Tips for Teachers

Autonomous Language Learning: Setting Up a Study Tour

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Language learning has often been systematically broken down into parts, most notably; reading, writing, listening and speaking. These so-called skill areas are sometimes grouped into passive and active skills. These parts have been further divided and categorized, but is this all necessary? What follows is a short report on a content-based course that was offered to a group of second-year tourism majors at Rikkyo University in Japan.

Each of the 15 students in this semester long, elective English course was assigned to one of four groups. Each group was asked to set up a study abroad/homestay program in the USA. Each group had one student with previous experience in this area who served as the leader. (Each of the leaders had set up and launched a real tour with the author earlier in the year).

Some of the general topics students were asked to look into were (October) selecting a region, university, or ELI program, and thematizing the tour; (November) working out the details of the program, accommodations, daily schedule, and creating a handbook; (December) deciding on airline reservations, travelers' insurance, and advertising campaign; (January) completing a group presentation, a completed program handbook, and a promotional flier. Rather than lead the students each step of the way, the instructor followed the students' interests and needs and provided information and advice as required.

Class met in an informal, workshop style for the beginning and the end of each 90-minute weekly period. Students then elected to leave the classroom and go to the computer lab or library when they were ready to do so. On occasion, some groups chose to remain in the classroom for the entire time working with materials they had brought into the class with them. Virtually all the information gathering and inquiries made took place on the internet. All student-initiated inquiries made via the internet or email were real. The students, for example, contacted the appropriate person at the hosting university in order to obtain the information they needed. (Students were

cautioned to make it clear that they were working on a research project that would not necessarily lead to a tour.)

Classroom management was a challenge—for the students, that is, most of them responded well to all of the freedom they were given by creating a schedule, setting deadlines, and meeting with group members outside of class. For one group of students, it was perhaps a bit too much freedom, which was reflected in the length of time it took for them to get started. In an effort to stay in touch with each of the students, they were required to keep a journal, which they would e-mail, the instructor at the beginning of each week. This information proved to be very helpful in directing the instructor's attention in the following class, as well as in keeping him abreast of how the projects were progressing. Here are some excerpts from the electronic journals.[1]

The first one is from Nozomi Ebata:

Hello! This is Nozomi Ebata. I sent you this email to tell you what I (my group) am doing.

My group chosen Outdoor Field Studies program sponsored by Yeloow stone national park. maybe would would take up this as main study.

In the last class,we also decided to conbine this Y.E.S program with University's ESL program. I search ESL or programs for international students at Montana state university because it is relatively close to the park. Then I couldn't check whether it has any programs for international student or not but later I could confirm it. So it is possible for us to put both together.

But I have a problem about cost. Putting both together, we are inevitable to expensive fees. I think We have to also discuss the cost problem.

That'all for today. I will send you e-mail again!

Chong Fei Meng provides another example:

From our research, we found that the english language programs that University of California, Irvine provide are the most suitable program for us to plan a study tour to US. I have gone through the homepage related to the english language program, and I could only found the basic informations. To gain a deeper understanding and details about it, I have send e-mail to them for more informations. The following are the reply from them. I would like to ask Mr. Cunningham to give me advice on how to responce to this reply and also what's the next step. I could proceed in order to make our assigment a smooth and successful one.

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[1] These journals entries are unedited and have been printed with the permission of the authors.

Three of the four finished projects were very well done, one of them was exceptionally impressive—nearly complete enough to launch as a tour. It was hoped that by giving these tourism majors an interesting and relevant project to work on, that they would develop some valuable skills related to tourism while learning English. Class was conducted exclusively in English, as was most of the research and all of the correspondence on the internet.

Overall, the students seemed to enjoy this research project and appeared to be genuinely surprised at how well they did. Here are a couple of samples[2] of what students thought about the course.

Satoshi Hirano writes:

> *I think I did my best on the work much more than other subjects . . . The main point of the tour was Tourism, and I was think to make it real . . . It was just a project but it had a lot more to me. I made a tour what I really what to participate. I really enjoyed the work on the project. I had to set up things from scratch and I realized that I had made progress at this kind of things through the OSP (another project).*

Another student, Akihide Takei, writes about the class in the following way:

> *Well, I think I learned that I can communicate with any institution using email. After taking Eigo Ensyu 2 (the name of the course), I feel like I can get and use varioius information from all over the world aggressively . . . I think the experience this class give us is worthwhile for Kanko (Tourism) students. Some of the Kanko students want to work for the travel agency. Those who what to work for such a place should have the experience like that, but other classes don't give us such an opportunity. It was the first time for almost all the students to create and organize a tour in Eugo Ensyu 2, I think. So, the class was worthwhile for most of the students.*

The instructor also found this style of working with students greatly rewarding and more in line with what learning is all about. The informal, exploration-oriented approach seemed to build confidence among the students.

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[2]These samples are unedited (except for the parenthetical information added for the sake of clarity) and have been printed with permission of the authors.

Language Learning Histories

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Until I finished writing this topic I did many things: making a mind map, editing, rewriting, reading, typing, etc. Thanks to this work I could improve my English ability. (Yuri)

If I am disappointed at learning English, once I read my LLH, I will be able to have power!! (Hisashi)

Introduction

One common topic to all students is language learning. So why not take advantage of students' rich English learning experiences in the classroom? In this paper, I will trace the development of a project on language learning histories (LLHs) that allowed my learners to re-examine their language learning in detail and develop their writing skills. I will also highlight student comments (using pseudonyms) to show the value they perceived in the various stages of the project. Finally, I will include suggestions for teachers to maximize the use of LLHs in their own classes.

