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ABSTRACT

The University of Michigan English Language Institute has experimented successfully with offering extra-curricular mini-courses for students of English as a second language. The courses provide an optional activity in which the exposure to English is through a real situation in learning subject matter. After several successful attempts, and some not so successful, the faculty isolated the factors to be considered in planning such a supplementary program. These factors include: (1) Courses should be offered at a time in the semester when a psychological break is needed, and when it will not interfere with the students' regular academic work; (2) A subject matter should be found that the teacher enjoys and that the students are not likely to have been exposed to; (3) The actual material to be read or discussed should be carefully chosen. It is advisable to use something simple and authentic; (4) Audio-visual aids should be used to make the course more appealing; (5) A series of three or four lectures in one week seems to constitute the right length for the course; (6) Not much, if any, outside work should be required, and students ought not to be forced to participate if they do not want to; and (7) Each lecture should be self-contained. Subject-matter possibilities for mini-courses are unlimited: what is important is the rewarding feeling of a shared interest or experience and a realization that English can be vehicle for real communication. (HW)

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EXTRA-CURRICULAR MINI-COURSES AS PART OF THE
CURRICULUM OF A COURSE IN ENGLISH AS A
FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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One of the most widespread complaints of foreign students of English is the lack of opportunity to use the language outside of the classroom. In the case of students in the intensive courses at the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan, four hours a day are spent in the classroom with four different teachers and often with different groups of students. These four classes, with an average of eleven or twelve students each, emphasize different aspects of the learning process: structure, writing, speaking-listening and reading. A special film program in the speaking-listening classes provides ample opportunity for conversation and discussion. The same is true of the reading and writing classes even though the emphasis in these is placed on the specific skills. In addition, the language laboratory is open eleven hours daily, in the morning, afternoon and evening. The students also have "conversation partners", community volunteers who meet with them for one or two hours a week on an informal basis. Several field-trips, visits to factories and museums and other social activities are also provided by the Institute. Furthermore, the great majority of the students live in dormitories with American roommates and are free to participate in almost all university activities. Despite these many opportunities to use the language, students still sometimes feel that they are exposed only to "classroom English" and that they are not being prepared to face the reality of the English language.

This is not entirely untrue. Regardless of what a teacher does, a language class is to a large extent an artificial linguistic situation, and even though there might be many opportunities for the students to use real English in real life situations, there are also many reasons why they do not always take advantage of them. Cultural differences, uncertainty with their use of the language, fear of embarrassment or failure, and lastly, the fact that it is easier and much more relaxing to talk and interact with people who come from the same country that they do, speak the same language that they do and understand and share their problems like nobody else.

The problem is then to find a kind of real situation, outside of the language classroom and the curriculum, in which English is used; a kind of activity in which the students are not forced to participate if they do not want to; something fun, relaxed, challenging and above all, real.

The idea of offering extra-curricular mini-courses was first brought up at a faculty meeting. Teachers felt that the students in our eight-week course would respond positively because they were eager to get as much English/^{practice} as possible in that limited time. They also thought that our fifteen-week students needed a break in the long intensive course they were taking. That is how our "Mini-Introduction to American Literature" was born in the winter of 1970.

Since then, twelve mini-courses have been offered, only

three of which have been repeated. We believe that we have learned what makes a mini-course a success and why some of our attempts have failed. (See Appendix)

~~(I would now like to turn my attention to those mini-courses from which we have learned the most.)~~ Our "Mini-Introduction to American Literature", which I taught, consisted of a series of eleven one-hour-long informal lectures, held at seven o'clock in the evening, in a regular university classroom, outside of the Institute. They ran from Monday through Thursday for three consecutive weeks. The actual course consisted of a series of poems by Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The second week was devoted to short stories, one by Ernest Hemingway and one by Truman Capote. The third week, which had only three meetings, was devoted to drama and featured a one-act play by Tennessee Williams. As an extra attraction all the material was recorded and placed in the language laboratory where it was readily available. All the readings were printed and distributed free of charge to the students who signed up for the course, which was also free. This first time we limited our enrollment to forty students because we had no idea of the interest the mini-course would create.

