Tips for Teachers

Strengthening English and Research Skills Through Project Work

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The Hong Kong University School of Professional and Continuing Education, (HKU SPACE) Community College was established in 2000. It provides a flexible and diversified higher education experience for pre-baccalaureate students who seek to improve their employment skills or further their studies at local or overseas universities. Since its founding, the faculty has grown increasingly aware of the need for student involvement in research activities as a means of developing critical thinking skills and a sense of professionalism. Student participation in research also benefits the faculty and enhances the profile of the university. In the spring of 2005, several lecturers at HKU SPACE, including myself, embarked on a semester-long project designed to meet the needs mentioned above as well as to enhance our students' English language skills. The project culminated in the first-ever student conference at the community college level in Hong Kong, held on 30 April 2005. The theme of the conference was Language, Society, and Culture, and it was conducted in English. This article outlines the project, highlighting the steps that were particularly important for developing English language and research skills. It closes with some suggestions for adapting the project for other language teaching situations.

Preliminary Planning

The project began with selecting the conference participants. Fourteen students, all at the advanced level, were selected. They were assigned individual faculty advisers who oversaw student work and provided feedback at each step of the process. In order to provide the most realistic possible outcome for this project, planning of the student conference also began early. Four keynote speakers—all scholars and experts in the

fields of language, society, and culture—were invited to make presentations at the conference. To ensure that students could successfully participate in the conference, we designed a series of twelve training workshops focusing on the linguistic and research skills that our students needed.

The Workshops

The points below briefly describe some of the workshops, giving particular attention to those focusing on English language and research skills.

1. Topic selection and preliminary reading. Students chose topics and proposed preliminary research questions. Their advisers then provided them with relevant reading materials that were used for background and guided reading skills practice. Background reading helped students build a solid foundation in the subject matter before they began their research work. Guided reading tasks helped students learn to read beyond the literal level of a text and develop critical thinking skills. If necessary, students had the opportunity to revise their original research proposals at this stage.

2. Vocabulary development. Vocabulary development was an ongoing process. The preliminary readings and workshop setting helped students acquire much of the technical or academic vocabulary that they needed for further work on their chosen topics. In order to encourage greater reliance on English throughout the project, students were given a monolingual English dictionary and encouraged to study vocabulary by noticing how it was used in their readings rather than resorting to memorization in Chinese as they typically would have done.

3. Academic reading skills. After developing general background knowledge on their research topics, students began more serious reading. They learned to search for answers to their research questions. They gathered, organized, analyzed, and synthesized information from their readings. They began to make generalizations or assertions about their new learning.

4. Writing and research skills. At the beginning, students wrote opinion pieces about their topics. Later, they wrote more critical papers based on their readings. The lecturers presented information about qualitative and quantitative research strategies and examined advantages and disadvantages of various research instruments such as questionnaires, interviews, case studies, and observations. The college even gave students access to software such as the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) for data analysis. We explained the format of a typical professional research paper including the form and function of the abstract, introduction, literature review, research methodology, data collection, discussion and analysis, conclusion, and bibliography.

Then, students drafted their own papers following this format. Advisers provided oral and written comments that were used to revise and polish the papers.

5. Speaking skills. Students practiced their conference presentations in several workshop sessions. Advisers applied writing process techniques to the oral component of the project, building in numerous opportunities for feedback and revision. Attention was given to numerous oral presentation skills including eye contact, body language, pronunciation, grammar, tone of voice, and techniques for successfully asking and answering questions after each presentation. In addition, students held their own group discussion sessions where they shared ideas about their strengths and weaknesses and how they might capitalize on the former and cope with the latter.

The general consensus of everyone involved in the project was that students' English language proficiency grew as a result of the workshops. One student commented, "I really enjoyed the preparation workshops for the conference because I've learnt and improved a lot, not only in my studies, but also in my second language— English."

The Culminating Event—The Student Conference

The student conference, organized for undergraduate and associate degree candidates and conducted in English, was the first of its kind held at the tertiary level in Hong Kong. The participation of four special conference experts made it a real, rather than simulated event. On one hand, the conference brought the project to a close. On the other hand, the conference was another important learning opportunity for students. Their presentations were recorded enabling them to review and reflect on their performances, identifying strengths and weaknesses. The conference also gave students a chance to practice several academic classroom skills. They took notes on each other's presentations and asked questions of and engaged in discussion with each other as well as with the keynote speakers.

Concluding Thoughts

This project was a success. We met the goals that we had set at the beginning. Briefly, these were enabling students to

* develop English language and research skills,
* interact with professionals in an academic setting, and
* share their research with others by presenting, or "publishing," their academic papers and projects.

