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Title: Literature as an organic language learning tool

Abstract

This is a conceptual paper, based on several semesters of collaboration in which the American author interacted with students in the Taiwanese author's EFL classes in Taiwan. The best native language users are typically those who read extensively, especially reading for pleasure in their youth. This gives them a large vocabulary and an intuitive feel for how words and ideas should connect together that they then naturally apply to future reading comprehension and writing tasks. Literature can, similarly, be a vehicle for foreign language learning, but how can the natural learning stemming from reading for pleasure be replicated in the more structured classroom? The authors explore approaches that employ student-centered methodologies and foster positive motivation. The metaphor "organic" language learning refers to learning that is natural, without being forced or contrived, and without artificial characteristics. This approach parallels other foreign language learning subjects in which authentic source materials are valued by students. However, use of literature for language learning comes with pitfalls. Culture as portrayed in literature may not be accurate, in order to make literary points, leaving students with serious misunderstandings about the target culture, which teachers must be able to address and explain. The authors present a framework of best practices for teachers of foreign language literature that attempt to mirror the process of learning language via reading for pleasure, and also draw on techniques used in native language literature courses when the text is challenging.

Keywords: distance technology, culture, foreign literature, authentic experiences, motivation

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Literature as an organic language learning tool

Problem Statement

The best native users of English are typically those who read extensively, especially reading for pleasure in their youth (Lerikkanen, Rasku-Puttonen, Aunola & Nurmi, 2004; Nippold, 1999; Sinatra, 2008). This gives the reader a large vocabulary and an intuitive feel for how words and ideas should connect together which they then naturally apply to future reading comprehension and writing tasks. Literature can also be a vehicle for foreign language learning, but how can the natural learning stemming from reading for pleasure be replicated in the more structured environment of the classroom?

This conceptual paper draws on several semesters of collaboration in which the American author interacted via the Internet with students in the Taiwanese author's EFL classes in Taiwan. The interaction included live videoconferences, YouTube-type videos prepared specifically for the class, and blog entries and comments. Over several semesters, the techniques used by the authors were shown to strengthen the motivation of students to study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Wu, Marek & Wu, 2009a; Wu, Marek & Wu, 2009b; Wu & Marek, 2009; Wu, Marek & Wu, 2009c).

Purpose of inquiry and inquiry questions

In this paper, the authors draw on their own experiences and the EFL literature to suggest answers to the following questions:

1. What are the goals that motivate students to study EFL, and what are the motivations that should be encouraged?
2. How can cutting-edge educational theory inform the complex problems of EFL literature instruction and learning?

3. How can instructors help students learn EFL literature in a way that is as natural and easy as possible?

In this analysis, the authors use the metaphor “organic” language learning to describe learning that is natural, without being forced or contrived, and without artificial characteristics (Beckett, & Hager, 2000; Moss, 2000). The benefits of organic language learning parallel other foreign language learning research in which authentic source materials have been shown to be valued by students and therefore contribute to motivation.

Significance of inquiry

This exploration of organic learning, and how the concept intersects with research about motivation and teacher-centered versus student-centered instruction, is highly relevant for EFL programs in the second decade of the 21st Century. In countries where there is no surrounding population of English speakers, EFL students often struggle with grammar, vocabulary, and with cultural references in source materials that are unfamiliar to them. Therefore, the more natural and painless English learning can be made, the more likely students are to engage themselves and actually acquire advanced skills.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

The following theoretical framework informs this consideration of the inquiry questions:

English Environment in Taiwan

The lack of a surrounding community of English speakers means that, for Taiwanese students, there is little practical opportunity to use English for actual

communication (Lan, 2005). The Taiwanese educational system, therefore, treats English as a classroom subject, similar to math or geography (Wu, 2006).

