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Idea Sharing: How to Maximize Participation in a Mixed-level English Class

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Abstract

Teaching a class of mixed EFL/ESL levels can be problematic for both instructors and students. The disparate levels of ability often mean that some students are not challenged enough while others struggle to keep pace. Drawing on experience in the university classroom in Japan, this practice promotes good preparation, self-reliance, inclusiveness, and maximum class participation. In two parts, this paper demonstrates how independent learning can be used to bring out the best in classes of this sort. The first part of the paper explains the method students use to create a self-learning portfolio. It will explain how students construct their portfolios to formulate questions and reach tentative conclusions before they arrive in class. The second part highlights the benefits of this system, presenting evidence that this approach engages students in mixed-level classes by fostering communication and inclusiveness. Examples are presented on how this mechanism boosts participation and motivation among even the most

reluctant students. While bolstering engagement, this process at the same time offers opportunities for group consensus and strong student leaders to emerge. Finally, this paper concludes with a reinforcement of the merits of this system and how this effective technique creates a student-centered class.

Keywords: mixed-levels, participation, student-centered class, independent learning

Part I: Teaching Context for a Self-learning Portfolio

The creation of a self-learning portfolio is applicable to a wide range of levels and courses. Fashioned to be used in high schools, universities, and adult classes, it is proven as an effective apparatus for reading, vocabulary, writing, speaking, presentation, debate, and content-based courses such as literature and philosophy. Eight years of practice shows that this system is most appropriate for classes that range from three to thirty students who are at least above the false beginner level. English proficiency levels can vary from low to advanced, as this system is designed to have weaker members contribute to the class without more advanced students dominating participation and discussion. The main objective of using the portfolio system as a medium, however, is to have fully-engaged classes that are inclusive and student-centered.

Creating a Self-learning Portfolio

The self-learning portfolio is in effect an elaborate name for a notebook or file containing the contents of what students independently take responsibility for and acquire apart from the instruction of the teacher. Through creating a depository for ideas, learning responsibility involves learner involvement, reflection, and appropriate use of language. The portfolio is therefore an effective tool in the learning process and in getting a class of mixed levels to work together for a rewarding experience. It is

designed to be a study companion as students become the designers and engineers of their own learning, at the same time bringing their own world view into the process.

From the outset, students are instructed to personalize the book, making it a work of art inside and out. They are encouraged to consider their notebooks as a journal of what they learn throughout the semester. The more familiar students are with their portfolios, the more helpful for learning is the content they compose inside.

Reading assignments are assigned each week to prepare students for the following week's discussion. Students should make entries in their portfolios based primarily upon their own findings, and focused on four main sections: key words or phrases; main points; opinions; and questions.

1. Key Words or Phrases

Teacher-selected vocabulary often places a ceiling over how far students are able to progress. Subsequently, higher-level students exert minimum effort and learn little, while less-competent students struggle, remaining silent or disengaged. To counter this problem, students are advised to compose their own lists of vocabulary from the assigned text or articles. According to Haggard (1986), this strategy promotes word consciousness as students are actively engaged in identifying important words from their reading to share with members of their class.

When selecting words, students should use their own judgment, bearing in mind the following criteria:

- Chosen words should be relevant to understanding the reading assignments.
- Selected vocabulary should be applicable to commonplace usage.
- Choices must generally be within the range and level of individual abilities.

Once accustomed to the process, students learn to filter what words are important to understanding the assignment. With teacher guidance they learn to select words that are relevant to

comprehending the text, and are useful for expanding their own vocabulary. Consequently, they stop spending excessive time and energy trying to understand irrelevant words and start focusing on those that help them understand the general meaning of the text. In addition, they naturally tend to select more high-frequency words over those that are rarely used. However, if a student is at an exceptionally high level, low-frequency words are encouraged in order to help stretch his or her vocabulary.

It is extremely useful for students to create *original* sentences to accompany each word on their list. This is initially time-consuming, but it serves two important purposes: first, it is necessary to reinforce correct usage in context; second, it internalizes the words, creating ownership of the usage the student created. To assist with achieving these outcomes sentences should be short and easy to commit to memory, rather than complicated compound sentences.

