

Stories

Two steps forward, one step back

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Learner autonomy? We don't do that here!

Shortly after I started work at Comillas University, I was having coffee with my line manager, Glenn, and talking about how to promote learner autonomy with our students. "Oh, we don't do that here!" he responded.¹ He was joking, of course, since the man himself is constantly innovating, but like most such 'jokes' his words carried an element of truth. As with the majority of Spanish university students, ours are accustomed to a school system based on rote-learning of huge amounts of information pre-digested by their teachers, and to some extent, university tends to be an extension of this approach. This is what students expect, and many teachers still conform to this expectation, so that our more skills-based, communicative language classes stand out as being rather different and therefore peculiar.

In addition, as English teachers, we operate under a number of constraints. Our students are engineering undergraduates, struggling to cope with a heavy workload and very demanding subjects. It is a very prestigious private university with very high academic standards. Although the students who enter are all used to being top of their class at their secondary schools, at the end of the first year there is a massive 40% fallout of those students who didn't make the grade, often because of subjects like calculus, physics etc. Most of them experience a severe shock when they get

their first mid-term grades. One of the lessons they seem to learn at this stage is that they need to prioritise, which often means a lesser dedication to what they regard as 'non-serious' subjects like English, Christianity or the 'Personal Skills' course in which they learn study skills, stress-management strategies etc.

Students know, of course, that English will be essential for their future, but the truth is that they don't need to pass the English course in order to get through first year, and this fact conditions their level of commitment to the subject. They display very low levels of effort and enthusiasm in our classes, and often seem to behave more like rowdy high school kids than university students. Attendance is often sporadic, homework non-existent, and they can rarely be prevailed upon to speak with each other in English. (This is not so surprising, considering they spend all day, from 8 in the morning until our two-hour, lunchtime classes, with the same class-mates, speaking to them in Spanish. To insist on them suddenly shifting to using English to ask for the Tippex or to gossip together is tantamount to banging your head against a brick wall. This does not stop many of us, of course: teachers are well-known for enjoying this particular form of self-mortification).

In my first term at Comillas, teaching upper-intermediate level first year students, we

¹ As quoted in my Teachers' Corner, issue 63

followed a commercial course for young adult professionals and students (*Language Leader*, Pearson ELT). The course itself was an excellent example of its kind, with vast quantities of well-designed exercises and many good communicative activities on topics of general interest. It also boasted plentiful self-correcting, on-line gap-fill type exercises which the students particularly enjoyed. Nonetheless, students complained that the format of the course was very similar to school, and that they really weren't learning anything new. My own feeling was that the work we were doing was not directly relevant to their professional future and was failing to offer them the preparation they really needed.

On the other hand, on courses supposed to be more specific to their future needs, like English for Professional Purposes,² I was so bored by the topics and the format of the course materials that I began to think I would have to look for work elsewhere. Eighteen months down the line from finishing my PhD on learner autonomy I felt at a dead end, frequently unable to see how to adapt all I had learned to my new teaching context, unable to manage my own motivation, putting less and less effort into lesson preparation. This, I thought, is the worst case scenario: a bored teacher. Somehow I have to re-ignite the spark, or I will lose my self-respect and sense of purpose, never mind the respect and engagement of my students.



Cartoon taken from *Homicidal Psycho Jungle Cat: Calvin and Hobbes Series: Book 13* (Watterson 1995)

I counselled myself to put into practice two of the lessons I'd learned from my research: (a) try to

find something interesting and enjoyable about the things you like least, and (b) you enjoy most the things you put most effort into. As I followed this self-advice, investing more energy into my lesson preparation and seeking new angles to approach the topics I initially found so dull, I did manage to invert the de-motivation cycle somewhat, although I was still on the lookout for alternative employment. Fortunately, towards the end of the year, events combined to offer a chance for innovation which got me hooked.

A golden opportunity

It was generally felt by the heads of department that 'something must be done' about the first year course to improve student motivation and levels of engagement – and to ease the frustration of all those condemned to teach them English. The decision was made to throw out the traditional course-book and replace it with something more professionally relevant – content to be decided, but perhaps something more like the English for Professional Purposes or English for Business Studies courses. But, at the same time, those of us who were due to teach the course couldn't stand the thought of working with a gap-fill based course full of long lists of very boring technical vocabulary which first year students were hardly likely to find more motivating than the previous materials: at least those had nice coloured pictures and an attractive layout (not to mention the popular online exercises)!

Luckily for me, it turned out that line-manager Glenn and I were actually very much on the same wave-length regarding the sort of course we should offer. With the other first-year teachers we brain-stormed the real learning needs of our future engineers. We were conscious that this was a transition year for the students, where they had to adjust to a new environment and study style whilst adapting to a more academic, professional style of language. We wanted to offer them support and both language and life skills to cope with the difficulties they would experience. We hoped to inspire them with their potential as future engineers, and to combine technical topics

² Taught to third year students on the four year degree course.

with subjects closer to home such as difficulties sharing living space with other students etc.

