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Film Circles: Scaffolding Speaking for EFL Students

Pre-service teachers around the world face a unique challenge: bridging the gap between traditional teaching focused on grammar translation and receptive skills, and communicative teaching aimed at well-rounded communication skills. Many new EFL teachers learned English in a traditional context that emphasized memorization and grammar, but after four years of studying pedagogy, they have become very knowledgeable about current communicative teaching methods. As they enter the profession, they wonder how to shape the future of English teaching so that their students are supported and motivated by meaningful and relevant activities.

In order to address this issue, five final-year teaching students at the Universidad de Magallanes in Punta Arenas, Chile—co-authors of this article—undertook an action research project to implement a communicative activity for students. They targeted students at basic proficiency levels and carried out their research in their individual teaching practice contexts. During the project, these pre-service teachers pinpointed speaking skills as an area of communication that they wanted to improve for their students.

In the course of the action research project, the pre-service teachers applied what they had learned in their degree program about successful communicative activities. As they researched interactive speaking activities that would work in the context of the public school system, they discovered a lesson plan that could be adapted to create a collaborative and highly communicative project that was ideal for their students. In this article the pre-service teachers (1) describe their rationale for a Film Circle project adapted from Fink's (2011) Literature Circle lesson plan, (2) provide information about the development and administration of the project, (3) evaluate its effectiveness, and (4) offer suggestions for reproducing the project in other classrooms.

The search for a communicative classroom activity

As pre-service teachers, we find ourselves in front of large multi-level classes asking how to motivate students and to increase their level

of English. The traditional methods in use do not always provide enough opportunities for students to speak in English, even though the students have studied it since they were children. While most are interested in speaking, they feel uncomfortable doing so because they have not been given sufficient opportunities to practice. They remain at a basic level, learning the same receptive skills year after year. In addition, many of the tasks commonly presented in EFL classrooms fail to develop students' critical thinking, and a lack of comprehensible input has caused them to feel inhibited because they have not mastered the vocabulary to use in a conversation (Echevarria, Voght, and Short 2008). These obstacles make it difficult to develop activities that allow our students to expand their use of spoken English. To answer these concerns, we decided to search for a project that would improve our students' confidence and participation in class.

Our search led us to an online Literature Circle lesson plan (Fink 2011), a group project that provides students with the essential scaffolding support and language input needed to discuss a book with their peers. We changed this project into a Film Circle in order to respond to our students' daily reality and interests; they love films, so using a movie instead of a book as the basis of the project was a key adaptation. Our idea was that with good input in English and increased motivation about the project, students would be more likely to become more actively engaged in learning (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2008; Walter 2004).

What is a Film Circle activity?

A Film Circle is a structured group project where five students are assigned different roles to perform according to their abilities and interests. Each student in the group has to analyze a film from a different perspective and present conclusions. Every role is designed around specific activities that are completed before, while, and after watching a film. The process is scaffolded—at every stage the activities include contextual support to build on background knowledge and make understanding easier, including the use of worksheets with graphic organizers, visual representations, word banks, and sentence starters. Without this scaffolding, the project would not have been possible. For example, before the film students learn relevant vocabulary and discuss a preview of what they are going to see. While watching the film, students practice basic listening and reading skills. After viewing the film, group members engage in cooperative learning as they share with each other the information related to their role assignments; this exchange ensures that each student contributes to the discussion and has a chance to practice speaking.

When designing the Film Circle, we took into account student motivation, the educational advantages of films for spoken English, and our available resources. A major benefit of this project is that students enjoy movies and are naturally motivated by the idea of watching one in class. Well-chosen films offer plenty of opportunities for students to use English to explore enticing content and themes. By using films effectively with educational objectives in mind, teachers can prevent the exercise from becoming entertainment with no learning experience taking place (Scacco 2007).