To reinforce this internalization, students should actively discuss their selections and sentences with their classmates. In essence, they actually advise each other on the vocabulary that they have acquired through their own research and thought processes. Through the act of teaching, students get to consolidate what they have learned, which leads to a deeper understanding of the ideas to be taught (King, 2002). By demonstrating their own knowledge of the vocabulary these words are cemented in their memories, while the activity also acts as an inclusive teaching method for all members of the class. Additionally, when students select the same words as their counterparts, they share another way to use the same words, providing repetition as well as a new angle on their usage. Such interaction clarifies and corrects the meanings of the words, resulting in either confirmation or debate.

2. Main Points

Generally, students are instructed to summarize paragraphs in one cohesive sentence. Short, non-essential paragraphs may be skipped, but most texts should provide from five to ten main ideas. Advanced students should be asked to write a summary of

the entire article in paragraph form instead of a list of summarizing sentences.

When processing reading content that is beyond the student's level, it is crucial to find the essential data and bypass non-essential information. It is common for students to become so bogged down with comprehending single words and meanings that they entirely miss the message of the reading. Gleaning the fundamental points from certain passages enhances student's comprehension skills and saves valuable time on their assignments and tests. Therefore, instructors must devote some time to teaching skills for filtering information and determining what is important and what is inconsequential. At the same time, enough room should be given for students to make judgments independently and to improve naturally, as a significant part of the learning experience involves becoming self-reliant.

Another reason for the students to write summaries is for quick review and recollection. At the beginning of class students should assemble in small groups, open up their notebooks, and instantly recall what they read in advance. They are then able to compare notes, observe what others came up with, and add to what they might have missed. Those who might have struggled with determining the main points get some assistance from their peers and upgrade their notes. Additionally, anyone who might have missed the assignment entirely can receive a quick briefing and be brought up to date almost instantaneously, enabling him or her to participate to some degree. As a result, an immense amount of class time is saved, enabling the class to dedicate more time to verbal exchange rather than the sluggish procedure of analyzing the text. Due to student preparation and peer assistance, much of the analysis is done before class, enabling the instructor and students more time to engage in the actual topics at hand.

3. Opinions

With each assignment students are instructed to write an opinion on what they read. These opinions should be shared in small groups for analysis and discussion. Less-competent learners might provide just a couple of sentences at first, but as the course develops they learn to write examples to back up their ideas with further details. More astute students are encouraged to fortify what they write with facts, data, and their own research. This provides a wealth of ideas to discuss and enables even the least language-competent students to arrive with ready-formed ideas to contribute. Moreover, participants have the opportunity to engage in "real life", meaningful dialogue about the text that they read. Students should quickly obtain the ability to connect the text to their personal lives, making the class more stimulating.

In order to express one's views and sentiments, it is imperative to teach students exactly *how* to give an opinion. Although many students have opinions on the inside, they often do not know how to formulate their ideas into a verbal response. Consequently, ample time must be invested into teaching exactly how to form strong, mild, and even diplomatic opinions comfortably in English. Exercising this skill can become one of the most enjoyable parts of the course and, additionally, pupils are actually developing concrete critical thinking skills.

Opinion sharing is used as a tool to generate extended discussion and encourage students to participate. Enabling students to share viewpoints provides interaction, requires acquisition of information, gives opportunities for participation, energizes the lesson and, above all, forces students to think more widely on the topics that they read.

4. Questions

Students should compose three text-related questions to bring to class. It takes several weeks to condition students to perform this task independently, but by mid-semester there can be so much dialogue occurring that the instructor has to interrupt in order to move on to other tasks.

In order to teach students to generate meaningful questions and engage in lively conversation, teachers should demonstrate how to form hypothetical and open-ended questions that require more than one-word answers. These questions should not focus solely on vocabulary or reading comprehension – such inquiries are rarely stimulating or conducive to initiating substantial dialogue. Rather, students should create questions that connect the reading to their daily lives, current issues, and personal stories. This lays the groundwork for extended conversation with follow-up questions, comments, and even laughter. A self-running group of five people can generate at least 15 questions that create their own, unique discussion. Some questions might overlap, but there should still be more than enough to sustain a lasting exchange regardless of mixed levels. Additionally, what might normally be a 20-second conversation can translate into several minutes if students are specifically taught to ask open-ended and follow-up questions. Instilling the ability to ask quality questions establishes extended dialogue that can be become both meaningful and a useful learning technique.

