Fostering autonomy and motivation:

A critical reflection on collaborative class task

Abstract

University students from English Language proficiency courses were asked to deliver a presentation on a topic they liked or about which they had knowledge. They had to work collaboratively in groups, explaining and teaching their audiences how to do something, for example, cooking, playing a video game, and doing origami. Guiding the preparation and assessing the performance of the task led the teacher to a reflection on the role given to the students and the implications it had on learning a foreign language. It was found that allowing students to work collaboratively on topics they have mastered or are attracted to, can boost their confidence, strengthen their autonomy, and increase motivation, as well as improve additional language learning, as language can be assimilated more naturally through the performance of such tasks. In conclusion, this reflective process has implications for EFL courses, in terms of permitting students participate in the construction of the curriculum or proposing topics for other learning tasks.

Key words: autonomy; confidence; language anxiety; motivation; natural approach.

Introduction

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses, it is usually teachers who decide on aspects such as the content, the planning of the activities, setting assessment criteria, and selecting the materials (Oruç, 2016). Less frequently contemplated is whether learning could in fact be improved by delegating some of these powers and choices to learners. The present reflective paper discusses implementing such an approach with university students in an
intermediate EFL course, in which students were given the opportunity to decide on the learning topics, materials, and even how they themselves would approach teaching a content-oriented task to others. As part of this process, they had to work in groups and encourage their partners (who acted as an audience) to participate. The results of this exercise showed that, in performing it, student became more confident and autonomous, and moreover were able to assimilate the target language more naturally. The present reflection explains this exercise from a theoretical perspective and the way it was performed in class.

**Confidence and language anxiety**

A student-centered design, as well as implementation, can have a positive effect on confidence in learning a foreign language. This is a concept that may be more familiar in terms of its negative counterpart, *language anxiety*, which MacIntyre (1998) characterizes as “worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language” (p. 27). Woodrow (2006) notes that language anxiety has a debilitating effect on oral performance and that it becomes more common when learners must perform orally in front of their peers. Considering this, it was noticed that since students were able to select a topic they knew or were interested in, they felt less anxious and showed confidence. It could be evidenced in their body language and positive attitude: smiling, moving their hands, walking across the classroom, having pleasant facial gestures, in addition to a higher tone of voice, different signs than the ones seen when the topic was assigned. Hence, students demonstrated security and positiveness while performing the task.

**Students’ autonomy and motivation**

Fostering student autonomy has been a crucial educational objective in recent years, and the ability to identify the learning strategies that are most personally effective is a key step in the
process (Bajrami, 2015), as well as one for which both teachers and students have a responsibility. Indeed, Yagcioglu (2015) argues that autonomy, responsibility, and motivation are closely related concepts. Núñez, Fernández, León, and Grijalvo (2013) conclude that “if teachers promote choice, minimize pressure to perform tasks in a certain way, and encourage initiative, in contrast to a controlling environment … they will provide students with interesting experiences that are full of excitement and positive energy” (p. 191). Accordingly, in this class activity, students were allowed to select not only the topic but also the materials, the way to perform the learning task, and their group partners, which provided them with opportunities to explore and develop their own learning styles and strategies. Another key element was that students were able to select topics of immediate relevance and interest for their peers of similar ages and backgrounds better than a teacher might often be able to do.

As a result, it was observed that both student participation and engagement (as both presenters and audience) was generally greater than in other types of presentations and activities conducted in the class.

**Incorporating EFL naturally**

Krashen and Terrell (1983) have emphasized the importance of a stress-free classroom to reduce affective filters, but go further in observing that, by favoring communication and input and diminishing specific grammar instruction, language can be more naturally acquired and produced. This class task had *conditionals* as the specific language target. Interestingly, it was not forced or sounded unnatural. It was observed that students used a variety of language tenses and structures, along with, vocabulary and expressions in order to be understood by the audience. During the preparation time -three in-class hours apart from some independent work outside the classroom- they were driven to ask the teacher and investigate about their topics and language
needed by themselves, which resulted in more fluent and understandable speeches. (See the appendix for an example of the task)

Conclusions

Overall, this activity gave students an opportunity to explore learning strategies of personal relevance, gain practice with collaborative work, and improve motivation and classroom participation. It might seem utopian to have students performing tasks that have been traditionally the responsibility and privilege of teachers (Oruç, 2016), such as selecting the objectives, materials, methodologies, and activities, as well as establishing the criteria for assessment. Nevertheless, the results of the reflection show that giving students a more active and inclusive role can help improve their language learning experiences.

References


**Appendix: Class task example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Name</th>
<th>Balloon twisting.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>In this activity, students were allowed to decide on a topic about which they would teach their peers through an oral presentation. Students organized themselves in groups of 4. They were allowed to select the partners with whom they wanted to work. Students were given about 3 hours in class to decide on their preferred topics. Each student proposed a topic, but (after about 30 minutes), they decided to teach their partners how to create figures using balloons. During preparation time, they distributed roles for the oral presentation, created an info-graphic to be used as a visual aid, and investigated the needed vocabulary and grammar with which they were not familiar.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grammar included</td>
<td>Various grammar structures and tenses were used, including: the present and past tenses, the passive voice, conditionals (which were the target language), and comparatives.</td>
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<td>Vocabulary included</td>
<td>Students had to use vocabulary appropriate for giving instructions, imperative expressions, and descriptive adjectives, as well as content-specific vocabulary.</td>
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<td>Development of the activity</td>
<td>The presenters started by giving a short explanation about the origins of the technique. They also described different types of materials and ways to twist balloons into figures. Then they provided their partners with balloons and taught them how to create balloon figures. They did this gradually, with constant monitoring, and helped when their partners had difficulties.</td>
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<td>Assessment</td>
<td>All the students in the audience were able to complete the figure based on the instruction provided through the presentation. They seemed to enjoy the activity, and most of them took their completed figure home.</td>
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<td>Role of the teacher</td>
<td>The teacher assisted the students in selecting their topic and preparing the oral performance by checking some of the vocabulary and expressions that the presenters wanted to use. The teacher also suggested grammatical tenses or structures that could help the audience understand better. Finally, the teacher participated in the activity as an audience member, creating an animal figure with balloons along with the rest of the audience.</td>
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