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TAIWAN, MACAU, AND JAPAN

Students as Textbook Authors

In the introduction to his book, *Learner-centeredness as Language Education*, Tudor (1996, x) says that "Language learners should be the main reference point for decision-making with respect to both the content and the form of teaching," and that this approach "should be realized by a process of consultation and negotiation between teacher and learners."

We can extend and enrich learner-centeredness by seeing students as the source of many texts that we can use in classes. In many teaching situations, the circumstances surrounding our teaching can motivate us to co-produce texts with students and to use these materials in the classroom. Such student-produced texts naturally create wide zones of proximal development (Vygotsky 1962) for effective, scaffolded learning. Seeing students as the textbook, their lives as the course content, expressed in the target language, can be very attractive to students and can generate profound and exciting learning. Moreover, as Campbell and Kryszewska noted, "[U]sing a learner-based approach, the learners themselves are responsible for the information input, thereby ensuring its relevance and topicality for each particular group" (1992, 5).

In this article we show how the authors, working with near beginning-level middle school students, successfully used student-produced texts to enrich the learning of the students. We introduce each section with a reaction statement from one of the co-authors of this article to what they observed as they watched the middle school students who served as the creators and the focus of their learning material. We begin with Isabelle Chou, a graduate of the MATESL program at Hawaii Pacific University:

> I could not believe my eyes! The students were really enjoying the fill-in-the-blank activity and were fully engaged. Even the two regular teachers of the class were smiling broadly as students wrote and interacted with their classmates. The teachers later said that this was one of the few classes in which the students interacted in English and enjoyed it. So they let the activity fill the hour rather than the 30 minutes that had been planned for it.

Isabelle was a "Friday guest teacher" invited to join an ESL middle school class of mostly new Pacific Island immigrants to Hawaii. She and co-authors, Monica Lau and Stephanie Yang, had designed a fill-in-the-blank information sheet for the students (see Appendix 1) with the help of their teacher (Tim Murphey). The goal was to have the students both produce and serve as the focus of the primary material they would use for reading and writing. This had been done before with more advanced students, who were asked to write their language learning histories. The histories were then printed up and assembled into booklets for the students to use as reading material (for more information, see Murphey 1999, and Murphey, Chen, and Chen 2005).

Although near beginners in English obviously could not yet write their own history, they could be helped to produce a fact sheet about themselves and their interests and to personalize it with their own drawings. After collecting a fact sheet from each student, we simply numbered the students' pages, created a cover page, put the students' group picture on the back cover, and photocopied, and stapled. And a booklet was born! Copies were made for all the students and for a few teachers. The following Monday each student was given a copy of the booklet. But what would happen when they went back in the following Monday and gave students the booklets. Co-author Stephanie Yang describes what she observed when the students first received their copies of the booklet:

> Students were slow at first to realize what it was, but when they found their page they were smiling from ear to ear. We asked them to read their pages to each other and to talk about their drawings. They looked proud, and although many were pretending to read, you could see they wanted to read. They asked each other about their drawings, pointing and saying "What's this?" We had a lot of different things we could have done with the booklet [see Appendix 2], but just not enough time. The students really liked their class picture on the back, which also can be used for more language learning later on. We asked the students to take the booklet home to show their parents.

Advantages to using students' own work

There are several advantages to using students' own work as teaching material. First, it is a good way for teachers to become aware of students' needs and interests. In the class described above, teachers were not aware that a few students were somewhat proficient in English and could be counted on to help their classmates. The teachers also found out some valuable information about the students' interests from the fill-in-the-blank exercise and the drawings.

Second, student-produced texts can increase students' motivation in class. Most people are more interested in themselves than in others. And students find it easy to write about themselves because they know the information, so they can focus on using the target language.

Third, by producing their own reading material, students learn to take control of their own learning. Further, they realize they can use the English language to construct their identity in social situations.

Fourth, student-produced material greatly increases student-teacher and student-student interaction. Students are highly motivated to learn about their classmates, and reading about them is a good way to learn. When students know each other, group dynamics improve, and students interact with each other more both in and out of the classroom.

