

Turning An English Seminar Course Into A Student – Centered English Classroom

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Abstract

In every academic program there is an appropriate distribution of general education courses, professional or core courses, minor and elective courses. Before a student is granted certification to graduate, he or she is required to take a seminar course. In most seminar courses that I have observed, instructors give their students a series of lectures on different issues or topics of interest in the area of study. Often times the sessions become rather boring because students are mere passive learners or recipients of concepts imparted by their teachers.

This paper discusses how the author moved away from the traditional practice of lecturing or giving talks by invited resource persons to activities whereby the students became the panel discussants, seminar participants, role players, script writers and the like in which leadership, cooperation, creativity, stronger friendship, constructive competition, resourcefulness came into play.

Introduction

In March 2001, the First SEAMEO Education Congress held in Bangkok ended with a lot of thought – provoking and action – oriented issues that were timely and relevant to Southeast Asian countries' education reform. Under the sub-theme “Responding to the Challenges in the New Millennium through Education Reform, Budget and Stronger Cooperation”, the panelists recognized the need of introducing educational reforms in the learning arena and developing learners holistically. The question of what reforms should be introduced to the educational system was raised and one of the suggestions offered on the teacher reform aspect was that teachers should act as facilitators of learning.

Earlier in 1999, the National Education Act of Thailand made a provision to attach the highest importance to learners. Around that time there had been expressions of concerns from the corporate sector that university graduates were not prepared to face the challenges of the corporate world. Some were attributing this to the usual practice of teachers making themselves the center of the learning process, prescribing and controlling every learning activity.

In keeping with the educational provision and the desire to do something better, I decided to make some changes whenever opportunities arose. One of these was when I was assigned to teach the course “English 426 : Seminar in the Use of Business English to fourth year students majoring in English Business Communication, I found out that it was still taught in the traditional way just like any other seminar course.

In general, the course had the following characteristics :

1. The teacher prescribed the learning goals and objectives based on prior experiences, past practices and state – mandated standards.
2. Learning content was organized and presented primarily by the teacher.
3. Paper and pencil exams, specifically mid-term and final exams, the focus of which were discrete vocabulary and grammar items rather than communication, were used to assess students.
4. Students were passive recipients of information.

With these characteristics of the teaching environment, it was not clear how much student learning was taking place. In creating an effective learning situation in the classroom, Kotter (1996), proposes these three elements.

1. The atmosphere should facilitate the exploration of meaning . Learners must feel safe and accepted. They need to understand both the risks and rewards of seeking new knowledge and understanding. The classroom must provide for student involvement, interaction and socialization, along with a business – like approach to getting the job done.
2. Learners must be given opportunities to confront new information and experiences in the search for meaning. However, these opportunities need to be provided in ways that allow students to do more than just receive information. Students must be allowed to confront challenges using their past experiences without the dominance of a teacher/giver of information.
3. New meaning should be acquired through a process of personal discovery. The methods used to encourage such personal discovery must be highly individualized and adapted to the learner’s own style and pace for learning.

In other words, the learning situation should place a great responsibility for learning on the students. How then should a teacher organize the classroom to support this type of student learning as an active dynamic process?

Glassgow (1997), describes the following actions for creating such a process :

1. Identify a problem suitable for the students.
2. Connect the problem with the context of the students’ world so that it presents authentic opportunities.
3. Organize the subject matter around the problem.
4. Give students responsibility for defining their learning experience and planning to solve the problem.
5. Encourage collaboration by creating learning teams.
6. Expect all students to demonstrate the results of their learning through a product or performance.

In the light of these suggestions for actions, I came up with these procedures.

Procedure

With the normal fifteen sessions of three hours per session for the whole semester I scheduled the first session for Course Orientation and self-introductions as well as forming project teams. In the course orientation I gave the students the following instructions after going through the course description and course objectives.

Instructions To Students

1. Today's session will be spent on introducing yourselves and then on forming your teams or groups for your group project presentations which you will do from the 8th week to the 13th week. There will be six groups with eight members each. Choose a leader and a secretary and a name for your group/team. The leader of each group will then draw lots to find out which group will be working on which topic.
2. The second week session will be spent on planning for the group project presentation. You may spend out – of class time to do more planning, if needed, as your group presentations will not be done until the 8th week. Your group presentations will be simulations or role plays or any learning activities in which the group members will be providing the information related to the topic. In other words, group presenters will act as guest speakers or panel discussants while the other non-group presenters will act as members of the seminar audience. Each group will prepare a presentation script based on the information gathered from academic sources from the library, online, the internet, etc. Leaders are free to delegate responsibilities to group members. You are free to use any visual aids and any means of presentation available to you.
3. Your presentations will be evaluated using the following criteria :
 - Content
 - Delivery
 - Evidence of Teamwork
 - Visual Aids
 - Creativity and Costumes

The teacher and the non – group presenters will evaluate the group presenters. At the end of the group presentation, the other 5 groups will hand in their evaluation forms. Each group will hand in only one form.