~~(Let me now describe what happened in that first mini-course, and point out its strengths and weaknesses.)~~ Our average enrollment for the winter term is about one hundred and eighty students. Our registration limit was almost imme-

diately reached and many students who could not sign up felt, quite understandably, left out. Since then, our mini-courses have been open to all the students of the Institute, regardless of level, as well as to their families, roommates and friends. The response had been tremendous; at least fifty percent of our students have signed up for every mini-course, and we have even gone up to two-thirds of the total student body. This includes the summer session, in which enrollment at the Institute rises to about three hundred students.

As already mentioned, we limited our enrollment to forty students in the first mini-course. At the end of the three weeks, there had been an attrition of almost fifty percent. (~~What were the reasons for this attrition?~~) We carefully analyzed what we had done and decided that there were at least three reasons that could account for our rather limited success: 1.) The course might have been too long. 2.) The subject matter might not have been interesting. 3.) The course should possibly have been taught by more than one person.

(~~So we decided to try again.~~) In the fall of 1970, we offered a "Mini-Introduction to American Poetry", which I taught and which consisted of only four lectures. To our original selection, we added a poem by Allen Ginsberg and a few more short ones by Emily Dickinson, whose poems had been enthusiastically received in the first mini-course. This second course was much more successful. We had a registration of over

ninety students and hardly any attrition. The relative failure of our first mini-course had undoubtedly been caused by its length. Rather than providing fun and relaxation, it had clearly become another academic responsibility.

During that same term, a teacher with a strong background in Anthropology and History offered another mini-course: " An Anthropological view of the Family in Different Parts of the World." It consisted of eight lectures, and relied rather heavily on student participation. The students were asked to read some relatively lengthy articles and other materials in order to participate in general discussions. During the first week of the course, a film was shown, prepared and narrated by Dr. Margaret Mead, in which four families were observed in different parts of the world. Considering the subject matter, the international make-up of the audience and the use of a very exciting film, we were rather disappointed with the results of the course. Not only did we have a marked attrition, but also student participation was much less active than we had expected. Through a questionnaire, we learned that the students thought that a two-week course was too long and that the readings, although interesting, interfered with their regular academic work. Very few of them had actually read the materials before the lectures; and consequently, most of them were unable to participate in the discussions. Once again the mini-course had become a bit of a burden.

The same mini-course was offered again a year later by another teacher with very similar results. This second time more emphasis was placed on the American family and the whole mini-course was geared toward general discussion of the topics rather than lecturing by the teacher, with only occasional comments and questions by the students. Some of the negative remarks made by the students about this mini-course were that the articles they had to read were too long and more importantly, that even though they could easily understand the teacher, they often found the other students almost incomprehensible. Both factors clearly show the reasons for the failure of discussion-oriented mini-courses. Notice though, that discussions are very successful in the classroom, where groups are smaller and the teacher provides the material.

At that time, we also isolated another problem. During the second week of my first course, I had devoted two periods to each short story. The first day we talked about the actual plot and discussed difficulties in vocabulary and grammar. The second day, we analyzed the short story in terms of its meaning, message, literary quality, and so on. Those students who had missed the first lecture, were completely lost the second day; they simply did not know what we were talking about. The same thing had happened when the film was used; because of its length, it had to be divided into two parts which were shown on two consecutive days. To any student who had been absent

one day, the film made little sense. In other words, we learned that in a mini-course, every lecture or meeting should be self-contained; that the student should not feel penalized at any one meeting for not having attended the previous one. This arrangement makes active participation always possible, if desired; moreover, it makes attendance more relaxed and always rewarding.

In the summer of 1971, we decided to offer a special mini-course called "English as Spoken in the Physical Sciences". This course was planned and taught by a professor in the Physics department and it consisted of four lectures geared especially to students in Engineering, Physics and Mathematics. Among the topics that were discussed were vectors, vector Algebra, simple differential equations, Newton's laws and projectile motion. We had expected that the course would be very successful. Students in the sciences always express an interest in learning "technical" vocabulary and this course would clearly fulfill that desire. The course was well-attended, but the reactions to it were not very enthusiastic. Most students felt that the course had been too easy and that they had not learned anything they did not know. In other words, they thought it was rather boring and not very challenging. Here we had an example of a practical subject, in an area which had supposedly been neglected, given by an experienced teacher in the field and yet the students had not found it stimulating.

