



Addressing Classroom Challenges With Volunteer Help

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Experienced teachers may ask for help with administrative or workplace issues, but we often find it difficult to admit that we need help teaching our classes. Such an admission might signal incompetence or lack of preparation, so we usually quietly cope alone. Last year, I had an opportunity to work in a Japanese university where class size, schedule, and other limitations meant that I needed to revise my expectations or ask for some help. When I made the latter choice, I was overwhelmed by the response and pleasantly surprised by the outcome.

For twenty years, I have been teaching in an ESL program that also serves as a laboratory for future ESL/EFL teachers. I am accustomed to having observers, assistants, and student teachers working in my classes. This image of teamwork helped me imagine how recruiting volunteers might allow me to keep expectations high and still work within the limitations that we faced. Recruiting volunteers may help other language teachers meet challenges that they face, too. Below are brief descriptions of three challenges that I faced and how volunteers helped me meet them.

Challenge #1 Arranging Conversation Time With Native or Fluent English Speakers

I taught freshman oral communications classes, which ranged in size from 22 to 37 students. Few had ever spoken English for communicative or pleasurable purposes. I felt that it was important for them to have a successful English conversation every week, even if it was a short one.

I told a colleague and the international student coordinator that I needed some student assistants. Within a week, I had five Japanese and three international student

volunteers. While their attendance, reliability, and motivation varied, I was able to arrange five-minute conversations for every one of my students nearly every week. Although these short conversations constituted only a fraction of the 90-minute class period, many students considered them the most important activity of the course.

Challenge #2 Creating a Real Audience For Student Projects

My students were enrolled in courses preparing them for work as preschool or physical education teachers. I wanted their "final exam" experience to be as close to a professional activity as possible. I chose a simulation of an international teacher conference poster session. Preschool education majors created posters on topics such as traditional Japanese toys and the value of outdoor play for preschoolers. Sports and recreation majors made posters on sports history, heroes, and other related topics. They did the research, prepared the posters, and practiced the mini talks that they would give to someone who came to see their poster. In the last several weeks of the class, they rehearsed these mini talks with the conversation partners described in Challenge #1 above. If the poster session was to be an authentic experience, however, I needed some visitors from outside our class to attend the poster session.

Using e-mail and office visits, I contacted approximately 30 colleagues, university staff members, international students, visiting professors, and friends, inviting them to attend one or more of my classes on poster session day. Many declined; however, many came, too. At least four went out of their way to attend on a day when they did not have scheduled classes. Some professors who could not come themselves gave extra credit to encourage their students to attend. These visitors gave my students the invaluable experience of speaking to a real audience.

Challenge #3 Getting Help With Administrative Issues

My Japanese language skills are very weak. Although I could often decipher the intent of the memos, bulletins, and announcements that appeared in my mailbox, I lacked the literacy skills necessary to respond to them. I needed to find someone who could routinely help me with administrative tasks.

This would have been an ideal situation for a conversation exchange—working with someone who wanted to speak English in return for helping me with my Japanese conversation skills. However, before I could arrange such a partnership, another equally attractive solution presented itself. One of my colleagues had a student who was interested in becoming an English teacher. His class schedule was such that he could not volunteer as an in-class conversation partner. However, he was available at the end of the school day, the perfect time to sit down and take care of administrative details. He wanted to learn as much as possible about teaching. For example, he asked me questions

about the decisions that I made and the materials that I used. He enjoyed learning about teacher tasks that fall outside the realm of instruction and the English words and phrases that describe these tasks.

Complications of Relying on Volunteer Help

It turned out that recruiting volunteers to help with my classes was relatively easy. Making sure that their presence resulted in positive outcomes for everyone involved, however, required some additional work. For example, I had issued an open invitation to the poster session, so I could not be sure how many volunteers would actually show up that day. Furthermore, most of the visitors had never attended a poster session before. They did not really understand their role. From many e-mail exchanges, it was clear that they imagined sitting in an audience listening to a series of student speeches. I needed an efficient way to put people at ease, get the poster session underway, and show people their roles and responsibilities without resorting to a lecture. Preparing many copies of this index card helped considerably. I simply handed it to each visitor who walked through the door.