English is often taught in Taiwan using traditional pedagogical principals, in which learning is conceptualized as being for future application. In traditional pedagogy, the classroom is teacher-centered and the teacher has full responsibility for making all decisions about what is to be learned, how it will be learned, when it is to be learned, and whether it has been learned (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005). Many EFL teachers in Taiwan, therefore, use lecture/memorization methodologies and students rarely have meaningful interaction with native speakers or authentic materials relating to English-speaking cultures (Su, 2008; You, 2003). English in Taiwan, therefore, has not historically been taught using andragogical (adult learner) principals in which learning is conceptualized as being for immediate application, the classroom is student centered, and students hold significant power to determine what and how they will learn (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005). The result is that students are often not highly motivated to pursue their study of English, resulting in lower proficiency and, therefore, less desirable student outcomes.

Motivation and Confidence in EFL Learning

Motivation, confidence, and ability interact with each other (Butler & Lumpe, 2008; Phillips & Lindsay, 2006). The cumulative experiences of the student, both in and out of the classroom, drive the three learning variables. They strengthen and weaken as a result of the student's experiences in the use of English, both positive and negative (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). Learners may have instrumental motivation, integrative motivation, or both and it has long been accepted that learners who possess integrative

motivation are most successful because their learning goal is to achieve personal satisfaction and enjoyment (Gardner, 2001; Wang, F. X., 2008). Learners who are only instrumentally motivated generally make the minimum effort required to avoid punishment or to gain rewards.

While the integrative/instrumental motivation framework has been widely cited, Dörnyei's (2005) more complex model of motivation is growing in popularity. Dörnyei said the EFL learner imagines an idealized future English-speaking self, based in part on real-life encounters (or lack thereof) with other English speakers and in part on the desire to function in international society. Dörnyei's framework is based on the 21st Century reality that students may need to use their English skills not only with native speakers, but with a wide range of people who speak English as a first or second language.

Authentic materials and interaction

Research has shown that even a fairly small amount of authentic interaction in the target language changed the perception of students about how well they were able to apply their skills, made students more comfortable with information they had already learned, and inspired them to make global, cross-cultural connections (Wu & Marek, 2010). The challenge for EFL professionals and students in Taiwan, the site of this study, is the lack of a consistently available authentic language-learning environment to supplement in-classroom learning (You, 2003). Therefore, innovative instructors constantly look for new instructional techniques and source material that students will perceive as authentic in order to create a learning environment as integrated with the target culture as possible.

Authentic Experiences

This has led to a growing body of literature about use of the Internet and technology to provide authentic enrichment of EFL instruction (Liu & Chen, 2007; Payne & Ross, 2005; Tudini, 2003). The literature contains the general theme that such channels of communication provide authentic, interactive experiences that are much-desired by students.

Previous research using the Internet to provide authentic source materials has shown clearly that when the instructional methodology stresses authentic and interactive engagement, it builds confidence and, in turn, produces increases in student knowledge on the target culture; and also that student centered, active learning, including use of technology and Internet-based cross-cultural interactions, contributes to improvement in learners' English proficiency level (Wu & Marek, 2010).

As shown by the data, even a relatively small amount of authentic interaction in the target language made students more comfortable with information they had already learned, changed their perception of how well they were able to apply their skills, and inspired them to make global, cross-cultural connections (Wu & Marek, 2010).

Natural and organic language learning

The concept of organic learning, if not the actual terminology, goes back to Aristotle in *Nichomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 1941), who writes extensively about how practical knowledge is constructed, holding that practical wisdom is the "true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man" (p. 1026). Modern ideas about experiential learning are centered in Constructivism, an

application of Cognitive Psychology (Bruning, Schraw & Ronning, 1999), and have the following characteristics (Beckett, 2001):

- A focus on the capacity for critical thinking in individuals in order to judge new information and fit it together with what is already known,
- A belief that self-direction will motivate learners, and,
- A philosophy that teachers and trainers serve as facilitators of learning, not

unquestionable experts.