Since the result of the Physics course had been somewhat puzzling, we decided to offer another "practical" mini-course, that same summer. We were really eager to find out why a mini-course on American poetry would be more successful than one on Physics and Mathematics. Our next try was called "American Universities" and consisted of a series of four lectures, given by four different people, two teachers from the Institute and two guest speakers: a foreign student advisor and the Associate Dean of the graduate school. The four lectures were : "The library - what is there and how to find it" , "Courses and classes in American Universities", "The Foreign Student in an American University" and "The Organization of an American University".

This time we did not fail. The mini-course was an unqualified success. It was well-attended, the students participated eagerly and their reaction was extremely enthusiastic. They said that they had learned about many aspects of American universities that they had not been previously exposed to. Other mini-courses offered later, further emphasized this point: regardless of the subject matter, a mini-course was well received if it offered something new, if it presented genuine information, if the students felt that they were learning something they did not know. In other words, if the learning experience was real.

From our experiments and observations, it seems reasonable to deduce that the idea of offering extra-curricular mini-cour-

ses is basically a sound one. The students' response to them indicates that there is an enormous interest in this kind of real and relaxed linguistic experience. More than the actual language they learn, which is limited to a few vocabulary items and some aural-oral practice, mini-courses seem to constitute an excellent vehicle for psychological re-enforcement. Many students have commented that they understood more than they had expected, and that they found mini-courses stimulating and fun.

When planning a mini-course several points must be remembered:

1. Courses should be offered at a time in the semester when a psychological break is needed; and when it will not interfere with the students' regular academic work.
2. A subject matter should be found that the teacher enjoys and that the students are not likely to have been exposed to.
3. The actual material to be read or discussed should be carefully chosen; for our purposes, it is better to use something simple and authentic, than something difficult that has been simplified or in any way altered.
4. Audio-visual aids should be used to make the course more appealing: films, slides, photographs, recordings, etc.
5. A series of three or four lectures in one week seems to constitute the right length for the course. It is long enough

to give the teacher a chance to develop a subject sensibly without becoming a burden for the students.

6. Not much, if any, outside work should be expected from the students. Materials and topics should be provided, and students ought not to be forced to participate if they do not want to. This approach has the advantage of making the lower level students comfortable, while leaving the door open for the more advanced students, or those who are willing to take a more active part.

7. Each lecture should be self-contained, so that a student can feel free to return after having missed one or more meetings.

The possibilities for mini-courses are unlimited: from poetry to sports, from art to national parks, from astrology to popular music. The essence of a mini-course is the rewarding feeling of sharing an experience or an interest and the happy realization for the students, that communication in English is, after all, possible and fun.

APPENDIX

Mini-courses offered at the English Language Institute.

1. Mini-Introduction to American Literature (Winter 1970)
(W.Whitman - E.Dickinson - R.Frost - L.Ferlinghetti -
E.Hemingway - T.Capote - T.Williams)
2. Mini-Introduction to American Poetry (Fall 1970)
(W.Whitman - E.Dickinson - R.Frost - L.Ferlinghetti -
A.Ginsberg)
3. An Anthropological View of the family in different parts
of the world.(Fall 1970)
(Four families(film) - The family, youth and sex -
American Sexual Heritage)
4. Mini-Introduction to American Poetry (Winter 1971)
(Same as #2)
5. English as Spoken in the Physical Sciences (Summer 1971)
(Vectors - vector Algebra - simple differential equations -
Newton's laws)
6. American Colleges and Universities (Summer 1971)
(Libraries - Classes and Courses - The Foreign Student -
University Organization)
7. American Families : A Comparative and Historical Perspective
(Same as #3) (Summer 1971)
8. Mini-Introduction to American Poetry (Fall 1971)
(Same as #2)
9. American Colleges and Universities (Fall 1971)
(Same as #6)
10. Mini-Introduction to American Poetry (Winter 1972)
(Same as #2)
11. Some recent Poetry in English Recorded as Popular Songs
(Summer 1972)
(Recordings by The Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, Carole
King, etc.)
12. The World of Gilbert and Sullivan (Fall 1972)
(Gilbert's libretti - Sullivan's music - Songs from
different operettas - The Gondoliers)