Non-Conventional Content in English Language Lessons: "Death" as an Instructional Unit Application

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Coursebooks, Content, and Constructing Lessons

Most of the commonly used coursebooks for English language learning deal with ordinary topics such as family, hobbies, health, sports, entertainment, food, shopping, and so on, and treat them in a rather uniform, predictable, and light manner. Of course, these topics in themselves can have an important place in English language learning discourse. However, as Klinger (1999) observes, learners are curious about, want to learn about and want to talk about events and items not only in their immediate social sphere and personal lives. He adds, citing Bereiter, that they also can relate "to the larger issues and forces that shape their world: birth, death, good, evil, power, danger, survival, generosity, adventure." Yet, Rinvolucri (1999) remarks correctly: "The EFL discourse world avoids the shadow side of life with little or no reference to death, poverty or war." He justifiably demeans this "EFLese sub-culture" adding: "Ambition, rage, jealousy, betrayal, destiny, greed, fear and the other Shakespearian themes are far from the soft, fudgey sub-journalistic, woman's magaziney world of EFLese course materials."

The safe approach taken in English language coursebooks may be a successful strategy for publishers to sell their books in the principal markets around the world. However, it oddly skirts many meaningful and engaging topics that are universal among individuals and human communities and that compel being addressed particularly in the global context of English as an international language. Maintaining the default strategy of offering only vanilla content relates as well to the matter of linguistic form. Thornbury (2002) neatly makes the point, citing Grady: "Everything is reducible to form. The textbook represents all types of issues and all types of discourse as not requiring much thought or action beyond the decision as to the appropriate grammatical structure." As Thornbury himself adds, "It doesn't really matter what you think, so long as you use the third conditional."

The impact, indeed, is enormous and on a worldwide scale. It seems fair to say that many EFL/ESL teachers, both new and veteran, native-speakers of English and of other languages, tie themselves to coursebooks and the usually mundane methodologies prescribed in the teacher's manuals that often accompany the student's

texts. Many teachers in poorer countries are often hard-pressed with heavy workloads, very large classes, limited instructional resources, little training, and little pay. They may have little alternative to dependence on whatever books they can obtain. Many other teachers in more affluent circumstances simply are not comfortable with the idea of implementing an instructional approach that requires them to develop and construct lesson materials for a large part of their courses. They limit themselves to the content and prescribed instructional methodology of textbooks. Consequently, as Leather (2003, p. 205) points out in her review of coursebooks, "one can sometimes feel that both materials and classrooms have been stripped of anything truly meaningful in life." Furthermore, in this restrictive learning environment, the opportunities for students for language acquisition are inherently lessened.

Content, Language Instruction, and Language Ownership

This article will assert the necessity and value of addressing topics from the real lives of learners in English language classrooms and developing instructional materials and teaching devices for that purpose, as such "non-conventional" content is almost entirely lacking in commercial coursebooks. Yet, many teachers in the front lines of classrooms around the world seek more than pedagogical argument for a particular case to be impelled to implement an unaccustomed instructional approach. Thus, some basic guidelines for the development and construction of topical materials will be outlined. As an example of a practical classroom application of the argument, the article will present in detail a unit of instructional work on the topic of death, one that the author has developed and employed successfully in his college and university classrooms over a number of years. At the same time, as wise teachers will not just gratuitously inject new elements into their instructional repertoire, I will refer as well to the rationale for the particular materials and their mode of employment. The objective is to give teachers an impetus and inspiration for the investment of effort and risk to pursue this kind of lesson-making.

Cummins (2003) has observed that "there is an inseparable linkage between the conceptions of language and human identity that we infuse in our classroom instruction." In the context of the instructional choices we make, he notes that we must examine "the extent to which the classroom interactions we orchestrate build on and affirm the cultural, linguistic, intellectual and personal identities that students bring to our classrooms."

In English language learning environments, I believe that instruction needs to be based on a humanistic and communicative approach within which students have meaningful opportunities to formulate and express their thoughts, opinions, and feelings, and to relate experiences and knowledge, drawn from their own life

experiences and the society in which they live. The aim is to enhance their self-awareness and their awareness of their society and culture, and from there to widen and deepen their understanding of other peoples and cultures and issues on a global scale. For college and university students in particular, the integration of content and language instruction can promote the cognitive foundation, linguistic capacity, and personal confidence and motivation for them to engage more effectively in meaningful communication and discourse on both local and international levels. The instruction is an integral element in their growth and development as mature, thoughtful, responsible young men and women who are well prepared to take their places in society, the workplace, and institutions of higher education.