While the project was a success, it also consumed an enormous amount of time and effort on the part of the organizers. Its underlying concept—a project in which students acquire both language and academic skills and then present their findings in a public forum—could be adapted for a wide variety of settings. Some teachers may be unable to work in as large or as cohesive a team as we were able to do. They may need to plan less ambitious workshops and projects. Some teachers may want to involve many more students, rather than selecting a few as we did. If so, students could work on group rather than individual projects. Less ambitious variations of the culminating event are also possible. For example, students might hold a poster session, an open house for parents, or invite another class to listen to their oral presentations. When resident experts are unavailable, school officials, local celebrities, or other respected community elders who are willing to use the target language in public could be the special guests. If a single public event requires too much organization, students could take turns presenting their work on a weekly basis. The essential elements were development of a student project, attention to building skills that ensured success, use of the target language in all stages, and a public forum in which to showcase student learning.

About the Author

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Using L1 Humor in an L2 Class

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Have you ever planned carefully for a class, including communicative activities that should involve your students in active use of the target language, only to be met with complete silence? This has happened to me on more than one occasion. Often, when I reflect on these experiences afterward, I realize that my activity was too difficult or that I had not adequately prepared students for its linguistic demands. I was lucky one day, however, when out of such silence a new idea occurred to me and I was able to turn the silence into a lesson that everyone enjoyed.

On this particular day, several students were chuckling among themselves in class. In what is probably a familiar teacher response, I asked them what was so funny and if they wanted to share their joke with the rest of the class. Immediately, they fell silent. I knew that I had only a moment to decide how to treat this silence and that if I was careful, I might be able to turn an embarrassing moment into a fun English learning experience. I was aware of the value of humor in language learning and had tried several different ways of introducing English humor into my classes in the past. This time, however, I thought why not let the students tell us in English what they thought had been so funny even though it was not related to our lesson. I asked the class if they wanted to hear the funny story. They all shouted, "yes." I said I also enjoy funny stories and that if they would tell their story in English, we could all enjoy it. I added that they should not worry about their mistakes but rather concentrate on telling the story. After a short pause, one student began. Little-by-little and with help from others, the story came out. Despite the language errors, the story-telling experience in English was a huge success. Soon everyone was laughing until tears ran down their faces.

In reflecting on this lesson later, I realized why this use of humor in my English class was more successful than my earlier attempts had been. In the past, I had only tried using humorous anecdotes or jokes that are in English language materials or associated with English language speakers. Often my students failed to appreciate the humor in them. In retrospect, this is no surprise. In order for my students to appreciate English humor, they needed greater familiarity with cultural aspects of English speakers' lives than our classes are generally able to give. Chinese humor, on the other hand, is second nature to them. Telling Chinese jokes, anecdotes, or humorous personal stories in English becomes a pleasurable language task and does not depend on cultural information that would require additional instructional time. Now, I frequently use Chinese humor in my English language classes. For example:

*   I often tell a joke or humorous anecdote as a warm-up activity or a prelude to a new unit of instruction. Familiar context helps make the joke or story comprehensible, so that my students are able to attend to the language. Soon, I hear them repeating the joke or anecdote to each other.

*   I assign students to come to class prepared with a funny joke or personal experience story that they will try to tell. First, they practice telling the stories in small groups. Then, each group nominates one story to be told to the rest of the class. By creating different groupings, students can practice their stories again with different listeners. Each time that students retell their stories, they become more fluent and confident.

*   I have also used humor as a topic of discussion for lessons focused on cross-cultural communication. Sometimes, in this context, I can make use of those English jokes that did not work well in the past.

Since that first day when the students told their funny story in class, I have been able to include many forms of Chinese humor in my English language classes. Students are more relaxed, and even my serious, demanding students are pleased with the results.

Afterword—The Story That Started It All

The anecdote that helped me begin to consider using Chinese jokes and anecdotes in my English language classes may help to prove my point that L1 humor may be more effective in language classes than target language humor. You can decide for yourself whether this story would have had the same effect if it had been told in an English-speaking cultural context or in the cultural context where you teach. Briefly the story went something like this: It was Valentine's Day and the student telling the story was attending a family reunion dinner. During the dinner, her young cousin suggested that all the couples in attendance should tell their partners, "I love you." The storyteller's father held his glass of wine up and tried several times to say the words to his wife. His lips quivered, and he broke into a sweat. Eventually, he blurted out, "Thank you." Everyone at the dinner table laughed heartily, and when the story was told in class, all the students did too. In the end, the gentleman said that no matter what he wanted to do, he could not utter those words in public or in private.

About the Author

Ding Jiali is on the faculty of the School of Foreign Studies, Jiangnan University, Wuxi, PRC. She was a visiting fellow at the Australian National University from 2000 to 2001. She is interested in ways of activating students' curiosity, autonomy, and independence in learning and using the target language. She can be reached at dingjiali@yahoo.com.