Part II – Benefits: Fostering Communication and Inclusiveness

The ultimate objective of this self-learning portfolio is to prepare all students to engage with the class, enabling the course to be increasingly student-centered. The program becomes student-oriented from the start as all members arrive to class adequately equipped to contribute, having already had ample time to form their contributions. Students learn to filter, summarize, and find key points in what they have read, are then more able to construct new knowledge when they relate it to what they already know (Engle, Nations and Canter, 1990).

Admittedly, there will be times when some students turn up unprepared. When this happens, however, the preparation done by the diligent members quickly brings the malingerers up to date as they review the content in pairs or small groups. To avoid laxity, however, the instructor must commit to implementing creative incentives to instill motivation in his or her students to

complete their work beforehand. The advantages to such pre-class planning are enormous, and the following three key points highlight some of the benefits.

1. Students work according to their own level.

Most EFL instructors have to deal with the fact that not all their students are of the same caliber linguistically and intellectually. In extreme cases teachers might have beginners sprinkled in with advanced students, a situation in which it can be problematic for all students to do equal work or participate on the same level. With the self-learning portfolio, however, students are able do work according to, and in many cases above, their personable abilities.

For example, in a class with various ranges of vocabulary capacity, students are able to absorb words suitable to their level by selecting their own key words from a text. Advanced pupils might choose the most ambitious words in the text, while lower-level students will prefer easier, higher-frequency words. If leading students already comprehend the entire text, they are still able to select key words and practice them in various forms and contexts. They are required to write original sentences, often changing noun, adjective, and verb forms of the same word. Through this process, they are gratified to learn that words that they once merely understood actually become internalized.

Rather than coasting through the material, upper-level students are expected to construct stronger convictions when writing their opinions by adding data and facts to back up what they believe. Higher expectations are placed on them than their less-competent peers.

As the course continues, the amount of time to complete weekly assignments diminishes for all as they become accustomed to the system, and more students are able to keep up with the pace of the class and contribute to the best of their ability. Moreover, students start to take responsibility for their own learning, and such learning independence is crucial for students who are either entering the workforce or planning to study abroad.

2. Students become more self-motivated, often doing more than what is merely expected.

When learners are required to arrive to class with their own research and learning in hand, they start taking ownership of their work. As a result, a key outcome is a stronger belief in their capacities and an ability to contribute to their class. As they start to see their own limits stretched, their motivation rises to new levels, and a sense of achievement unlocks their motivation.

Some of the best work is done by weaker students who recognize that they are able to work autonomously and contribute to class discussion. Consequently, many put meticulous work into their portfolios. Intermediate and advanced students sometimes start out somewhat lackadaisical, writing the minimum required for each section. Upon getting constructive feedback from the instructor, however, they often boost their productivity and invest more time into their work. In particular, many advanced students become very enthusiastic, composing pages of opinions by mid-semester as opposed to the few short sentences that they wrote at the beginning of the term. For all, the notebooks become a diary of sorts that is a learning companion to record thoughts, ideas, or even vent in. These concepts eventually spill into the classroom as students create extended dialogue straight out of their own portfolios.

To maintain high motivation, instructors should instil high expectations in their pupils. Detailed feedback, not merely praise, is of utmost importance as teachers let their students know how to do their work independently and more effectively. Comments and suggestions contained within feedback need to be focused, practical, and based on an assessment of what the student is capable of achieving. Statements such as 'you can do better', 'work on your grammar', "good job!', or 'did you Google-translate this?' provide useless guidance or advice (Carlson & Tanaka, 2015). The criteria used for assessing student work need to be clear, understood by the student and used to frame personalized feedback (Dinham, 2009). Students will then have a strong foundation on which to build their portfolios, ultimately

translating into better class participation. Correspondingly, pupils tend to step up their work when they know that their instructor invests considerable time into his or her students.

