
Teach Writing Right on the Overhead Projector

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For helping students develop their writing skills, the overhead projector offers many advantages over the traditional chalkboard. For instance, from the back of the room, the bright image produced by an overhead projector is more easily read than is writing on a chalkboard, and the overhead projector immediately solves the problem of those ESL classrooms without chalkboards. With an overhead, no time is wasted nor noise produced by students walking to and from the board, and mobility limitations of handicapped students are minimized. Rather than focusing on the teacher, the screen provides a different center of attention for the class, as well as interesting classroom activities.

When students do their writing on transparencies which are later shown to the entire class, they all become involved because either their own work or their friends' work will soon be projected for all to see. Like everyone else, students are interested in the concerns and accomplishments of their peers. Of course, anonymity can still be preserved, avoiding student embarrassment. On the other hand, if a student's work is well done--and if appropriate--the teacher can ask whose it is.

Materials

The materials used are inexpensive. In fact, almost any transparent plastic works fine. Because the typical activity involves writing just a few sentences, small pieces of transparency material will suffice. Ordinary page protectors can be cut into four strips,

each yielding eight pieces (from both sides) somewhat larger than two and a half inches by eight and a half inches. These strips can be washed or wiped with a moistened cloth and re-used time after time. Discarded X-ray film cleaned with household bleach (which strips the emulsion from it) can also be used for transparency material. Students can even make transparencies from household, kitchen-type plastic wrap which will retain legibility even after being stored in one's back pocket.

A careful selection of pens will minimize expense and facilitate re-use of the plastic. Water-based pens made especially for writing on plastic (like Pentel and Vis-a-Vis) work well, and the writing is readily removed with water. Permanent pens provide a somewhat more intense image, but removing it requires a solvent such as rubbing alcohol, lighter fluid, or spirit duplicator fluid. Before purchasing a pen, trying it on old-fashioned (shiny), transparent tape will verify its capability to write without "beading" on overhead transparency sheets. An alternative type of pen, less valued by students, is a refillable, grease marking pencil. Avoid marking pencils which unpeel since students love to unwrap them (and waste the pen in the process).

If thermal copiers, photocopiers, print shop cameras or blue print machines are available (all of which will make transparencies for the overhead projector), writing exercises utilizing overhead projection can be based upon already printed material also.

Classroom Activities

The overhead projector can be used for any activity which traditionally has involved the students' going to the chalkboard .

A number of the small plastic sheets can be distributed and students in the class asked to write appropriate sentences. If desired, a transparency can be placed on the projector to provide a stimulus for these sentences. The movable man and woman (described in a previous article in this series, [*TESL Reporter* 17(3), July 1984]) may be used to illustrate: "He is sitting, but she is standing. She was standing, but now she is kicking the ball." You may wish to have one student at the projector arranging different situations to be described.

Students who are doing the writing may involve their peers in activities requiring them to respond in total-physical-response-type activities. For example, students might identify classmates by name or description with something for them to do. The expectancy and anticipation inherent in activities of this type will catch students' attention, so that class time flies.

Form Transparencies

A good portion of one's time is spent completing forms, many of which offer interesting material, valuable for ESL classes. Using the appropriate transparency-making machines (as mentioned above) writing exercises can be based upon printed forms.

For example, a transparency of a blank check can be projected. The teacher or a student can demonstrate the correct procedure for its completion. If a piece of clear plastic

is placed on top of the check transparency, the information can be written and then quickly "erased" by removing the top piece of plastic. If the original blank check is duplicated (using a photocopy machine or a thermal copier to make a spirit master for production of multiple copies), students can then place a piece of clear plastic on top of their paper copy of the check. Then, they can complete the information and pass it to the instructor who can superimpose it on the check transparency.

Other forms which work well include motel registration forms, medical forms, credit applications, driver's license applications, or any forms used within the school itself. Crossword puzzles also provide an interesting change of pace. Large print varieties, available for children, are often appropriate for the ESL classroom.

For those forms with printing too small for projected legibility, several options are available. With a good quality transparency and a darkened room, the projector can be moved toward the back of the classroom to increase the image size on the wall. Or, with the right type of copy machine, the original transparency master can be enlarged to whatever size is desired. One can tape (with shiny, clear tape) two or more transparencies together to make a larger one to include all the material on a long form. If you have access to a print shop darkroom, film transparencies of superb quality and of any size can be made photographically.

The "Four Square" Technique

The "Four Square" transparency technique has proven itself to be quite an interesting and valuable classroom activity. It is based on a picture consisting of four quadrants or



Figure 1. A sample picture story for the "Four Square" transparency technique

squares, each depicting a scene in a story (see figure 1). In use, a master transparency and several paper copies of the complete picture with its four scenes are made. The paper copies are distributed to several students along with a sheet of clear plastic and a pen. Viewing the pictures, working independently or with partners and using their own imaginations, the students create an original story. With the clear plastic sheet on top of their paper copy, they write in the dialog of their own, original story. When finished, they pass in their transparency with the sentences of their story, but without the illustration.

In advance, the teacher has prepared a mask made of an ordinary manila folder cut into two pieces at the fold. In one (the frame) an opening is cut for the entire four-square picture transparency, which is taped in place. Then, from the top half of the folder (the mask) four squares are cut. Each square is attached to the frame (taped along one edge only, hinge-like) and masks its quadrant until it is time to reveal that picture.

The teacher places the student dialog transparency beneath the picture master with

the four hinged squares all closed to mask both the picture and the student story. With the projector switched on, the teacher can see through the cardboard to verify the alignment of the student's story and the pictures. (This alignment is more easily accomplished if no dialog "balloons" are used). Then, the first square is opened for the class to read. In sequence, the following windows are then opened and the dialog/story read. Given the same picture, the variety of stories a class of students produce will delight everyone.

Conclusion

Students love the variety of interesting activities which the overhead projector allows. They also like the anonymity it provides, without the embarrassment of having their mistakes identified--as they are when written on the chalkboard. And with a little encouragement, as students become more familiar with using the overhead projector themselves, they will even suggest and help implement new ideas which occur to them.