4. Each one of you will make your individual presentation on the topic from the third to the sixth week. The fifth week is a pair presentation in which one is a reporter interviewing a celebrity. You choose the role you would like to portray from someone like that of the Prime Minister of Thailand, Tata Young or any other one. You are allowed to have only your cue cards during your presentations. You will be graded on your individual presentations based on the following.
 - Content
 - Delivery
 - Grammar
 - Visual Aids
 - Vocabulary
5. On the seventh week we will have a company visit/tour. After the tour, all of you will hand in a summary report of what you have gained from the visit.
You must prepare some questions to ask the company people after the visit.
6. On the 15th week we will do a Wrap – Up and Evaluation of the course.

Learning Activities

Week	Activities
1	Course Orientation Self – Introductions Forming Project Teams First Planning
2	Group Planning
3	Individual Presentations : “How To.....”
4	Individual Presentations : Sales Talk
5	Pair Presentations : Interviewing A Celebrity
6	Individual Presentations : Company Profile
7	Class Company Visit
8	Group Presentation : How To be Successful in English Business Communication
9	Group Presentaiton : At the Workplace
10	Group Presentation : Holding A Business Meeting
11	Group Presentation : Business Negotiations
12	Group Presentation : Launching A Product
13	Group Presentation : Tourism Campaign
14	Group Seminar
15	Wrap – Up & Evaluation Activities

Observed Students' Behaviors or Performance

In the first session allotted for forming teams, students knew where they belonged in and whom they trusted to lead them. They chose topics they were familiar and comfortable with because they were sure they could find more information about them.

In the group planning, group members brainstormed among themselves on their method of presentation, subtopics to be covered, actors or role players, organization of their presentations, visual aids, content script and other preparations to be made to ensure that their group would have the best presentation.

There was evidence that students were employing their previous knowledge and experiences gained in a previous course Effective Presentation when they did their individual presentations of the topics "How To.....", Sales Talk, and Company Profile. They brought personal, communication and educational gadgets as well as office machines to demonstrate how to use them. They convinced their classmates to buy their company goods or services which ranged from cosmetics to credit cards, insurance policies, holiday packages, party – catering and real estate. They talked about their companies – the ones where they did their internships. Notably remarkable was their increase in self – confidence and improvement in their oral fluency. I did not need to call the roll for presenters ; rather they volunteered one after the other depending on who wanted to speak first and next.

The Pair Presentation : Interviewing A Celebrity was very interesting to them as one of the pair took the role of either a national or international figure whom he/she probably idolized, respected, or wanted to be identified with. Students playing the celebrity's role were dressed up like the celebrities themselves and imitated their behavior or speech styles which resulted in laughter and teasing. They also employed previously learned interviewing techniques.

The Team Project Presentations took the form of simulations of situations (panel discussion, lecture, demonstration, role playing, symposium, workshop) depicting the topics. Information provided by group members which came from library and internet sources were effectively accessed, organized, interpreted, communicated and supported by visual aids or power point. It was evident that they used strategies of thematic organization like concept mapping, and categorization. I was struck by the way the leader of each group distributed the roles among the members. It reflected the fact that members' linguistic and acting abilities plus personalities were taken into consideration. More linguistically-able students did more of the information-giving work while the less able ones were made responsible for the technical aspects of the simulation. For instance, in the presentation on "Launching A Product", there was supposedly an intermission on the stage for a TV commercial and the less fluent students did the TV act non-verbally. It was gratifying for each member to feel that his contribution to the group task was also important.

The Group Presentation on “How To Be Successful in English Business Communication” was a simulation of a panel discussion in which the panel discussants were supposed to be a well – known and respected academician, a very successful businessman, a very popular and young TV personality who speaks very good English, a diplomat and a very popular female moderator. The information which was well presented was taken from the Internet, from interviews with their English native speakers, and from books. It was a complete simulation of a panel discussion in which the moderator introduced the panel discussants whose presentations with visual aids were timed and who answered the questions from some in the audience. An evaluation was also done by the audience.

The simulation of Business Negotiations was done in a few scenes. The first scene was a lecture from a supposed guest speaker on the fundamentals of business negotiations. The next scene was a role play of a supposedly unsuccessful business negotiation followed by a supposedly successful business negotiation. The audience was not given information on which business negotiation was successful prior to the role playing because after the role plays a Question and Answer session was done. Questions dealt with were on the information given in the lecture which also covered cultural dimensions of business negotiations and which may be the causes of unsuccessful negotiations. Prior to the simulation the Master of Ceremonies informed the audience that there would be a QA Session at the end and those who could answer the questions correctly would get some rewards. Naturally, the students were motivated to pay attention very well. The information used in the lecture was taken from business books in the library as well as from the Internet. The script for the role plays was well – written and the role players were very good actors.

Here are some of the statements taken from the students’ course evaluation essays.