3. Students become invested in the class.

Regardless of disparate levels of ability, diligent students soon find that the success of the class greatly depends on how well they prepare for it. They also discover that they can be involved on a level that they had not previously thought possible. On the contrary, those who come unprepared find themselves either bewildered or unable to participate until they catch up with the class. This realization results in a better effort by those students, and is often reflected in an increase of entries in their portfolios as well as a rise in their grades.

In order to gauge student effort and incentive, a comparison was made between two university courses over sixty weeks. Although the content differed, all classes had the same instructor and an almost equal number of mixed-level second, third, and fourth-year students. One course used the self-learning portfolio system while the other centered on teacher and text-selected learning. At the end of each semester, the students from each class were asked how much they were able to extend their learning due to self-study. The greatest difference between the two was the amount of time committed to homework. Passive students who did merely one hour, or less, of homework per week averaged only 8 percent for the students with portfolios as opposed to 47 percent for those with text-selected learning. On the contrary, the number of people who spent over two hours on homework was more than double for those who kept portfolios (66%) than those without (31%). Finally, 26 percent of the students who created portfolios invested three to four and a half hours on their homework compared to 22 percent from their counterparts. The results conclude, therefore, that the course with the portfolio system yielded significantly higher student effort than the text-selected system.

Summary of Process

As the weeks pass, students start to realize that their self-learning portfolios are an effective communication tool as they disperse into pairs or groups to re-engage with their homework in the classroom. More importantly, students are able to teach each other, bolstering their knowledge and embedding the vocabulary deeper into their minds. The act of teaching helps the student teacher to improve his or her comprehension of the subject through clarifying, simplifying, and generating examples (Nutt, 2014).

This process is repeated when students take the next step of reviewing the main points of their reading together. Most points are reconfirmed and new ones are added as students collaborate to form an understanding of what they read. Capable students support the less adept, and the content of the texts are better comprehended by all. Discrepancies in abilities are mitigated as students engage with various topics in their own creative ways. This self-learning system serves as a record of their journey in learning and solving problems (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

Primed with opinions and three questions, the students exchange ideas. Discussions become inclusive because each person has numerous chances to participate. Through such engagement, classmates learn multifaceted approaches to inquiries and problems. They learn to consider the same issues from a variety of viewpoints that might not naturally occur to them. This is a great strength of heterogeneous classes in particular, where the less people have in common, the more diverse their thoughts and opinions. Students learn how to listen and include the voices of their community in their discussions. Even the most reluctant of students will often contribute, and community is built through group involvement. In an amicable spirit, participants learn to value opinions form diverse perspectives, even if they differ from their own.

Over time the class tends to run itself. The teacher becomes a facilitator of learning rather than an imparter of knowledge. This enables learners to make informed decisions about how to move

their learning forward and make better choices. By introducing self-assessment, students no longer have to depend on the teacher to tell them what they need to do next (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001). As the students are independently on task, the instructor is enabled to minister to various weaknesses in groups or individuals. Additionally, the teacher takes time to instill concrete discussion skills such as how to give strong or diplomatic opinions, how to ask open-ended and follow-up questions, and various ways of agreeing or disagreeing. While the instructor tends to one group, the others have plenty of material to proceed with.

In a sense, the teacher is free to answer questions and make rounds to various groups while several other "mini-teachers" appear. This is another great strength of this system as natural leaders emerge, yet quiet members still participate to the best of their abilities.

Final Conclusion

Through the use of self-learning portfolios, students with disparate levels of competency are able to arrive to class equipped with material to actively participate. Moreover, the best outcome of independent learning is when students realize their own capacities to learn and lead. Such realization gives rise to higher motivation and greater effort in assignments. Through class discussion based on portfolio entries, learners are able to put their own studies into effect, resulting in a student-centered class that is fully engaged in the learning experience.

Group learning does more than facilitate the acquisition of knowledge. It also has other desirable attributes such as: improving communication skills, teamwork, and problem solving; taking responsibility for learning; sharing information; creating self-reliance; and developing respect for others (Wood, 2003). Such qualities are the ingredients for a student-centered class that is engaged with both the material and each other.

The Author

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