Cognitive Psychology and Constructivism were developed as an alternative to the older Behaviorism model, which holds that we are the product of our external conditioning. Behaviorists reject ideas of internal factors and discount the possibility that different people may perceive reality differently (Malott, 2011). Thus, Behaviorism is associated with Realism (Ozman & Craver, 2007) and operates under the assumption that once students are told something, such as via lecture, they should internalize and remember it without further effort.

Many studies have shown that in young children learning English as a primary language, reading is an independent variable affecting vocabulary, writing proficiency, spelling, and conversational ability (Lerkkanen, Rasku-Puttonen, Aunola & Nurmi, 2004; Miller and Gildea, 1987; Nippold, 1999; Sinatra, 2008). Sinatra, for example, recommended that the rich vocabulary found in children's books be used to teach vocabulary. He said (p. 178) that "early reading acquisition of high-frequency and function words are critically important for both conceptual understanding and early reading success" and are particularly good at teaching grammatical relationships.

Using authentic texts is a growing trend in L2 instruction because they are true representations of the L2 culture, however O'Donnell (2009) noted that others argue that authentic materials can be too difficult for students with limited language proficiency, and should be presented modified reading texts. O'Donnell found that use of authentic texts that have been created or modified to support student pedagogical needs appear to be better understood by intermediate level L2 readers, however text difficulty played a pivotal role he found.

Analysis and Discussion

The theoretical framework provides a context for the discussion and analysis of the inquiry questions.

Question 1: What are the goals that motivate students to study EFL, and what are the motivations that should be encouraged?

Students clearly have multiple motivations for studying English as a Foreign Language; some are internal and some are external. External factors, generally associated with instrumental motivation, include degree program or course requirements, hopes about future job quality and income, and family pressure. Internal factors, generally associated with integrative motivation, include enjoyment of the subject; a perception that English is a worthwhile topic to study; past success at using English for practical purposes; and the goal, *à la* Dörnyei, of functioning in the multi-cultural international society, which uses English as a common language.

However it is a mistake to consider that internal-versus-external factors, and integrative-versus-instrumental motivation operate as either-or aspects of motivation. None of these types of motivation functions to the exclusion of the others. Some

instrumental motivation is valuable, so the student understands learning objectives set by the teacher, keeps deadlines, focuses on tasks to be accomplished, and other elements of the learning environment. Integrative motivation has long been held to have value, because it causes the students to want to study, i.e. to select improving English ability over other things that compete for the attention of the students.