Using Prediction Tasks to Help Student Writers
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Being an avid reader is a wonderful asset in a developing writer. Often, students who read widely or for pleasure acquire familiarity with various genres of writing and text structure more naturally than nonreaders do. Unfortunately, many of my community college and university level students, who need to be able to write well, are not avid readers. I have had some success in helping these students with their writing by working on skills that they also employ when they are reading, even if they are not strong readers. Prediction is one of these skills. Learning to use prediction gives students a tool that they can use in evaluating and revising their own and their classmates' writing.

Prediction is a normal part of everyday life. We choose what we wear in the morning or what to carry with us based on a prediction of what the weather will be like or what we will be doing that day. We make purchases based on predictions about what we will need or do later. We sometimes try to predict what will happen in the future, whether for fun or for real. Thus, prediction is not something that is foreign or difficult. Everyone does it. It is also an important tool in reading although few readers are conscious of it. To illustrate this point, consider the way the following paragraph begins.

Readers make predictions when they read titles, common expressions, sentences, and paragraphs. Sometimes a single word will create a prediction of what follows, particularly for native or fluent speakers of a language. Sometimes a reader's predictions are exactly the idea the writer will express, but mostly a reader's predictions fall within a range of possibilities. Now, what would you predict should follow this italicized passage? You might predict an example of the type of prediction that a word or passage might evoke or possibly how I would suggest making this notion of prediction clear to students. However, you would probably not expect or predict that I would discuss unexpected student responses or another reading skill, for example. We can use this notion of prediction to give students concrete feedback on their writing that will help them revise, and in so doing, better understand the writing process.

Following are sketches of several prediction tasks that I have used with developmental and ESL student writers.

Making Predictions From Titles

Titles are a good place to begin prediction tasks. If you are like me, your students frequently ask whether their papers need to have titles. I ask my students to imagine going into a library where all the titles have been removed from the books. That is how I feel when I sit down to read papers that do not have titles. If I ask them why the titles are important in the library, they will say that they tell us what will be in the books, so in a sense, they know why the titles are important. To help them feel this need, I prepare a list of titles from books and articles to use in class. Depending upon the level of technology available to you, this could be done with a PowerPoint slide, an overhead transparency, or even titles written one-by-one on a blackboard. Show a series of titles. Ask students to make a prediction about the content of each book, article, or essay. Suggest that they write down their predictions and then discuss them in small groups. They will be surprised by how similar their predictions are. It doesn't take long for students to realize that titles allow readers to make predictions about the content of a work and whether or not they want to read it. Sometimes students ask about misleading titles. When they do, I discuss reasons why writers sometimes do this, pointing out that it is rare in academic writing.

Making Predictions Within a Paragraph

Next, work with paragraph-length texts. For this, you will need sentence strips, an overhead transparency, PowerPoint slides, or some method of showing students a text sentence by sentence. In the beginning, use a well-written paragraph that has been broken apart. First, show the topic sentence and let students predict what the paragraph is about. Then, add another sentence or two and pause to let students make another prediction. Ask what they think the writer will talk about next. Continue in this manner. If time permits, you might ask students to silently write their predictions and then compare them with a partner or small group. Gradually they will see that they can often predict exactly what the writer will say and that even when they cannot, their predictions will probably match those of some of their classmates. This activity also helps students learn how to become more active readers when they approach a new text. In a variation on this activity, you can show students well-written thesis statements and let them predict the content and (sometimes) the structure of an academic essay.

Predicting Words and Phrases

When students have some experience predicting what idea will follow another, you can try using a paragraph in which you have strategically deleted some words and phrases. Students will be surprised by how often they can predict exactly what words they need to fill in the blanks. Here you discuss in a general way how much of what we

say and write is made up of formulaic expressions that are used by native and fluent writers to create new ideas and texts.

Once you have introduced the notion of prediction to your students, you will probably find teachable moments in which it is relevant, helpful, or fun in many other areas of classroom life. For example, as you conclude one activity, ask your class to predict what is coming next. Or, ask students to listen to the opening line of a news broadcast and predict what the lead story will be.

Prediction tasks help students begin to see texts from the point of view of a reader. When they have learned that well-written works allow readers to make generally successful predictions, they are ready to look at their own writing from the point of view of a reader, too. Using the same techniques as above, show your class a paragraph or text in which their predictions will not work. Often, the reason is that the text is writer-based rather than reader-based. Because they now understand that a good text makes prediction possible, they will accept that something about this paragraph is incomplete. In other words, they will understand that revision is necessary, not because a demanding teacher is not satisfied, but because the text is not yet ready for reading. For many developmental and ESL writers, this is a very important realization. From this point forward, your student writers will have a much better understanding of the need for and power of revision in the writing process. Very soon, you will hear them using prediction in the feedback that they give each other and in revising their own papers.

About the Author

Medellin Stephens holds an M.A. in ESL from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. She has taught developmental and ESL writing at a number of institutions of higher learning in Honolulu. Currently, she is on the staff of the Art of Living Center in Quebec City, Canada.