Over the summer, Glenn rustled up a skeleton course of texts and activities based around a series of 'learning products' and the language and professional skills needed to carry them out. He

created it in an online document and then handed it over to those of us who were to teach it for us to develop collaboratively. The process of doing so over the last two years has been intensive, but gradually it has taken on a clearer shape. Below is a brief summary of what I would now consider to be the 'structure' of the course.

<p>Micro-skills to be covered include typical skills for inter-cultural communication which are so vital in the academic and professional world:</p>	
<p>Productive skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining • Explaining • Paraphrasing • Summarising • Translating • Describing processes (specially for engineers ☺) • Structuring, planning and organising a presentation or report • Designing a survey • Selecting reliable source material • Differentiating between formal and informal style • Keeping a bibliography • Editing, process-writing, polishing • Capturing audience attention • Voice modulation, body language, posture • Defending your point of view (politely) • Negotiating towards an agreement • Asking pertinent questions • Responding to unexpected questions 	<p>Receptive skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note-taking • Inferring meaning from context • Coping with technical language • Dealing with long and difficult texts • Speed-reading • Reading for gist, detail and specific information <p>Metacognitive skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing awareness of recurrent errors • Recognising lexical false friends • Vocabulary learning strategies • Setting goals for out-of-class learning • Reflecting on the learning process • Self- and peer-evaluation
<p>'Learning products' included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mini and group presentations • Popular TV science programme • 'How to' videos (for describing processes) • Videoed sketches about problems living with other students • Survey • Student-produced listening comprehension exercises (based on study skills videos) • Written reports 	

Trying it out

The new course is different to what students and teachers are used to in a number of ways:

- Very sparse student ‘materials’ (as many of the materials were to be chosen by the students themselves). The materials would not be ‘common’ to all, but rather presented by students to each other, creating a genuine information gap. As a result, students had in their hands just a few pages of photocopied material which looked rather unimpressive.
- Very little direct teacher input.
- No explicit, pre-determined grammar teaching blocks (students have already covered the grammar relevant to this level at school, *ad nauseam*. They still make plenty of mistakes with it, despite that, but it is doubtful whether more of the same approach will remove what seem to be fossilised errors).
- Correction based almost exclusively on focussing on real-time student errors and process-writing.

Clear guidance was given concerning how to structure and plan the different ‘products’, how to select reliable sources of information, etc., but about half of class time was dedicated to collaborative work on the projects. Most of the remaining time was spent helping students develop skills and strategies for reading difficult or extensive technical texts, recognise differences between formal and informal style, etc.

The first time I taught the course, it involved a huge amount of preparation: the format of the course involved a departure from the norm for a lot of students and they needed a great deal of structure and scaffolding to ensure they would produce a quality end product. It was quite chaotic, I was feeling my way, but I had a very clear idea where I was going and strong conviction that we were heading in the right direction. I was on a permanent high.

At the same time, other colleagues teaching the course were feeling increasingly uncomfortable and stressed out. The course involved far too much preparation in its initial stages and didn’t correspond at all with their idea of what students wanted or needed. For the more advanced

students, the projects just weren’t challenging enough (I was teaching at upper-intermediate level, so this didn’t affect me, but many students in the advanced classes were accustomed to working at proficiency level, and some of them were practically bi-lingual). Some expressed the need for more ‘input’, and expressed nostalgia for nice, themed lists of vocabulary, and, yes, you guessed, some good ol’ fashioned grammar.

At the end of the course I felt satisfied that my students had developed vital skills, and in the final feedback questionnaires they recognised that they had indeed met most of the goals of the course, for example:

- to read widely and more effectively/fluently, e.g. press articles, reports etc. on topics relevant to engineering
- to build up your professional/formal vocabulary
- to develop your fluency and self-confidence speaking on more challenging topics which stretch you beyond your ‘school’ English
- to be able to defend/justify your opinions with arguments and examples etc.

Yet some were unable to pinpoint exactly what they had learnt, aside from “a bit of vocabulary”. Perhaps this is not surprising: they are so used to quantifying their knowledge, but skills development is not easy for them to measure.

The re-run

This year I taught the course again (once more at intermediate level). With the benefit of experience I felt much more confident, and was able to push students to achieve more. Although they still talked far too much (in Spanish, sadly, not English ☺) I was more than satisfied with their progress, attendance and engagement as well as their commitment to producing the work set. Withholding grades for written work until it is re-drafted and including the criterion ‘Improvement based on teacher and peer-feedback’ in the grade seemed to result in a much higher quality end-product (;).

