USING PROGRESSIVE PEDAGOGIES TO ENHANCE LEARNER AUTONOMY

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In this presentation I firstly review different approaches and methods that have been used to teaching English. Based on these approaches and methods, our understanding of how students learn their second language has been greatly enhanced. However, students in the 21st Century have more demands and needs than previously and we now have to use more progressive pedagogies to teach them. Some features of a progressive pedagogical approach are: learners are active participants; teachers are facilitators and guides; there is shared decision-making by the group; learning is seen as part of real-life experiences; and learning is conceptualized as a spiral where knowledge is constructed through experience and social interaction (Peters, 2012). This type of pedagogical approach is student-centred and lends itself to the promotion of learner autonomy. By way of an example I will talk about a university level English for Science course I have been involved in developing and teaching over the past five years.

Introduction

This paper is about how second language teachers can try to change their pedagogical approaches used with their students to encourage a greater degree of learner autonomy. It begins with a brief review of the main approaches and methods that have been used to teach English as a Second Language, then, introduces the main tenants of a progressive pedagogy. Some features of learner autonomy are examined to illustrate how they match with a progressive approach to L2 learning. After that, by way of an example from an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) example the paper shows how a progressive approach can be used with project learning. Feedback about the process students undertook to complete their project are given.

Teaching Approaches and Methods To locate the course design in its broader context, it is useful to first review how English as a Second Language has usually been taught. In the first half of the twentieth century a Grammar-Translation Approach was used to the teaching of English. Some of the main aspects of this approach were that: the main goal of learning the language is to be able to read its literature; the method focuses on translating sentences into and out of the L2; and the L1 is the medium of instruction. Following this, the next main approach to L2 teaching was by way of the audio-lingual approach. With this approach foreign language learning was seen as a process of mechanical habit formation. Drills and repetition was the main focus of each lessons and memorization was a key feature of the vocabulary. Somewhat as a reaction to this behaviourist approach, Communicative Language Teaching (CTL) was advocated from the 1970's. Some of the principles of CLT were: the in-class learning activities should in some way be communicatively useful for students; language operates above the sentence level, and more importantly, mistakes can be tolerated as long as they do not interfere with the communication.

In addition to these three main approaches to language teaching, there are also other methods and approaches which have been advocated at different points in the history of language education: direct-method; discrete-item method; situational learning; and the learner-strategy approach.

Building on the theories of general education, and a desire to have students more involved in their language education a progressive approach to teaching and learning has also been on the pedagogical agenda for some time, although often overlooked as a major contributor in the history of approaches and methods. With a progressive approach the main focus is on activating the agency of the learner.

That is, to give learners more responsibility for decisions they make about how and what they learn.Table 1 illustrates some of the differences between a more traditional approach to language teaching/learning and a progressive approach.

Table 1 : Difference between a traditional approach and progressive approach.

Traditional Approach
1. School prepares students for life.
2. Learners are passive recipients of information.
3. Teachers are sources of information.
4. Learning is linear. Questions have 'correct' answer
5. Decision-making is central.
6. Knowledge is learned through lectures and texts.

Progressive Approach
a. School is a part of life.
b. Learners are active participants.
c. Teacher are facilitators, guides who foster thinking
d. Learning is spiral. Questions can be generated and answered by students.
e. Decision-making is shared by all groups.
f. Knowledge is constructed through experience and social interaction.

A progressive pedagogical approach to a large extent relies on students taking some responsibility for their own language learning. This complements the ideas and principles behind a learner autonomy approach. Dam et al (1990) state that in order for students to be autonomous they should be "an active participant in the social processes of classroom learning…and active interpreter of new information in terms of what she/he already and uniquely knows… (someone who) knows how to learn and can use this knowledge in any learning situation she/he may encounter at any stage of her/his life"

An English for Science Project

The principles of using a progressive approach to course design were implemented on an English for Science project at the City University of Hong Kong. The English for Science course targeted students from the following departments: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Architectural Studies, Computing Mathematics, Environmental Science and Management and Surveying. Students were both male and female and aged around 20 with Cantonese as their first language. There was up to 24 students in each class and the course aims were: to develop students' ability to read a variety of scientific texts, and appropriately communicate (through speaking and writing) the findings of scientific projects in an academic context. At the beginning of the course, students were organized into groups and given a quasi-experiment. They then had to research their topic, collect data, and prepare a script before making a digital video of their project which was then uploaded to YouTube. At the end of the course, the whole class viewed each other's videos and peer and tutor feedback was given. Table 2 shows the course outline and what was expected in and out of class from the students.