Using content from students' own lives and their society and culture in the English classroom greatly facilitates, encourages, and motivates their use of the language and self-expression, thereby promoting language acquisition and advancing growth in language proficiency. "The integration of content with language instruction provides a substantive basis for language teaching and learning. Content can provide both a motivational and a cognitive basis for language learning" (Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989, p. 202).

In this context, learners' engagement also with universal topics and themes genuinely contributes to their sense of ownership of English as an international language. It promotes both their understanding and practice in English to communicate their ideas, feelings, opinions, knowledge and experiences to others, across linguistic, cultural and national boundaries. It is ironic that in some educational settings around the world the opportunity for students to engage in this kind of reflective communication in itself may be largely limited to the English language learning classroom.

Learning English as an international language does not necessarily involve study of the customs and culture of countries such as the United States and Great Britain where English is the native language of a large majority of the population. Ownership of English on the part of non-native speakers means their control of the use of the language for their own purposes, which may include the kind of personal communication just alluded to as well as the pursuit of education and employment opportunities and other life chances within an intensely integrated international order.

Content and Materials Development

While some English language coursebooks surely deserve to be used in our classrooms to some extent, as noted earlier, the content of most of them lacks a full sense of reality and thus limits language input and acquisition, as it fails to provide sustaining interest and relevance that engage both teachers and students in productive

and rewarding language learning efforts. Thus, developing one's own instructional units and the accompanying materials for students' work to fill this void becomes a fundamental element in English language teaching. Not only does it enable teachers to exercise direction and control over the instructional process, but also it is a satisfying and rewarding opportunity for them to utilize their pedagogical expertise and imagination.

Furthermore, as Swaffer (1985, p. 17) avers: "For purposes of the foreign language classroom, an authentic text... is one whose primary intent is to communicate meaning." By this simple and definitive measure, the substantive content of these materials developed and employed for meaningful language instruction can claim an authenticity often lacking in coursebook materials which serve form over substance and at worst involve classroom activities that are performed for little more purpose than students' immediate diversion.

In the preparation of appropriate materials, for conventional and non-conventional topics, determining factors for the choice of subjects and the manner in which they are developed and used include the proficiency levels, maturity, and interests of the learners in the class as well as their training and capacity to engage in meaningful, student-centered, interactive, communicative activities and tasks.

Teachers need to explore a topic with thoroughness, precision, and imagination, from many compelling and meaningful angles in order to prepare instructional materials that are interesting and effective for language learning. The content items must be engaging and provide learners with opportunities to join fully in that exploration along with extensive and varied language use. The materials themselves must be prepared and presented with great care and organized in appealing and easy-to-follow formats. In the construction and presentation of learning materials there is interplay among the nature of the materials, content items, and purposeful language learning activities and tasks the teacher designs for their use. It is essential that teachers have formulated clear learning aims and methods to implement the work assigned to students.

In the context of college and university classes, as well as those for adult learners, in Japan, with students from low intermediate levels, I have developed instructional units for many topics, such as family, education, employment, aging society, gender issues, criminal justice, and immigration and nationality. The specific content within even commonly used topics is very much non-conventional. For example, within "family", some issues that are prominent in the society are explored in a manner and at a depth appropriate to particular classes. These include the use of surnames in marriage, fatherhood, child rearing, birth rate, three-generation families, divorce, and single parent families. Certainly these are not found in conventional English language coursebooks in the marketplace, not to mention a topic such as death, selected as the

illustrative focus in this article. However, I do not engage in advocacy-orientated instruction on either local or global issues. I concur with Sargent (2004) that the one-sided presentation or orientation of an issue toward ends that correspond to the worldview of the teacher lacks instructional integrity.

In preparing materials for these kinds of topics, teachers should think systematically of ordinary human experiences and issues and break them down into simple components the students in their classes can address within the limits of their language proficiency, or reasonably stretched to a slightly higher level. Consider points that are relevant to their lives now and in the future, as well as those that are particular to their society and culture. Some materials will be teacher-constructed, others will be found through investigation of instructional resources and utilized in appropriate ways. Video, poetry, social data, items from the source culture, and discussion outlines are some of the materials I use for the topic of death.

Blanton (1992, p. 291), who advocates a "whole language" approach to college ESL, notes that such a unit of instruction is likely to be successful if it meets the following criteria. Her list provides a thorough summary of what I have sought to achieve with my own instructional unit on death, discussed in the following section as an application of the principle put forward in this article.

1. The unit engages students' interest.
2. It requires students to communicate meaningfully.
3. It surrounds students with language that they can understand.
4. It challenges students to think.
5. It provides students with the opportunity to interact with others.
6. It presents students with text-related tasks to perform.
7. It requires students to listen, speak, read, and write.
8. It is student-centered, while being content-oriented.
9. It integrates language functions and language skills.
10. It increases students' self-confidence and self-respect.

