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Integrating Skills in the ESL Reading Class Using Student Experience

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A s an ESL instructor in the intensive English Language Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara Extension, I was daily faced with a need for meaningful reading activities for my students, until I began writing reading texts based on personal stories written by the students themselves and creating a variety of language learning activities to accompany the texts.

The quarter I first began using such texts I had a low-intermediate level class of 14 students: one Korean speaker, one Spanish speaker, and the rest, (Swiss) German or Japanese speakers in nearly equal numbers. There were seven male and seven female students, ranging in age from 19 to 70. At the beginning of the quarter, their ability level was somewhere between Stage 2 and Stage 3 of Dixon and Nessel's (1983) three stages, that is to say, they had from some to considerable oral fluency in English and considerable written ability in their native languages. They were eager to learn more English but generally insecure in using it. On the Foreign Service Institute scale, where 5 represents a native speaker, they would probably score 1 + or 2.

Our class met for 1 hour and 15 minutes daily for 10 weeks. In addition to reading, the course covered vocabulary, listening, and speaking. Shortly before finishing our reading text, which consisted of simplified, well-known short stories, the students and I discussed the idea of using their own personal stories as the basis for reading texts. They liked the idea, so I asked each of them to write a story for me about an unforgettable and important personal experience. These stories then gave me the basic content for 14 class sessions in which all language skills could be integrated and practiced.

Preparation and Classroom Practice

I took the stories home and prepared a reading text based on each one. Some stories were less than a page; some were more than two

pages. Such differences in length made for variety in presentation and classroom activities, short stories offering more time for discussion, longer stories more opportunity to practice active listening. In writing the texts, I tried to stay as close as possible to the meaning and the flavor of each story. In one case I actually changed a first person narrative into a poem because I felt it lent itself to such a form. I then developed pre and post reading activities for each text. These varied according to the "feel" that I got from each story. For example, for one prereading activity, I recast an account of an unusual retirement party I received from my 70-year-old Swiss student as a strip story by dividing it into parts equal to the number of students in the class. Having to put together the action sequence of the story as a group prepared the students for reading the text I had written. It also allowed me to use different but synonymous words and phrases in the strip story and the text. (See Long & Richards, 1987, for more details on strip stories.)

I planned to have the authors tell their stories to the class. In preparation, I had the class do a prereading activity, while the author of the story and I conferred in order to ensure that the author understood the recast story and that I had gotten the facts straight. This conference time also gave the author a chance to reread the story in preparation for telling it to the class. I directed the author-storytellers to tell the story, not read it, and to look at class members while speaking, looking down at the text only to refresh their memory. By the time an author was ready to tell the story, the class was primed by the prereading activities to hear it. During the telling of the story, I took a noncentral place in the class so that the storyteller held center stage. As the story was related, I observed the class and got a feeling about who was following the story and who was not. During the comment and question session and before students received the text, I silently wrote vocabulary and corrections on the board based on what students were saying or I took notes for later class review.

When students finally had the text, they were able to read what they had heard in order to confirm or disconfirm their guesses about what was in the story. This often led to discovery of differences in seemingly homophonous words and phrases. For example, a German-speaking student assumed from the context that a word used by a Japanese student was *working,* but he was confused because what he heard the speaker say was something like *waking*. When he saw the text, he was able to reconcile his understanding with his perception. Such discoveries produced a greater understanding and tolerance for differences in pronunciation and a willingness to simply absorb information until a considered judgment would be formed. All of this contributed to class cohesion.

After the students had read the text, I asked the author to take questions. These ranged from requests for information and elaboration of the story to requests for the meaning of words. With a strong student I absented myself completely from the interaction; with a weak student I acted as an on-call collaborator, contributing only when asked, and then talking only to the student, not to the class.

Another technique in the post reading question and answer session I used was to divide the class into groups and ask them to produce questions about the text. While they were doing this, I would again confer with the author-storyteller to work on problems that had come up in the telling of the story or to ensure that the student fully understood differences in the original text and my recast version.

After the post text question and answer session, there was some final activity designed to have students practice language in a personal way. For example, the final activities for the retirement story consisted of students individually describing an unusual celebration they had taken part in and, as a class, briefly discussing work and retirement. In all of these discussions, students acted as experts, sharing information about their own countries and cultures.

For each discussion I would vary student groupings. For one activity, I had students carry on a discussion with a partner and then share with the class the information they had gleaned from the discussion. For another activity, I had them work in dissimilar national groupings in order to promote understanding among students of various nationalities. My self-defined goal for these class activities was to build class cohesiveness by creating structures in which real communication could take place.

Results

The use of student-generated texts as the basis for an integrated skills methodology paid off for me and for the members of my class both in terms of learning English and of forming a classroom community. It enabled me to better understand the students as individuals and to serve their needs as learners of English. For them, it fostered fluency, discussion, cross-cultural understanding, and a genuine interest in reading. It also helped them to understand one another better and created a positive classroom atmosphere in which communication could take place. Strong friendships developed between individuals in the class, and the class as a whole took on an upbeat, interested and positive feeling. One often finds in intensive classes that those with the most fluent English dominate regardless of whether they possess other qualities that would project them into a leadership role. But in this class, the 70-year-old Swiss man was able to find a natural place of respect and leadership among a considerably younger group of students in spite ofthe fact that he was not the most fluent in English. I believe he won this respect by the way he told his story and by his sympathetic understanding of the stories of others.

Based on my experiences with student-generated texts, I have decided to create a supplemental text for my reading classes made up of student stories from previous courses, while continuing to elicit new stories. I will not abandon published materials altogether, but they will not have the same place in my reading class they once did. ■

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