Table 1 : Mapping the course structure with aspects of learner agency.

STRUCTURE (tutor supported)
Present the project guidelines
Give a time line
Provide the learners with technical assistance
Provide the learners with linguistic assistence
Highlight aspects of creativity
Assess the product

AGENCY (learner controlled)
Make decisions about roles and approaches to the project
Arrange schedule to fit the time requirement
Master the technical aspect of producing a digital video
Practice the linguistic aspects in order to present the digital video
Showcase multimedia aspects of the project in creative ways
Present the project by way of a digital video

Students' Comments

The English for Science course has been running for five years now, and as a way of evaluating the success of the course a large research project has been developed. In this paper I report on one part of this project. One group of students acted as a case study. There were four students in the group and they studied mathematics, applied chemistry and environmental science. Their English proficiency was around intermediate level and this was the first time any of the group members had prepared a digital video and so it was a new experience for them all. In order to check their students' perceptions about their projectI met the students as a focus group twice. Each session lasted one hour. We talked about their perceptions, problems and strategies of participating in the scientific video documentary.

Data

The following areas of discussion have been extracted from the focus group interviews: Using English; Plurilingualism;Investment; Showcasing their work; Learning beyond the classroom; Being autonomous. Here I summaraize their comments.

1. Using English: The students commented that they used a lot of English outside of the class while completing their project. One reason for this was that it was an English Class and that gave the students "permission" to use English with each other.

2. Plurilingualism: Although the students did report on using a lot of English, they also said that they made use of their first language (L1). This was often in order to speed things up, to check understanding, or to manage the group.

3. Investment: The students spent a lot of their own time out of class on their project. It seemed that they were prepared to invest their time in order to make a good video. It was the students themselves who evaluated the ongoing progress of their project and if they were not happy with their results they kept working on the project. The amount of time these students spent on completing their project was over and above what was expected.

4. Showcasing their work: One aspect of spending a lot of time on their project was that, as a group, they wanted to project a quality piece of work. Students were aware that their digital projects would be seen by their classmates, but they were also aware that by posted their projects on YouTube then a potentially wide audience might view their work.

5. Learning beyond the classroom: In order to complete their project these students went to great lengths to enhance their own learning. They made use of an English speaking friend to check their work, and they spent a lot of time learning the editing software in order to present an interesting piece of work to the class and their tutor.

6. Being autonomous: Students reported that they took a lot of decisions together. They worked cooperatively and collaboratively as they were engaged with their project. One student said doing this project was a "precious" experience for her and one that she enjoyed.

Conclusion

The English for Science digital video project reported on here made use of two main principles: the use of a progressive pedagogy, and the integration of technology into the language class. The progressive pedagogical approach made use of the concept of a learner-autonomy. Language learning does not stop once the lesson is over, and we expected that our learners have the ability to take control of their own learning. However, there has to be a balance between structure and agency when using a learner-autonomy-based pedagogy: students are supported in class with a variety of learning activities (structure) which they then use for their out-of-class project work (agency). They are encouraged to work collaboratively with their team members and may choose to be more or less independent of each other at different stages while working on their project.

By using a digital video project we encourage the students to work with new technologies and new literacies, to experience a range of resources, tools and environments for their out-of-class learning experiences. The English for

Science digital video project combined a learner-autonomy-based pedagogy in class, with an out-of-class digital project we heighten the students' learning experiences as they create and share multi-modal texts using images, videos, texts and sounds. By working with others to produce a significant piece of work, learners reflect on what they can and cannot do well, and are encouraged to seek out resources which will assist in their project, and which will possibly have wider implications to their future learning. This type of project illustrates that if well planned and interesting project work motivates learners to invest their time in their language learning.

References

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