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

But the problem remains: I am the only teacher really happy with the course, and this sometimes makes life very uncomfortable for other teachers. Part of the problem lies with the very nature of much university teaching: we are all on part-time, temporary contracts and pass like ships in the night. It is rarely possible to arrange a departmental meeting which we can all attend, because most have two or more jobs to hold down. An additional problem arises from the fact that our performance is evaluated by our students, and their approval, or otherwise, of our methods strongly influences how many classes we get to teach the next year (or at least that is the impression we have gained). This adds to the insecurity of highly qualified, highly experienced teachers who have mortgages to pay and pensions to save for.

Fortunately (again) we also all appreciate the importance of our departmental team, and are a supportive bunch. Although we rarely manage to find a window for a shared coffee, we do manage to lunch together every now and then, and have recently taken to having song, dance and games evenings at each other's houses. That is to say, we actually like each other a lot, we enjoy each other's company and have a strong supportive base of trust. And thank goodness for email, the main way we all share our teaching ideas, as well as jokes, music and poems (from those talented enough to write them).

So I am optimistic about the future of the course, and I think that together we will manage to create something even better next time.

Lessons (re)learned

The experience so far hasn't really produced any surprises, but it has served to reinforce what many of you, dear readers, have learnt before: the changes involved in a move towards a more autonomous model are often even more painful for teachers than for students. Perhaps the worst feeling is the sense of loss of control over the content, direction or outcomes of the course. Working in this way often feels too vague and wishy-washy, both for students and teachers, and it is essential to find the means to tie the learning down and make it explicit. Yet, however much we try to do this, learners will still often not 'get it'

because what we are doing just doesn't fit into their *constructs* concerning what language learning should be like. If we believe in what we are doing, we just have to hope and trust that one day, in the remote future, they will see the benefit of what they have learnt (even though they probably won't give us credit!).



<http://floridapolitics.com/archives/194379>

At the same time, it is important not to throw the baby out with the bath water – that is to say, there is no reason to reject the cosy, familiar gap-fill exercises, themed vocabulary lists and tests entirely. Our students love them (as long as they are not the sole content of their learning). They find them relaxing, they allow them the sensation of learning with a minimum amount of effort and thought, and in a few short minutes they feel they have achieved something 'useful' and quantifiable. They also make revision easy and allow for quick bits of marking on exams, much easier to measure than metacognitive skills development, progress towards autonomy, or even coherence or cohesion.



<http://ncrunnerdude.blogspot.com.es/2013/02/>

Our students operate under considerable pressure (in that way, of course, they are just preparing for the working world which awaits them if they are lucky enough to get a job). We are, I believe, right to add to that pressure by requiring them to think critically, be creative and

innovative in developing their inter-cultural communication skills. But it doesn't hurt to give them a little of what they like from time to time. It can even serve as the basis for a discussion on the different skills each task-type develops. And of course we have to respect the individual learning styles of our students.

In this fluid and gradual transition between teacher and learner control (Dam 1995) I have always found it essential to keep my ear close to the ground by using feedback surveys and dialoguing with students over their doubts and concerns regarding innovations. In this way, I try to keep them with me, to prevent provoking resentment and an 'us and them' feeling which raises the affective filter (Krashen 1982) and blocks their willingness to cooperate. As Leni says, (Dam 1995:79) "a prerequisite for developing Learner Autonomy is a feeling of confidence, trust, acceptance and respect on the part of teachers and learners alike".

Overdo the questionnaires, and you can give the students the impression you don't know what you are doing and are asking them to do your job (witness the infamous student feedback comment: "I don't know. I'm not the teacher!"). But used correctly and sensitively, especially in the middle of a course when you pick up 'resistance', they can be transformative.

Last, but by no means least, we have to be realistic about who our learners are, and indeed accept them as they are, even as we try to help them change, for if we do not, "a deficit model of learner autonomy – our learners don't have it, we need to develop it – can undermine our ability as teachers to build effective learning environments and relationships with our students" (Broady 2009: from abstract).

As Tudor points out (2001:40) "whatever the theoretical potential of a given methodology [...] (it) is unlikely to lead to meaningful learning unless it fits into the mental realities of the students in question". In fact, if methodological innovations are not sufficiently embedded in local realities, they will fail to take root, leading to 'tissue rejection' (Holliday 1991 as quoted in Tudor 2001: 44). Alternatively, there may be 'token adoption', where teachers and students

follow the official procedures, the letter of the law, but not its spirit, so that the innovations do not have any lasting or profound effect on attitudes or learning behaviours. Consequently, innovations must be negotiated together with the learners, with an attitude of respect and understanding for their learner 'histories' (Karlsson 2008, 2012).

Or, as Dr. Seuss says: "Be sure when you step, step with care and great tact, and remember that Life's a great balancing act" (Seuss 1990).

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