Importantly, exploring the content of a film also activates critical thinking. We wanted to address this issue because, based on our observations, one reason students do not speak actively in class is that they are often asked to memorize and repeat information in English instead of expressing their own thoughts. One of the ways teachers can encourage students to think critically is by creating questions that are worthy of being answered and that have the ability to lead to discussions so students can use their persuasive skills to solve problems based on their beliefs (Snyder and Snyder 2008). Therefore, when we designed the Film Circle, we included serious questions for the discussion component that would make students think.

During our student-teaching experience, large class sizes and limited resources were challenges that we were able to address through the collaborative group work aspect of the Film Circle. In a large class, it is hard for the teacher to attend to every student's needs. Group work is a good way to deal with this problem because it offers students more opportunities to speak (Brown 2001). Moreover, the natural collaborative learning that occurs in group work is an

opportunity to effectively deal with individual differences in the classroom (Shank and Terrill 1995). In addition, students with different levels of English in a multilevel classroom can benefit by working with their classmates. For example, lower-level students can learn from more advanced students, and those who are at a higher level can reinforce their knowledge by helping their peers (Brown 2001). In this way, lower-level students are not left behind, and everyone gets to practice communicating in English.

Using a Film Circle to supplement the textbook

In our institutional context, books and other materials are not readily available to supplement a traditional textbook. This was another compelling reason to use the Film Circle as a supplemental activity, because films can be found that relate to practically any topic in a textbook. For example, we were required to teach the skills, vocabulary, and grammar presented in the textbook unit on sports. Therefore, we made sure to align the Film Circle activities with our school's assessment about sports so that our students could meet the textbook-related learning goals. Because the students became so drawn in by the supplementary activities of the Film Circle, we found that a significant resource in the classroom was the students themselves.

The Film Circle could be adapted for use as part of the curriculum at any level, and if it cannot be aligned with the school's learning goals, we recommend using it between assessments when there is less immediate pressure to focus on the textbook content. If the class structure does not allow time for an activity like this, it may be used as an enjoyable after-class activity, and students may participate voluntarily.

Selecting and showing the film

Selecting the right film is crucial because it has a profound effect on student participation. Therefore, we took several points into consideration. The film needed to be appealing to our students and related to their background knowledge so they could understand it more easily (Walter 2004; Echevarria, Voght, and Short 2008). The language of the film had to be reasonably understandable for the students of various levels of English, so we picked a familiar topic that they had already seen in their textbooks. In the end we chose the movie *Goal! The Dream Begins* (Cannon 2006). This is the story of a Mexican boy who lives illegally in the United States. His dream is to be a professional football (soccer) player, but he suffers from asthma. He is given the chance to play for Newcastle United, where, after facing many challenges, he succeeds. This film worked perfectly for our students because the majority of them are football fans, and the message of perseverance is inspiring for young people.

This Film Circle activity can be adapted to various classroom needs. We used our personal computers and a projector to view the film in school, as our school does not have a DVD player. If students have access to computers or a TV elsewhere, they can watch the film in a library or at home as another option. The amount of class time required can be adjusted by assigning the film as homework outside of class or by using a TV program instead of a film. In the Chilean context, films in English are readily available for rent or purchase, but online films or resources such as short clips on YouTube can also be used. Information about the legal downloading or purchasing of films, music, and TV shows can be found at www.utexas.edu/its/secure/articles/music-sources.php. The following website also contains information about downloading films, as well as helpful instructional resources for teaching a Film Circle activity: www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/literature-circle-roles-reframed-877.html#resources.

Assigning five student roles for a Film Circle

The different roles played by the students are a major component of the Film Circle: the Designer, the Soundtrack Analyzer, the Vocabulary Enricher, the Questioner, and the Checker. These roles compel students to pay attention before, while, and after viewing the film. Our students were not used to speaking English, so it was important to include scaffolding techniques in each part of the task (Peregoy and Boyle 2005). Student contribu-

tions are important to achieve a complete discussion of the film during group work, and the following five roles successfully get everyone involved.