The discussion that follows offers teachers a guide for constructing their own creative and effective English language instructional units on the topic of death itself and other non-conventional topics that involve stimulating and substantive discourse. I hope that it will encourage and inspire teachers to undertake this venture especially into areas that are not part of the content of conventional coursebooks, but that are very worthwhile and productive to pursue.

Death: A Non-conventional Topical Unit of Instruction

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so. *John Donne (1572-1631)*

Death need not be proscribed as a, well, deadly topic for the English language classroom. It may be treated in a manner that is comfortable for students in compelling lesson components that meaningfully involve them and affect successful language learning. This article outlines a multi-dimensional approach on this subject for college and adult learners from intermediate levels of proficiency that integrates all the language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. I have used all of the components in various college classes in Japan with up to twenty students. In advance of using some components, I have advised the class of the nature of the topic and said that any student who might be upset with it should see me privately. However, these lessons have never been a problem for any of my students. Indeed, they have been well received, appreciated for their originality, and successfully carried through. In short, teachers working with students in their customary sensible and sensitive manner need not shun all treatment of the topic of death merely on the face of it. Thus, I confidently share these instructional ideas.

Video and Discussion

Video material engages viewers both visually and verbally, and can promote a deeper and fuller understanding of a particular subject. We are drawn to and identify with characters in a story and experience the emotional as well as the rational aspects of the subject. Video material can have an impact that motivates learners to communicate their own thoughts and feelings about what they have seen as they construct its meaning for themselves.

I may start an instructional unit on death with the video of an episode from a 1980's U.S. TV family drama series called "Our House". It was about a widow and her three children who came to live with her father-in-law. In one episode 13-year-old David receives a severe head injury in a bicycle fall and goes into a life-threatening coma. We see his deceased father appear real in David's mind. He wants to give up life in order to be with his father, who tries to convince David to return to life and his family. The father also appears watching over his wife, David's mother, as she tries to cope with the crisis. In the end, after a very hard personal struggle in his mind, David accepts his father's appeal and comes out of his coma to continue with his life. This warm and affecting story rivets the attention of students and raises several issues about the subject of death. (While this particular video may not be available to other teachers,

they can seek a video, even in the first language of their students if the class is homogeneous, that will serve a similar purpose.)

After watching, students in small groups start on their own to sort out what happened in the story and to give their reactions to it. Invariably, some of the questions that arise are: what happens to us after we die; do we have a soul or spirit that lives on after death, and if so where does that spirit reside; do the deceased have any direct influence on the living; do the living have any obligations toward deceased loved ones; how does one face death. Students return to the discussion in the next lesson with a printed handout I make that outlines and connects their points in order to stimulate and facilitate further discussion. Intermediate level college students are quite capable of expressing some basic, thoughtful remarks on these questions, albeit brief in many cases.

Poetry and Recitation

Poetry is universal among all societies and deals with themes that are common to all cultures and human experiences, such as love, death, nature, despair, and hope. Poetry utilizes all the resources of language and provides rich input to language learning. In this context, "the main objective of using poetry in language lessons is... to find a means of involving the learners in using their language skills in an active and creative way, and thus to contribute to the development of their communicative competence" (Tomlinson, 1986, p. 33).

My careful selection of poems for a unit of instruction on death includes the following: James Russell Lowell's "The First Snowfall", which recounts a father's touching memory of his dead young daughter while speaking to his living child; Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee", which recounts the memory of the poet's deceased and beloved young wife; and Edward Arlington Robinson's "Richard Cory", which relates with startling surprise the suicide of a town's greatly admired and most prominent citizen.

The study of the poems can integrate structure and meaning. The teacher can introduce each poem in turn with several readings. For each of the texts, small groups can work through assigned reading tasks and activities that explore the themes of the texts, the meaning of particular elements, poetic structures, lexical components, and students' personal responses. For "The First Snowfall", one response item might address the images of the landscape, described in the first 12 lines, after the snowfall, and another their empathy for the father as he "thought of a mound in sweet Auburn / Where a little headstone stood"; for "Annabel Lee", on the mood created in the poem by the poet's use of repetition and rhyme, and their appreciation of "a love that was

more than love" between the poet and "Annabel Lee"; and for "Richard Cory", why a person like him whom all in town "thought that he was everything / To make us wish that we were in his place" might in fact have been in such despair as "one calm summer night, / Went home and put a bullet through his head."