Why LLHs?

Beginning with topics that are familiar to students builds confidence, motivation, and interest. LLHs in particular build confidence because students are experts on their LLH. They are motivated to share their personally meaningful stories and to listen to others. Furthermore, excitement and inspiration abound when students notice similarities, differences and uniqueness in each other's stories. My process in this project provides students with valuable opportunities to develop self-awareness, awareness of others, and the ability to notice valuable insights in language learning. These insights can then be reflected on, and serve as anchors for, future reference. The process below also builds in a variety of useful sub-skills which assist students in becoming more effective learners in general, and writers in particular.

The LLH Process

Below is an outline of the development of the LLH process. Each step is closely connected and can be applied to other topics too.

Starter Questions

First I provide students will consciousness raising questions on the LLH theme in order to activate schema. I encourage them to also ask their own questions during ten-

minute timed conversations (Deacon, 2001) that are held with various partners. In class, I say, "the following questions may help you to think generally about your English history":

• Talk about your experiences learning English in high school, other schools, and personal study.

• What impact did your teachers or other people have on your learning?

• What experiences have you had overseas?

• Why are you learning English?

• Have your attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and feeling towards English changed? How? Why?

• What advice have you received that has helped you to learn?

• What advice would you give to other learners like yourself?

Mind Maps

Next, students write mind maps (Buzan, 1994) for homework (adding colors, pictures, and key words) to visually illustrate their LLHs. In the following lesson they share their mind maps with partners who provide cues such as: "Tell me about your mind map," "Tell me more about this part" and "What more do you want to add to your mind map?"

Then the students add and/or delete parts of their mind maps by taking into consideration their peers' feedback. They notice the common themes, highlight the main points, and number each point either chronologically or in order of importance. Students then discuss their mind maps with new partners and continue to help each other to further organize and clarify the visual and logical arrangement of their ideas. Some questions that help to structure the discussion and influence the arrangement of ideas at this stage include: "What's the most important point? Why?" and "What's the next most important point? Why?"

> *Mind mapping makes my thinking clear.* (Yusuke)

> *Mind mapping was useful for me because I had never thought deeply about myself. I remembered my experience and knew myself. I thought it's a very important thing.* (Yukiko)

Reading LLHs From Previous Years

I provide students with LLHs from their peers in former years in order to stimulate further discussion and expose them to various other insights on language learning. They also serve as wonderful linguistic models because these LLHs represent the final version of the project writing process.

> *I thought the text from last year's students was very useful because first, if I couldn't understand how I should write, I could learn a good idea from the text.* (Tae)

> *It was fun and helpful to read OG's (old girls) LLH.* (Makiko)

Writing the First LLH Draft

Students take their refined mind maps home and use them to write a first LLH draft. Then they read over the draft and reflect by asking: "What details best communicate what I want to say?" At this point the focus is on noticing whether or not the ideas are clear and arranged in a logical order. They are told that editing for grammar, spelling, punctuation, and other elements of style will come later.

Editing for Content

In the next lesson students share their writing with a few partners (peer editors) who write comments such as: "I really like the idea you mentioned about ____." or "Wow! I had a similar experience when I was in high school" or "What does this part mean?" They focus primarily on the content.

> *I think it is important to know other person's comments. They let me know what is lacking in my paper and what they want to know. Redrafting is also important because I remember more things that I want to write when I do redrafting.* (Mari)

> *I think that pair sharing with my peer is useful and interesting because when I wrote my LLH I thought it's perfect for me. However, when my peer read it, there was a part which she couldn't understand. So she helped me to write a better LLH.* (Miki)

Redrafting

Then students re-write their drafts using their partner's suggestions. Afterwards, they carefully self-edit for grammar, spelling, and punctuation first and later through

exchanging papers with a few peers. Finally, they prepare new drafts which I read, comment on, and return.

> *Redrafting was very useful for me. Once I write sentences I never read the sentences usually. But when I did redraft I had read my papers again. I think it made my writing ability improve.* (Yuka)

Publishing

On a suggestion from a colleague (Tim Murphey, personal correspondence) I now publish the final drafts of students' LLHs as a booklet. To reduce my workload, students send their histories as email attachments. I then print, organize, and create a volume for each contributing author.

Conclusion

The LLH project is a useful and interesting experience in learning to write and communicate about personally meaningful content for students. It is also a chance to develop writing skills by following a carefully structured writing process. The project becomes even more exciting in later years as students take advantage of the historically situated narratives of their predecessors. Allow me to conclude with a few insightful LLH author comments

> *I enjoyed writing the LLH because I could find that I had many experiences to learn English. In fact, I forgot my feeling when I learned English for the first time. But thanks to this LLH I remember this feeling.* (Natsu)

> *I read my writing again and again, then I corrected many mistakes by myself and my friends and also you. Redrafting made sentences clear and easy to read and understand. I had never thought about history like this. It was interesting. Thinking about my history made me think about my future.* (Norie)

References

Buzan, T. (1994). *The Mind Map Book.* New York: Dutton.

Deacon, B. (2001). Timed conversation. *The Language Teacher, 25*(1), 33-4.