

The employment of English authentic materials in an EFL classroom

Background:

Most college English classes in Taiwan now use pedagogically-altered materials. They are examination-oriented and grammatically based. It is believed that college English classes should be not only about language itself, but also authentic communication.

Aims:

- 1) To familiarize students with authentic materials.
- 2) To lower participants' anxiety and concerns, both instructors' and learners'.
- 3) To boost their motivation to utilize authentic materials in English learning.

Research Questions:

- 1) whether those materials motivate students to learn English and further to be autonomous in their course of English learning, and
- 2) whether it is feasible to use English authentic materials in a college English classroom, especially when various formats of materials are used,
- 3) whether a communicative student-centered approach lowers students' anxiety over communicating with others in English.

Definition:

English authentic materials are **NOT** altered or edited for pedagogical purposes, but for general recreation or consumption.

Principle:

To maximize exposure to English, the role of the teacher is minimized and that of the learners is maximized.

Objectives:

- 1) Employ authentic materials
- 2) Simulate a real-life English speaking environment
- 3) Communicate in English authentically

Execution: 4 workshops

The joke-sharing workshop

Procedures: The participants were asked to remember a joke or funny anecdote. Online Dictionary and the teacher were consulted for unfamiliar words. When ready, they shared their jokes in pair with everyone else.

Results: Through sharing, the students learned new words in context from their fellow students. In addition, as the jokes were shared many times, they were able to explain them more and more effectively, which struck authentic communication and enhanced their communicative skills. Overall, the atmosphere was extremely pleasant. Joking sharing was more enjoyable than reading all the fabricated conversations or scenarios in textbooks.

The reading material workshop:

Procedures: With the notes of their designated articles, the students stood in two lines face to face and shared their articles with the other students till every student had some ideas what the others had read. Three or four students were randomly grouped together to discuss the topic of the week with a question list provided for group discussion and then regrouped to share what they had discussed in their previous groups. Individual oral presentations were conducted after the sharing.

Results: Overall, with a series of tasks, they felt they learned quite a lot. The vocabulary and expressions, as well as their understanding of the social issue, were beyond what could be given in one single English class. The improvised presentation stressed them out a bit because they were pushed to organize all the ideas and did a public speech and answered questions raised by the fellow students. The width of their understanding of the social issue could never be covered by one textbook or an article.

Conclusions:

- 1) The authentic communication prompted by English authentic materials was never seen by some teachers.
- 2) No one focused on the grammaticality of their utterances but on the content being conveyed to the others to persuade and convince.
- 3) In a communicative student-centered class, the students felt anxiety-free when speaking English.
- 4) All above show that a communicative student-centered college English class is feasible and can be done with great success.

Challenges

With ready availability of the Internet and a great abundance of authentic materials at the fingertip, not having enough materials is never a problem. However, how to select suitable materials for prospective students requires some serious thought. This issue can be approached twofold. It is clear that the proficiency of the students has to be taken into consideration and the materials selected should be done accordingly.

The audio clip workshop:

Procedures: Audio clips containing jokes or funny anecdotes were played in class, simulating a scenario in which one might listen to something interesting with their family or friends. Several students were grouped to discuss their understanding of the audio clips and pieced the whole scenario together.

Results: The participants found the audio clips a bit hard to grasp. Despite the difficulties, the group work helped their understanding and lowered their anxiety. The element of "fun" in the clips helped ease the tension and made the class more enjoyable.

The audio clip workshop:

Procedures: Having watched their selected comedies, the students promoted their chosen comedies to win over as many students as possible by sharing some interesting plots. At the end, a vote was conducted to determine their favorite comedy.

Results: When sharing their favorite shows and stars, the students felt related to the shows, and they would like others to watch them. Laughter filled up the classroom. They did not feel that they were learning English as they were communicating in English without others looking at them strangely. The interest naturally got the students to communicate with others with what they are passionate about. To win the votes and support from the others gave them some extra boost to share and talk to the others.