Fifth, as co-author Monica Lau discusses below, using students' work cuts down on the time a teacher must spend finding and creating teaching materials, and student work may be more desirable than a commercial textbook because it better approximates what the students can actually do.

> In Macau, teachers have a heavy workload every day. They have to do administrative work and counseling besides teaching. Therefore, using students' own work can help teachers save time in preparing their lessons, and it can keep classes more student-centered. When I taught in Macau, I liked to use the students' work as samples because I didn't have enough time to prepare my own models. I saved student-created art work, essays, written dialogues, and

journals. I mainly used student work to show other students what I expected from their assignments. For journals, I would choose certain ideas or comments from students and share them with the class.

More examples of student work that teachers can use

Profile sheets, stories, and art books

Teachers can easily produce profile sheets, such as those described above, and simply copy, collate, and staple them into booklets. For low-level learners, seeing their writings in the target language and drawings put into a language book format can inspire them to invest more effort into learning the language. Beginning English language learners can mime their stories or draw them. Their art work may be one of their favorite channels of expression, particularly when some of the people they want to communicate with have trouble understanding them.

Learning journals and action logs

Journal writings can be easily collected from students. Topics for journal entries can vary according to what students are learning or what they want to write about. The purpose of using journals is to have students use the language in a non-threatening way. Journal entries do not have to be long, and teachers can use the information for lesson planning. Ideas students mention in their journals can also be published in class newsletters (Murphey 1993).

Web resources

With more advanced learners, teachers can use the Internet to compile students' opinions, thoughts, and ideas on various discussion topics. Students' work can be collected from their postings and responses. Teachers can use this work for ice-breaking and other activities. For example, teachers can have students post their autobiographies on web-based programs like WebCT, Blackboard, or even blogs. Teachers can assign the length of postings and the number of times students must respond to classmates. Teachers can look at students' postings and responses before class to see what students are most interested in and what may be confusing them. Teachers can use the information they get to plan their lessons and design class activities.

Language learning histories

Teachers can collect students' language learning histories through information gap question sheets, short answers, or essay writing. After collecting students' histories, teachers can make a few corrections and then "publish" the students' language learning histories in booklets. For elementary level, teachers can use these booklets for a reading aloud activity. When students hear (or read) about their classmates, it improves group dynamics and increases tolerance and understanding in the classroom. Besides sharing their stories with their teachers or classmates, students can take them home to show their families. Seeing their names in print, and possibly seeing digital photos of themselves on the booklet cover, can boost students' identities as foreign language users.

Books made by students

Student-produced texts can sometimes be even more motivational for students than commercially produced materials. Having students make their own books supports the contention of Murphey and Arao (2001) that people learn from people who are similar to them in many ways, that is, near peer role models. Students at Endeavour Elementary School in Issaquah, Washington, made 115 of their own books to send to the South Pacific so less fortunate children would have books to read (Education World).

Two websites provide wonderful ideas for elementary through high school language teachers who would like to have their students make books; the websites are: http://highland.hitcho.com.au/books.htm by Highland Heritage Home School and http://www.making-books.com by Susan Kapuscinski Gaylord.

Conclusion

Using students' own work as teaching materials can save teacher time, increase students' motivation, and assess students' needs. Teachers can collect students' work in many ways and publish it to the delight of their students. Adding pictures and student artwork, although not linguistic in and of itself, lends itself to wonderful linguistic exploitation. Student-produced texts may be one of the richest of materials for teachers to use in the classroom. Seeing students become enthusias-

tic about using the language for real, personal purposes through these materials has sold us on this idea. We realize that, ironically, the most valuable and overlooked resource in education may be sitting right in front of every teacher. While teachers scramble to make and collect materials and try to imagine how students will react to them, an easily accessible and reliable source of material walks in and out of their classrooms every day. But now you know. So go ahead—make a book with your students. And prepare to be enthused!

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Student Storytelling… David Fay

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www.unclefred.com
www.ababasoft.com/how_to_draw/

Comics for social action
www.worldcomics.fi/home_about.shtml

Manga
www.emi-art.com/twtyh/main.html

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Student-made Comics
www.amazing-kids.org/index.html
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