussions or report-writing.

Activity: Obtaining Information from Public Offices, eg. Post Office, Tourist Bureau

- Level: Pre-Intermediate -- Upper Intermediate
- Focus: Direct & Indirect Question Forms; Comparative Forms

At lower levels, students can be directed to ask for simple pieces of information such as the cost of postage stamps to certain countries, the price of underground tickets, or interesting tourist sites to visit; at higher levels, more complex information and more detail can be requested, such as the conditions on and availability of discount rail tickets from one destination to another, or the best tours to take to maximise the amount that can be seen during a short stay in the area.

Activity: Surfing the Internet

- Level: Pre-Intermediate -- Advanced
- Focus: Vocabulary Building (depending on subject area(s) selected); Reading Skills; Report-Writing Skills

Students can be requested to find out information about current events, famous people and places, culture and pop music -- at lower levels, this may consist primarily of simple factual quizzes, or "Internet Treasure Hunts" (Brown 1999) such as those listed by The Internet TESL Journal. The numerous fortune-telling sites on the WWW are often very popular with students, and an activity centred around them can be an interesting adjunct to a study of future forms. At higher levels students could be involved in more analysis (eg. of the value of websites) or synthesis (eg. of the reports of a particular event from different newspapers across the political spectrum). The internet also lends itself to groupwork, and to extended projects, such as planning trips and holidays. One well-received activity I conducted involved students working in groups of 4 or 5 to plan a 1-week holiday to an English-speaking city of their choice, eg. New York, Sydney, etc, where they had to find out all the information regarding flights, hotels, tours, etc, from the net, and produce an itinerary and costing for their trip. Of course, not only does the internet enjoy great popularity among many students, but WWW activities can be conducted from anywhere in the world, with virtually no modifications.

Activity: Emailing

- Level: Pre-Intermediate -- Advanced
- Focus: Letter-(Email-)Writing Skills; Informal/Formal Language (depending on correspondent(s) selected); Reading Skills; Vocabulary Building (depending on subject area(s) selected)

Students can be encouraged to link up with native speaker "pen-friends" from different countries, which works especially well if the pen-friend is learning the EFL student's language; chat sessions are another possibility. Students can also be given assignments where they are asked to correspond with site editors of, for example, fan club pages, while higher level students can be asked to write emails to online newspapers. Very often, in my experience, students do receive replies, which is very motivating and sometimes leads them into an exchange of emails, providing extra language practice in a communicative setting. There are also a number of scientific and other websites which invite net surfers to send in questions, to which the answers may be published online. I recently worked on a project where students were asked to find answers to certain scientific questions on such a site, and then worked in groups to come up with an interesting question of their own (just one per group so as not to overload the site) and, after having them checked by me, they posted the questions and looked regularly to see if answers had appeared -- which, eventually, they did.

Activity: Setting Up Webpages

- Level: Intermediate -- Advanced
- Focus: Writing Skills

Students can be given support in setting up their own individual or group webpages on subjects of their own choice, or as part of class projects. As well as obtaining valuable writing practice, students usually receive email feedback from each other and not infrequently from other net surfers who just happen to be passing by. However, a word of warning: if the pages are hosted on the college's server or under its name, it is a good idea for teachers to vet materials before they are posted -- this entails extra work but

can avoid legal and other complications.

Activity: Television & Radio

- Level: Intermediate -- Advanced
- Focus: Listening Skills; Report-Writing/Summarising Skills; Oral Presentation Skills

Students can be asked to watch TV programmes or listen to radio broadcasts on particular subjects, bearing in mind that the latter are more difficult because of the lack of visual support. While short excerpts are probably more appropriate if used during class, students can also be asked to make use of these media in their own time. One activity that works well at higher levels is to assign one student each day to report on and summarise the previous day's/that day's main news stories, sports stories and/or weather. Students are then able to make use of any media -- TV, radio, newspapers, internet -- to construct their class presentations.

Activity: Joining a Studio Audience

- Level: Intermediate -- Advanced
- Focus: Listening Skills; Vocabulary Building (depending on the kind of show)

Many television shows nowadays are produced live and it is often possible to get tickets to be in the television audience. This can be a particularly exciting experience for students, especially if they have been shown excerpts from that show in class, or been encouraged to watch it and become familiar with the presenter(s) and format(s) in the weeks leading up to their visit to the studio.