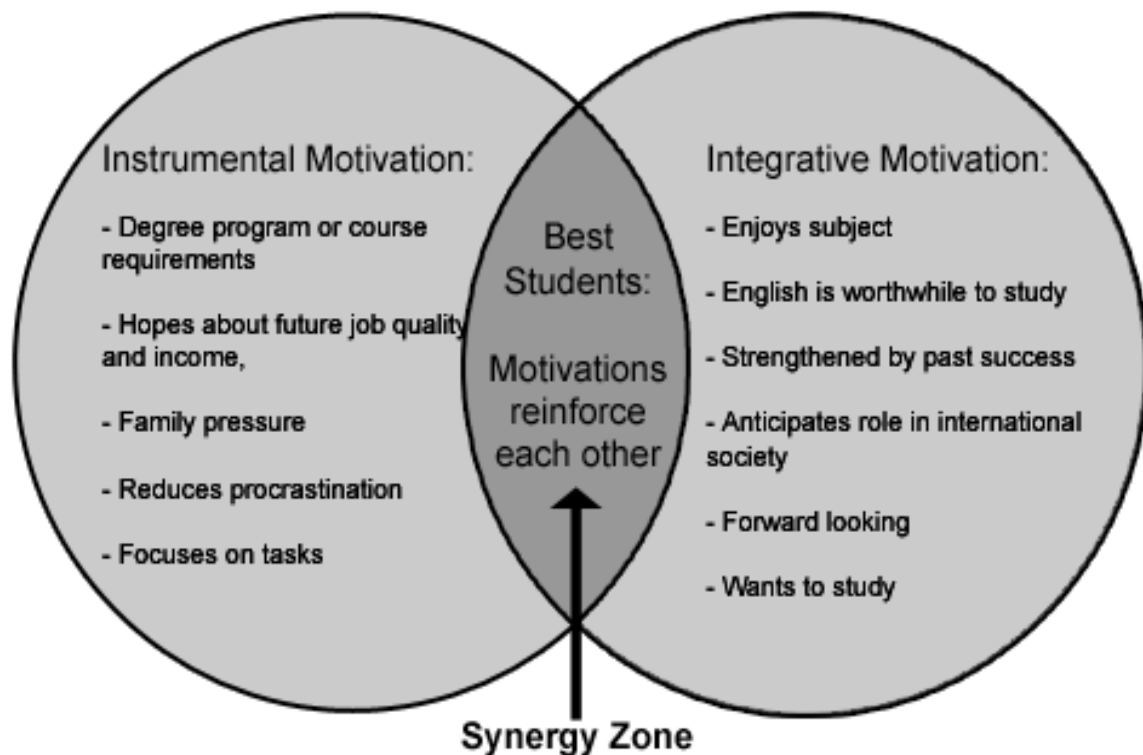


Figure 1: Conceptual model of reinforcing motivations.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of how these alternative motivations work. When healthy instrumental motivation is reinforced by integrative motivation, the result is, that is, the combined action of the two forms of motivation becomes greater than their effects individually. The authors believe that it is this “Synergy Zone” in which students are most open to the perspective Dörnyei described in which students want to

reside in a cosmopolitan international culture in which proficiency in English is a fundamental requirement.

Motivation, therefore, must be seen as a multidimensional construct, including internal and external dimensions, as well as temporal considerations that reflect past positive or negative experiences in use of English and future expectations. The teacher plays a central role in determining where the student resides in these multiple dimensions. The teacher ideally sets and explains instrumental requirements to which students logically agree, demonstrates integrative benefits appealing to the enjoyment of students, and presents a role model of functioning in international society in a way that has strong emotional appeal to students.

Question 2: How can cutting-edge educational theory inform the complex problems of EFL literature instruction and learning?

Contemporary learning theory is rooted in Constructivism, however many EFL instructional methodologies remain rooted in Behaviorism, typified by a lecture-memorization classroom structure and little discretion on the part of the learner about what and how to learn. Constructivism, on the other hand, emphasizes the practical application of skills to fit new information in to that which is already known. Therefore constructivism dovetails perfectly with research that shows that students benefit from methodologies that stress active versus passive learning, student centered learning environments, and critical thinking. For many EFL teachers in Taiwan, however, this means a dramatic change in direction and loss of some control, as the students take more control over elements of their learning.

Methodologies built on the foundation of Constructivism solve many of the problems of EFL learning and teaching by allowing students to exercise judgment about

what and how they learn under the guidance of the teacher, using authentic materials to replicate natural communicative interaction as much as possible, and emphasizing active learning via critical thinking. In particular, students in this environment are less likely to be bored and to find source material to be too difficult. They are more likely to be engaged in the learning process because they much more often are called upon to apply what they are learning and to improve their skills thereby.

Question 3: How can instructors help students learn EFL literature in a way that is as natural and easy as possible?

EFL students frequently cite the need for more authentic instructional materials, however source materials prepared for native speakers are often far too difficult for EFL learners. The literature has shown, therefore, that literature written for younger readers can be adapted for use in the EFL literature classroom.