1. The Designer

The student with the Designer role summarizes the entire film through graphic representation of the main scenes. This role uses visual intelligence, sequential thinking, and oral summarizing skills. The task is to create pictures that illustrate a timeline of the plot and contain corresponding sentences about what was happening at each point in the film. The Designer is given a worksheet with a timeline and blank boxes for the pictures that have labels such as "Santiago tries out for Newcastle United." A word bank is also included for language support, with connecting words like *next, then,* and *after this*. We created this role for our Film Circle to give students who learn visually a chance to work with pictures and to reinforce the other students' understanding of the plot during the discussion.

2. The Soundtrack Analyzer

In the role of the Soundtrack Analyzer, the student uses a worksheet to take notes about the bands, songs, and styles of music from the film to promote group discussion. Apart from that, the Soundtrack Analyzer relates the style of music to specific scenes in the film. Thus, this role matches the emotions shown in scenes from the film with music played at those specific moments and shares that information with the group. The worksheet used by the Soundtrack Analyzer includes a graphic organizer containing certain scenes juxtaposed against a word bank describing emotions and musical styles, along with sentence starters about music to help him or her take notes.

3. The Vocabulary Enricher

The Vocabulary Enricher role is taken from Fink's (2011) lesson plan, and the task is to classify key words from the film and share them with members of the group. As an adaptation for lower-level students, we used a handout with circles representing various themes from the film, and the student had to discover words related to each theme. For example, if the concept on the handout is football, the student might write the words *player, sports agent,* and *football*. The English subtitle function helps the Vocabulary Enricher to both listen and see new words, which helps the student complete the worksheet. The new vocabulary is shared with the group members, who benefit from learning new vocabulary in context.

4. The Questioner

Another role from Fink (2011) is the Discussion Director, which we call the Questioner, a role that directs the student to create questions for members of the group. The Questioner asks questions to get information and promote group discussion about the film. As an adaptation for lower-level students, we gave the Questioner a graphic organizer showing different parts of the film and a list of topics to help form questions, as well as a guide to create basic questions and start a conversation, such as the sentence starters "I think _____" and "It seemed that _____."

5. The Checker

As the name indicates, the Checker evaluates the contributions of each group member. We found this role to be very important in our context since students need structure and accountability in order to work in groups without direct teacher supervision. On a worksheet, the Checker completes specific information about how the group worked and notes the strengths and weaknesses of each member's participation in the group discussion. The Checker uses a worksheet to check the accuracy of other group members' observations, including a graphic organizer and sentence starters related to the film's main ideas. The Checker is responsible for participating in group discussions to get sufficient speaking practice, and he or she also has to use notes and the worksheet to give oral feedback to group members. This role promotes peer checking and autonomous learning.

Three steps in a Film Circle activity

Because our class periods are relatively long at an hour and a half each, we had enough time to teach the students about their roles, view the film, and complete the group dis-

cussion in three class periods. This was an adaption to fit our needs, as Fink's (2011) Literature Circle presents a detailed plan including worksheets and instructions for ten 50-minute lessons to start and then recommends using individual 50-minute sessions afterwards. While a Film Circle may require several lessons at the beginning to help students understand their roles, the number of lessons needed is reduced significantly when the teacher uses it again because students already know their roles. As a supplemental activity, a Film Circle can be repeated several times per term using new films with students taking on a different role each time. Following are brief descriptions of the pre-viewing, viewing, and post-viewing stages of the Film Circle project.

Pre-viewing activity

As a preparation activity, we studied the textbook vocabulary and activities related to sports; this preparation helped the students understand the film better when they watched it. Students were also pre-taught vocabulary from the film through pictures and examples, and they were told that specific words would be useful during the project. A cloze activity was useful to pre-teach the vocabulary: students were given a script of the movie trailer where several deleted words were replaced by blank lines. As they watched the trailer, the students had to read and listen in order to fill in the missing words. This listening activity helps prepare them to understand the film when they watch it and gives them written support for some of the concepts they will encounter in the film. Since the students are at a low level of proficiency, this extra support is necessary to make the language they will hear comprehensible.