“I felt nervous and shy at first but later on I improved and just wanted to talk and talk.”

“I was glad I had a chance to show my acting ability.”

“Our group met even after classes, at night at my home because we wanted to be the best team. We practised our parts especially the ones in which we have to be the teachers. We prepared power-point presentations and other materials.”

“At first I was afraid because I might not be able to speak very well but as we went along speaking week after week, I found out that I might not need to enroll in a refresher English course after graduation as most students do. I feel I am ready to work using English.”

“The activities we did in class were enjoyable. I enjoyed the role playing the most. I learned a lot from them because I understood what they meant.”

“I found true friendship in my group.”

“Our leader told us to do our best.”

“We worked at home with our computers surfing the Internet. We slept late and we were tired but we were happy that we could do what the teacher expected from us.”

Conclusion

In the beginning of this paper I posed the question of whether students were getting any learning out of the traditional method of teaching the course. I decided to move away from a teacher - centered classroom to one whose environment allowing students to

- 1) take responsibility for learning,
- 2) become active information seekers,
- 3) develop information processing skills
- 4) have direct access to multiple sources of information
- 5) work with teachers to define performance criteria
- 6) develop self – assessment and peer assessment skills
- 7) work with teachers to select learning goals and objectives based on authentic problems and students’ prior knowledge, interests and experience.
- 8) work individually at times but also need to collaborate in small groups.

Having changed to a student – centered learning environment, the elements of leadership, cooperation, creativity, stronger friendship, constructive competition, resourcefulness emerged or became visible.

As we can glean from the observed students’ performance in this context of learning, students tend to engage in learning rather than coping. Coping mechanisms are the set of “acritical techniques” that students develop over the life of their schooling that they often use as a substitute for “genuine learning”. Coping techniques involve doing exactly the opposite of what one must do in order to learn. There are a lot of reasons why students develop coping mechanisms over time ; many have to do with the nature of schools and some have to do with the expectations of teachers. Too often students are encouraged simply to cope because the kind of tests, assignments and learning activities teachers give them allow them to do so.

I’d like to end this paper with some recommendations focusing on the psychological principles pertaining to learners and the learning process and are primarily internal to and under the control of the learners rather than conditioned habits. These principles are intended to deal holistically with the learners in the context of real – world learning situations.

1. The learning of complex subject matter is most effective when it is an intentional process of constructing meaning from information and experience. Learning in schools, therefore, must emphasize the use of intentional processes that students can use to construct meaning from information, experiences, and their own thoughts and beliefs. In turn, learners become active, goal – directed, self – regulating and assume responsibility for contributing to their own learning.
2. The successful learner, over time and with support and instructional guidance, can create meaningful, coherent representations of knowledge. Educators can assist learners in creating meaningful learning goals that are consistent with both personal and educational aspirations and interests.
3. The successful learner can link new information with existing knowledge in meaningful ways. Knowledge widens and deepens as students continue to build links between new information and experiences and their existing knowledge base. The nature of these links can take a variety of forms, such as adding to, modifying, or reorganizing knowledge or skills. How these links are made may vary in different subject areas, and among students with varying talents interests and abilities. However, unless new knowledge becomes integrated with the learners' prior knowledge and understanding, this new knowledge remains isolated, cannot be used most effectively in new tasks and does not transfer readily to new situations.
4. Learning is influenced by environmental factors, including culture, technology and instructional practices. Learning does not occur in a vacuum. Teachers play a major interactive role with both the learner and the learning environment. The degree to which the classroom environment is nurturing or not can have a significant impact on student learning.
5. What and how much is learned is influenced by the learners' motivation. Motivation, in turn, is influenced by the individuals' emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking. Positive emotions generally enhance motivation and facilitate learning and performance. Intense negative emotions generally detract from motivation, interfere with learning, and contribute to low performance.
6. The learners' creativity, higher order thinking and natural curiosity altogether contribute to motivation to learn. Intrinsic motivation is stimulated by tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal choice and control.
7. Learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations and communication with others. Learning can be enhanced when the learner has an opportunity to interact and to collaborate with others on instructional tasks. Educators must provide for learning settings that allow for social interactions, and that respect diversity, encourage flexible thinking and social competence.
8. Learners have different strategies, approaches, and capabilities for learning that are a function of prior experience and heredity. The interaction between learner differences and curricular and learning conditions affects learning outcomes. Educators need to attend to learners' perceptions of the

degree to which these differences are accepted and adapted to by varying instructional methods and materials. When learners perceive that their individual differences in abilities, backgrounds, cultures and experiences are valued, respected, and accommodated in learning tasks and contexts, levels of motivation and achievement are enhanced.

9. Setting appropriately high and challenging standards and assessing the learner as well as learning progress are integral parts of the learning process. Performance assessments can provide other sources of information about the attainment of learning outcomes. Self-assessments of learning progress can also improve students' self-appraisal skills and enhance motivation and self-directed learning.

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