As nearly all poetry gains from being read aloud, oral presentation should be an integral part of the instructional unit. It is a marvelous opportunity for students, working in small groups and reading the text aloud many times and in various ways, to share, discuss, and critique their efforts while developing individual expressive interpretations of the text and its meaning to them. Recitation is also a stimulating and effective practice for students to develop better pronunciation, phrasing, intonation, rhythm, pace, fluency, and voice projection and control. Ample time should be allotted for this practice and presentations before the class.

Writing and Translation

Reading can be integrated with writing through appropriate assignments, providing students with additional opportunities to respond to the texts they have read. The writing tasks could be set up as joint constructions by pairs or small groups or as individual assignments, in either case employing a process mode of production that includes brainstorming, drafting, peer review, and revision.

For "The First Snowfall", students could imagine and write the words the father may have spoken on his visit to his child's gravestone after the winter snow had melted. For "Annabel Lee", they might be asked to imagine how they think the poet might respond to the words of another poet: "Never love with all your heart, / It only ends in aching." For "Richard Cory", they could compose an obituary for Richard Cory that would appear in that town's newspaper. Generally my writing assignments are set modestly at paragraph length.

Writing in the form of translation is another excellent approach. Translation of carefully selected passages from literature in their first language offers EFL students a unique opportunity to explore the dimensions of both languages and to develop their skills and style of written expression in English in ways that often are both different from and beyond the products of standard composition and expression in the second language.

Duff (1989) summarizes well the value of translation in language learning:

> Translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning: flexibility, accuracy, and clarity. It trains the learner to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity). (p. 7)

Rivers & Temperley (1978) describe the translation process in an EFL setting:

> The production of an acceptable translation into English is [for students]...a means for developing sensitivity to the meanings expressed in a stretch of discourse in one's own language and to the different linguistic mechanisms used by the two languages to convey these meanings. (p. 337)

The rationale and a particular instructional methodology for EFL literary translation are discussed at length and in detail in Porcaro (1998, 2001).

Translation of poetry is a unique challenge and a very selective choice of texts is of paramount importance. For the topic on death, I give my Japanese students the poem "Obaachan" ["Grandmother"] by Shuntaro Tanikawa, one of Japan's most popular contemporary poets. It is from the collection *Hadaka* [Naked] in which simple poems are given as the lyrical, evocative voices of children on a wide range of innocent and bittersweet experiences, reflections, and imaginings. In "Obaachan", a child relates his experience at the bedside of his grandmother in the moments before she dies. The translation process takes students into new territory as they consider the subject of death. At the same time, they derive much satisfaction from their writing efforts. Following is a translation of "Obaachan" by a first-year university student from one of my classes.

Grandmother
She opened her eyes wide and seemed to be surprised.
She tried very hard to see something that we couldn't see.
Somehow she looked troubled
and seemed very confused.
She might have realized just now
an important thing that she hadn't known before.
If so, everyone shouldn't have cried
and should have been quiet.
But she couldn't move her hands and legs,
and she couldn't speak.
No one could understand what she wanted.
She was only breathing, as if she was angry,
as if she wasn't breathing by herself.
It seemed that her chest was being pushed by someone.
Suddenly, at that time, her breath stopped.
With a look of surprise on her face,
Grandmother died.

Explaining Local Customs and Issues

Lesson content that deals with local customs and issues draws on students' familiar base of social and cultural knowledge and experience, and supports their sense of ownership of English. For my students, an exploration of things Japanese related to the topic of death could include items such as visiting the family grave site (*ohakamairi*), the summer festival welcoming the visit of the spirits of ancestors (*obon*), Buddhist funeral ceremonies and family altars (*butsudan*), and contemporary issues such as death from overwork (*karoshi*) and the rising number of suicides among middle-age men.

Generally, students may be directed to explain, describe, relate basic information and personal experience, and comment on such local customs and issues in pairs or small groups. Short articles on some matters may be assigned as reading, and relevant writing tasks also could be formulated.

Such lessons can be engaging and productive while also providing an opportunity for genuine two-way teaching and learning. Students may provide the non-native teacher with a wider and deeper understanding of some things from their society and culture while the teacher helps them to advance their proficiency in English to communicate that knowledge and familiarity.

Conclusion

Many and multi-faceted instructional ideas dealing with the topic of death have been presented in this article. They can be adapted for both lower and higher levels of language proficiency within classes. Selected material could be limited to a single lesson or two, or carried over a series of lessons to form a fuller unit of study. Above all, I hope that this article will lead teachers to consider and venture into new and worthwhile areas of content-based English language instruction based on the development of their own instructional units that bring further success in their work and their students' accomplishments.

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