Viewing activity

In the second class, the students watch the film with English subtitles, which were used to support students' listening with a written representation of the words. While watching, each student fulfills his or her assigned role and pays attention to the language and the concepts of the film. Students will be watching and listening for different information that will be shared later during group work.

Although we did not expect our students to understand every word of the film, we did expect them to understand the plot, the major scenes, the order of events, the characters, and the emotions associated with each event. This expectation was communicated explicitly so that students did not waste valuable class time trying to understand every detail. This approach resulted in added practice in the important skills of reading and listening for main ideas.

Post-viewing activity

In the third and last class the students worked in their groups, taking turns to present the information they gathered and participate in a discussion of the film they had seen. The discussion was very basic, often with students asking and answering simple questions or reading their observations out loud. As our students progress, we hope to make the activity appropriate for a more advanced level by taking out some of the supports and encouraging students to use more creativity in their roles to express ideas and opinions, and to enrich the overall discussion.

Results of the Film Circle project

To determine the effectiveness of the Film Circle for addressing our classroom needs and promoting oral interaction in English, we evaluated qualitative data from the students' completed worksheets, the teacher observations, and the students' reflections on the activity.

Data from student worksheets

An analysis of the worksheets indicated that students who did not normally participate spent more time than usual on task. Students began to take responsibility for their own learning by trying to fill in the handouts as accurately as possible, and students who normally had a very low level of participation in class were motivated to complete them. Students became more independent learners through this activity because the structured role assignments made it unnecessary for the teacher to monitor them at every step in order to get them to complete their work. Increased independent learning is very important in our teaching context, as students are accustomed

to being dependent on the teacher and will often elect not to do an activity if they do not enjoy it.

Data from teacher observations

Another important source of data was the teacher observations of the students' development during the three classes. At the beginning, students had a lot of questions about their tasks, but as time passed, carrying out their roles became more automatic. It was observed that even when the process was quite slow, all students spoke in English. Also, students showed a high level of investment in the project and often asked for feedback about how well they were completing their roles. Students also commented that they enjoyed the project. Through our observations we noticed that students put forth a great deal of effort to perform their roles and express their ideas, even at a basic level.

Data from student reflections

Information was also collected by surveying students about whether they liked the Film Circle and whether they thought that it helped them communicate in English. The following student reflections show some positive aspects of the project:

- They enjoyed the fact that they did both individual and group work.
- They appreciated that it was a dynamic project with more than one thing to do and that each person had a unique role.
- They reported that it helped them not only to learn new words but also to use them correctly within a context.

Summary of findings

Because our students had never done a communicative, collaborative project like the Film Circle, the start was slow. We had to repeat instructions and be persistent as the students learned to work in groups and begin speaking for the first time. Despite this, the Film Circle fulfilled its purpose by motivating the students to interact in a meaningful way in English.

Many of our concerns and challenges were addressed. The project was suitable for large classes due to the scaffolding support, the collaborative component, and the high level of structure. We saw that it was beneficial to incorporate learning objectives into a project dealing with an interesting and authentic art form, which was an excellent means to create comprehensible input and communicative activities tailored to our students' level of English. The Film Circle project allowed them to think critically, express their ideas, and become more autonomous learners.

Conclusion

The Film Circle project was a success for both the teachers who designed it and the high school students who used English to meaningfully communicate for the first time. The students saw that they could express their ideas in English and were able to connect with a truly motivating classroom activity that allowed them to reach a new level of English communication. In turn, the pre-service teachers all commented that the project increased their confidence in their abilities to design meaningful activities that successfully engage students to speak in the classroom. The teachers learned that when they set attainable communicative goals for their students and design motivating interactional activities with adequate support, students can rise to their high expectations and improve their English.

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