Activity: Visiting Travel Agents

- Level: Intermediate -- Advanced
- Focus: Direct & Indirect Question Forms; Comparative Forms; Vocabulary Building (Travel & Tourism)

After working in pairs or groups to plan imaginary holidays to various destinations within or even outside the country where they are studying -- something that can be integrated with a session surfing the net -- students can go and find out details and prices of tours/trips and then report back to the class. This is one of the most popular activities I have conducted, and twice I have had students come back having actually booked a holiday.

Activity: Calling Information Phone Lines

- Level: Intermediate -- Advanced
- Focus: Direct & Indirect Question Forms; Listening Skills

Students can be asked to obtain information from a variety of phone services. For example, when examining the present simple used for timetables, students can be asked to ring up local bus companies to find out the times of nightbusses, or railway stations to find out train departure/arrival times and prices to various destinations. Any "Talking Pages" services like those in Britain are also a very exploitable resource.

Activity: Attending Talks, Lectures and Debates

- Level: Upper Intermediate -- Advanced
- Focus: Gist Listening Skills; Turn-Taking and Other Discourse Markers; Indirect Question Forms; Vocabulary Building (depending on subject(s) discussed)

If the topics are of interest to the majority of students, talks and lectures can provide ideal opportunities for listening to native speakers. I have seen students respond positively to speakers as diverse as the feminist writer Shere Hite (after having read reviews of her work), the biologist Lynn Margulis, and a variety of local and state government politicians. Advanced students often enjoy attending debates, both for the subject matter and to hear the patterns of (sometimes vitriolic) interaction between speakers. In some situations students may even be able to ask questions, though they need to be well-prepared for this. Alternatively, speakers can be invited into the classroom for a more informal talk -- these may be as disparate as an Australian Aboriginal elder explaining something

of his culture, or a journalist from **The Sun** talking about the nature and role of tabloid newspapers in Britain. Such talks can often be organised even in non-English-speaking countries.

Activity: Attending the Cinema or Theatre

- Level: Upper Intermediate -- Advanced
- Focus: Listening Skills; Vocabulary Building (depending on subject matter)

After some preparatory work, ranging from a general study of vocabulary or themes through to reading the script of the play or film in class, such a visit provides excellent listening skills practice, and can be followed up with worksheets, class discussions and debates, or report-writing.

Thus, while the options for using the outside world in inventive ways become far more extensive at higher levels, it can be seen that there are also many possibilities at lower levels. Indeed, there is no reason not to begin early, so that by the time students arrive at higher levels, they are quite used to linking classroom practice with communicative possibilities in the world outside.

Problems with Using the Outside World as a Resource

A number of potential problems, largely connected with preparation or practical details, must be kept in mind when using the outside world as a resource. In my experience, the following are amongst the most significant:

- there are, as Allwright argues, no "'teacher-proof' teaching materials" (Allwright 1990: 136) or resources; the best resources in the world will yield no linguistic profit unless they are coupled with carefully thought-out activities appropriate to the level, and it is all too easy to design enjoyable activities from which the students learn little or nothing
- if not properly prepared, learners may be daunted by and fail in the set task, which would be very demotivating
- the teacher must firstly check out practical details such as opening hours, what products are stocked in which shops, what kinds of displays are contained in museums, and so on
- if the class is to use smaller stores or businesses where they may be particularly obtrusive, the teacher should obtain permission first, which can often be done by stressing that these students are potential future customers
- some activities -- treasure hunts are a case in point -- require considerable preparation, while others -- such as surveys composed and conducted by students, or student websites -- require extensive teacher support while the activities are running
- the answers to set quizzes may alter over time -- as prices rise or websites change -- so that these may need to be checked out each time such an activity is conducted
- ideally, because of the cost of living as a student, free activities should be conducted, but if there is a small cost involved (say, entry fees to a an art gallery) this should be cleared with all students, or alternatively the college may agree to pay
- activities involving the internet or email can only be conducted at an institution with sufficient resources, and the teacher must be computer-literate; also, while many younger students are relatively familiar with computers nowadays, some others may require additional help

Conclusion

Visuals, realia and authentic texts have long been used as aids in the EFL or ESL classroom, and can have great value as an integral part of English lessons. If teaching in an English-speaking country, however, it is possible to go further, and make use of the outside world so that it becomes, as it were, an extension of the classroom, where students are able to put into practice what they have learned, and are taught how to make use of their surroundings as a source of comprehensible input. We should definitely begin this process at lower levels, and expand it as students advance in their learning. The bridges built between the classroom and the outside world, and the more gradual transition to "post-classroom experience", will not only make language study more meaningful and motivating, but will stand the students in good stead when it comes time for them to go forth as completely independent learners, without the support of teachers, classmates or a language classroom.

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