Dear Visitor,

Thank you for coming today. Please talk to as many of my students as your time permits. They are prepared to answer the following questions:

1. What is your project about?
2. Why did you choose this topic?
3. What did you learn from doing this project?
4. Can you tell me more?

Please feel free to ask me questions at any time during the session.

Working with the in-class conversation partners presented additional challenges. My students had limited proficiency, low motivation, and no experience with casual conversation. It was important that their initial experiences with the student assistants be successful. At the same time, since my assistants were inexperienced, they needed guidance. Since they were volunteers, they needed things to be easy and pleasant. Since they were full-time students, training sessions or conferences outside of class time were out of the question. Neither they nor I had time for discussions about the relative importance of fluency, accuracy, error correction, or other important pedagogical issues. I also found out (the hard way) that detailed e-mail messages were overwhelming, and

in some cases, counterproductive. I needed a clear, simple means of showing them what to do. The Weekly Conversation Record shown in the appendix helped considerably. The guided dialog helped the conversation partners see how to incorporate both review and new information into the conversations. They referred to the topics at the top of the page when students could not sustain their conversations for five minutes. They used the empty space on the sheet to ask me questions or communicate concerns about students. Finally, their initials served as my check on student attendance and participation.

The effort expended to recruit and plan for volunteers was worth it for several reasons. Primarily, I was able to meet my original goal—each student had a successful English conversation every week. Student attendance, productivity, motivation, and fluency all showed significant improvement. In addition, there were several positive outcomes that I had not anticipated. One was that we reached students other than my own. Some students who wanted to be in-class conversation partners could not because of their class schedules. However, they were able to assist the international student advisor with his new Language Learner Lounge, an informal gathering place for students who wanted an opportunity to use their foreign language skills. Another positive outcome was that the Japanese conversation partners were ideal role models for my students. Seeing Japanese volunteers using English to communicate with each other and with international students gave many of my students their first glimpse of English used for purposes other than completing an English class task. They were clearly impressed. Murphey and Arao (2001) explain this phenomenon, called near peer role modeling. Finally, over 100 future teachers experienced learning in a student-centered class. In order to arrange the individual conversations, I used a workshop model for most of our class time. Many students commented that this English conversation class helped them think about their future work as teachers.

In closing, I should mention three points. First, it was easy to find volunteers. I did not begin to exhaust the possible sources from which to recruit them. Second, my volunteers were not trained teachers or ESL professionals, but with some thought about how to structure their work and their time, classroom activities proceeded well. Third, although this story comes from a university setting in Japan, I am confident that volunteers could provide valuable assistance to teachers working in other settings as well.

Reference

- Murphey, T., & Arao, H. (2001). Reported belief changes through near peer role modeling. *TESL-EJ*, 5(3). Retrieved September 4, 2006 from <http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/tesl-ej/ej1a/a1.html>

About the Author

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Appendix

Weekly Conversation Record

Name: _____ Class: _____ ID#: _____

Job? No Yes (position): _____ school clubs & activities: _____

**Homework: Each week, prepare for these conversations with your CP.
[CP is Conversation Partner.]**

June 26

CP initials _____

CP What did you do this weekend?

You

CP What is your project about?

You

CP Oh, that's interesting. Please tell me about it.

You [Keep the conversation going as long as possible.]

July 3

CP initials _____

CP What did you do this weekend?

You

CP Tell me about your part-time job OR Tell me about your hometown.

You

CP What is your project about?

You

CP Oh, that's interesting. Please tell me about it.

You [Keep the conversation going as long as possible.]

July 10

CP initials _____

CP What did you do this weekend?

You

CP Tell me about your part-time job OR Tell me about your hometown.

You

CP What are your plans for summer vacation?

You

CP What is your project about?

You

CP Oh, that's interesting. Please tell me about it.

You [Keep the conversation going as long as possible.]

July 18 Final Exam Conversation with Jean

Jean What did you do this weekend?

You

Jean Tell me about your part-time job. OR Tell me about your hometown.

You

Jean What are your plans for summer vacation?

You

Jean What is your project about?

You

CP Oh, that's interesting. Please tell me about it.

You [Keep the conversation going as long as possible.]