

Making difficult materials more accessible to students

Clara Birnbaum

I have watched my teaching go through a radical shift in focus. It is a shift that is in keeping, I think, with a trend that began in earnest with the “communicative” movement, and continues to develop as more is learned about what works best in the language classroom. In my presentation at the *Rikkyo TESOL Seminar*, in September of 1999, I wanted to share my observations in connection with this, and offer some practical ideas that attempt to answer the needs that this new shift entails.

Instructors of English at the university level, feel increasingly, that it is not enough that teaching materials be linguistically sound, or even communicative, goals which well-thought-out textbooks can satisfy to a certain degree, but that they also be authentic, contextualized, and meaningful in the world. This shift is a continuing challenge to the linear idea that one perfects one’s English first (English is the “goal”), and then later uses it to communicate about things that really matter (English is the “means”), and offers in-

stead, that the great divide between medium and content is a myth that can and should be bridged from the start, especially at the university level. Instructors are discovering that using materials that touch a deep human chord, that speak to current issues of social concern and our role in the world, do not necessarily frustrate students and have an adverse effect on their learning because of their complexity, as I once feared, but, on the contrary, can benefit language learning in a deep and lasting way, if combined with solid pedagogical principles.

But how is one to reconcile the fact, suggested above, that stimulating, authentic materials...newspaper and magazine articles, video and film, etc. catering to native speakers...are generally too difficult linguistically for most learners of English? It is a problem that can be reconciled, as evidenced by a growing wealth of available teaching materials. Given the scope of this summary, I’ll describe briefly only one of my lessons from

the seminar, and then outline some of the principles underlying it.

First of all, it seems to me, that the main pedagogical goal and challenge, is to manipulate original materials in such a way as to retain their integrity, while at the same time making them accessible to the learner. The lesson in question centres on a lengthy article about aging that appeared in *National Geographic Magazine*. It is filled with wonderful pictures, some of which I photocopied six times to be used in a class divided into six groups. The pictures' captions and some vocabulary support were printed on separate slips of paper, and placed, jumbled, in the envelopes with the photos.

I introduced the lesson by inviting the students to think about their future old age and how they hoped to live it. I then walked through the article, pointing out some of the photos and reading and explaining the captions. After this, the students, in small groups, matched their copies of the photos with the captions, and then matched the original captions with paraphrased versions on a handout. There were other exercises of a linguistic nature, a jigsaw reading from the article, and finally questions about the many facets of growing old. I also played songs about aging and showed an amusing and very sweet animated short about an older couple who fall in love. These were also accompanied by language tasks.

The eclectic and flexible nature of the materials made it possible to balance use of the four language skills, vary the degree of language penetration, and vary the mood (serious/silly, academic/personal, easy/difficult, etc.). It also allowed for a wide range of student commitment and skill. For example, after the jigsaw reading, I distributed the full excerpt for the benefit of interested students who were motivated to go beyond the requirements of the lesson.

This approach to materials allows for a very natural, and organic development of curriculum, where students' needs, desires, and interests can be easily addressed. Also, because of the richness of such materials, other themes are easily suggested. The animated film above, for example, inspired a subsequent unit of materials on love, friendship, and relationships.

While there are glitches to overcome, my experience suggests that there is a favorable response from students to current and authentic materials, if they are handled well. I think there are three reasons for this. One is that students are stimulated by materials that address issues they already have a concern for. Second, students are able to meet the intellectual challenge, and relate more easily to materials that are on level with work they are doing in other classes. Finally, using English to explore issues that are relevant

to the students, gives English a more real and tangible purpose in their lives. I believe that, in spite of the difficulty, there is more language learning, and more critical exploration, of a very lasting

nature.

(クララ バンバム

本学ランゲージセンター英語嘱託講師)