This clearly replicates the natural elementary school or kindergarten learning environment of a native speaker in the United States who first learns a handful of words, and then reads them in short sentences derived from the very limited vocabulary at the command of the students. As the students continue to read, over time, new vocabulary is incorporated carefully into the texts allowing the students to learn word meaning from the context of the sentence and paragraph, from illustrations accompanying the text, from “sounding out” the words (applying the sounds of the individual letters to determine the pronunciation of the entire word), and from external definitions. When they still do not understand a word, young children usually ask an adult for help, thus providing a respected external definition. The authors note that young children in the United States also learn to read as a side product of educational television programs such as Sesame

Street (Sesame Street, 2011) in which instruction is strategically included in entertainment content.

Steen Krashen (1988) drew on this natural learning process when he recommended the Comprehensible Input Plus One strategy for second language acquisition, “i+1”, in which the students are always pressed to interact slightly above their current ability, or “one level higher.” This continually encourages the students to improve their ability while not overwhelming them with unfamiliar content that could reduce their confidence and cause an undesirable drop in motivation. In reading, this means always reading at a level in which there is a carefully managed number of unfamiliar words which students will come to understand from the content and from external definition checks.

However, use of authentic literature for EFL learning comes with pitfalls. Culture as portrayed in literature may not be accurate, because of literary points the author intended to make, leaving students with serious misunderstandings about the target culture, which teachers must be able to understand and explain. The authors encountered such serious misunderstandings in teaching the classic short story “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson to Taiwanese college students. Almost every student in the class concluded that the New England villagers in the story were unfair and immoral because they chose to stone a fellow citizen to death to ensure good crops. This judgment was certainly the intent of the author, however, many of the students also tended to assume that such stoning events actually happen today in New England, until both the Taiwanese and the American instructors stressed the differences between the fictional text and reality. The students were confused because the author advanced her

artistic purposes through metaphors that did not mirror reality, requiring a more nuanced understanding than the Taiwanese students possessed. If the teachers had not possessed full understanding of the reality of the American culture, lasting misunderstanding might have resulted.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The discussion of the practical applications of the theoretical framework leads to several key conclusions:

1. Constructivist classrooms, employing student-centered methodologies, active learning and authentic source material, are the clear choice for effective EFL instruction.
2. Carefully chosen literature can benefit Constructivist language learning by providing authentic source materials valued by students.
3. The authors concur with O'Donnell (2009) that modified "children's versions" of notable texts, or texts created by native-speaking authors with EFL students in mind, can often be beneficial because they allow the instructors to manage the level of difficulty of the class. If unaltered texts are used, they must be very carefully selected to meet the learning needs of the students.
4. Such texts for EFL learners should reflect relatively recent cultural elements. American children are often provided simplified versions of historical literature, such as Robinson Crusoe, Swiss Family Robinson, Dracula, Treasure Island, Gulliver's Travels, The Jungle Book, and The Prince and the Pauper, however EFL learners will likely consider these works to be outdated stories and would be more interested in stories reflecting culture today.

5. Even when simplified versions of literature are used, enrichment of the texts is necessary to check cultural understanding and to provide a basis for Constructivist activities stemming from the text.

6. Just as the $i+1$ concept is applied to the degree of linguistic difficulty of a text, $i+1$ should also be applied to the degree of cultural difficulty of the text, or how challenging the cultural elements of the story will be for EFL learners to compare and contrast to their own culture.

7. Multimedia support materials have been shown to be more engaging for students, therefore there is a market for creation of such materials, once a new standard reading list is developed that meet the recommendations of this paper.

These conclusions represent a challenge for the EFL community in Taiwan. In many cases, the required literary texts may not be available “off the shelf” and enrichment source materials may also not be easy to find for teachers who are not highly experienced in Western culture. The authors believe that textbook publishing companies must be cognizant of the modern requirements of the EFL environment and work with international partners to develop texts that are authentic for students, yet address the $i+1$ needs of vocabulary and cultural content.

EFL research is clear that the more authentic the learning environment is, the better students will learn and improve their ability, confidence, and motivation, and the more they will enjoy their learning. This approach to the use of literature for EFL language learning has the potential to provide a true organic means of learning that bypasses the challenges of the traditional lecture-memorization educational context.

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