

Designing for Debate: An EFL Materials Development Research Project

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Introduction

‘There is little for adolescents to get their teeth into; there are very few life hooks’ (Hillyard, 2005 as cited in Banegas 2011, p. 80) is a commentary on the lack of substance and controversy in ELT textbooks for young people, implying that the content designed for this age group is generally uninspiring and excessively ‘safe’. The materials presented in this project respond to this critique, presenting not only engaging social issues (Soley, 1996), but also featuring contemporary YouTube videos of persuasive speeches and authentic texts, while exhibiting a student-centred approach which serves to encourage critical thinking, maximise output opportunities and promote collaboration amongst learners. Moreover, there is an attempt to harness some creative ‘pizzazz’ (Richards, 1995, p. 108) into the project. In this paper, I discuss the context, rationale and guiding principles which have informed this undertaking from its conception to its completion.

Context

The target learners are advanced Korean EFL students, currently in 6th grade at a private English academy. The English immersion classes (Jeon, 2012) consist of 10 students, the majority returnees from the USA, UK or global international schools. Classes are taught solely by native speaking instructors and include literature, TOEFL preparation and CLIL (science and social studies). The pedagogical philosophy underpinning this particular content-based approach involves preparing high-capability students to master academic subjects through English as a medium of instruction (Larsen-Freeman, 2000), to augment and extend their previous experiences overseas. Additionally, during the summer and winter public school vacations, learners attend the academy for intensive classes, which are designed to focus on a specific sub-set of academic competencies. The materials have been developed for one such session, to introduce learners to debating skills. The short course is designed to cover four lessons, each two-hours long. Accordingly, the content spans 8 instructional hours.

Materials overview

The materials are presented as a short, supplementary course-book, divided into four connected,

progressive units, respectively titled “Introducing Debate & Arguments, Speaking Persuasively, Building Evidence and Debating Live.” Each unit contains clear and achievable objectives to frame the teaching and learning experience (Richards, 1995)¹. The course aims to furnish learners with the necessary skills, confidence and language resources needed to participate in an informal debate by Unit 4. This modern, informal debate differs from traditional styles, such as the British Parliamentary format, as it is designed specifically for 10 students and acts as a gentle introduction to the concept. Moreover, to augment skills acquisition, learners study and utilise the psychological persuasion techniques exhibited in Monroe’s Motivated Sequence speech format².

The materials have been created to be aesthetically engaging, appealing to the end-user primarily, but also, of course, to the teachers, commissioning academy and *parents*. Importantly, from the parental perspective, the quality of design is a crucial consideration, since the increased fees for the intensive classes include the cost of the supplementary materials. Three key principles, drawn from Ellis and Ellis (1987), steer the physical design element; cohesion, clear presentation and colour. Since existing in-house materials were simple individual handouts in monotone print, mostly devoid of any visual stimulation, this project aims to significantly improve on past work.

Literature Review & Rationale

As Korean public-school education adopts a didactic, input based approach, (DeWaelshche, 2015) many parents look to private supplementary education, not only to provide a competitive edge for their children (Howard, 2021b; Oh, 2010), yet also for the reduced class sizes and westernised pedagogy representing output based, learner-centric approaches (Bray & Lykins, 2012). More specifically, the overarching philosophy of the academy is that learners should receive education in English, rather than simply being ‘taught’ the language; ‘transforming English into a tool for life rather than an examination subject’ (Muller et al., 2014, p. 61). Thus, the intention is to find a balance between the academic instruction necessary in the harshly competitive societal climate (Cho, 2004) and the emphasis on positive character building and ‘effective citizenship’ (Soley, 1996, p. 9). This is elucidated by the Academy Principal:

“We work together to encourage each child to lead himself/herself to become an intelligent,

¹ The appendix includes additional guidelines and a debate scoring rubric.

² See Begum (2015)

tolerant, responsible and giving member of the global community by providing diverse learning experiences in English” (Mrs Lee.).

In accordance with this vision, the chief aim of the course is to teach the requisite debate skills and competence, with an emphasis on ‘learning from process’ (Mcgrath, 2016, p.217) through the various tasks presented. The materials also facilitate the use of a number of academic linguistic functions, as proposed by Chamot and O’Malley (1987, p. 239); ‘explaining, informing, describing, classifying, and evaluating’. Importantly, the course has been designed with reference to learner factors including attitudes, expectations and interests (McGrath, 2016); the students favour learning collaboratively, they anticipate academically-oriented content and they are stimulated by real-world issues. Similarly, El Majidi et al.’s (2015, p.924) study revealed that teenage EFL participants held particularly favourable attitudes towards debating due to the inclusion of ‘active participation, challenge, teamwork, fun, critical thinking.’ Pedagogically, concentrating on debate is advantageous, since it aids the advancement of all four receptive and productive skills (e.g., Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013; Fauzan, 2016; Krieger, 2015), yet also *encourages critical thinking, maximises language production and promotes collaboration*, which combine to form the guiding principles of the materials.

Methods

Whilst this was primarily a desk-based study, student participants were involved in the piloting of the materials and provided writing samples. All participants provided written parental consent and ethical review was granted by the participating educational institution. The project was also overseen by University College London’s Institute of Education.

Guiding Principles

1. Encouraging critical thinking

The first guiding principle underpinning the materials design is the desire to encourage students to think critically. Critical thinking is defined as ‘reasonably reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do’ (Ennis, 1985 as cited in Xu, 2013, p. 6). It is also characterised by metacognition, analytical thinking and high-order thinking (Bonney & Sternberg, 2011).

Moreover, as Halpern explains, the process employs cognitive processing techniques to think in a manner that is “purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed” (Halpern, 2007, p. 6).

Critical thinking shares some similarities with critical pedagogy, espoused by Freire (1970) in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He applied the banking metaphor in his sharp criticism levied towards traditional modes of instruction; comparing the child to an empty vessel that is passively filled with deposits of information from his or her teacher. Rather, students should be encouraged to solve problems and partake in dialogues with their peers and teachers. In contemporary pedagogy, Freire’s words continue to resonate as the ability to think in logical, analytical and evaluative modes is essential not only academically, for the learner’s future educational success, yet also for numerous complexities of life they will encounter (El Majidi et al., 2015).

While the inclusion of critical thinking in traditional pedagogy is evidenced throughout history, from as early as Socrates’ scholarly emphasis on logic, (Facione et al., 1995), Santos (2013) identifies a distinctive lack of critical thinking approaches in contemporary *ELT* material. Yet she suggests that the language class *is* a fertile ground for discussing socio-political world issues, based on the Vygotskian assumption that conceptual understanding is developed through language use. While some writers have opposed the inclusion of critical thinking instruction in Asian EFL contexts, (e.g. Atkinson, 1997), Shin and Crookes (2005) observed, in their study, that Korean EFL learners were receptive to listening to the ideas of their classmates and wished to critically engage with peers to broaden their views. The study certainly served to dispel the myth that Korean students favour a passive role; participants responded actively during extended classroom dialogues and subsequently described the experience as liberating and purposeful. Similarly, Davidson (1998) calls for the inclusion of critical thinking in all EFL contexts, regardless of culture. Furthermore, he suggests that EFL practitioners may be deemed *more* responsible for the explicit teaching of critical thinking skills than L1 instructors, since EFL learning entails cultural preparation alongside acquisition. He asserts that the instructor is tasked with preparing learners to ‘interact with native speakers who value explicit comment, intelligent criticism and intellectual assertion’ (Davidson, 1998, p.121).

Scholars such as Bellon (2000), specifically advocate the inclusion of *debate* into pedagogy to foster criticality, citing the various intellectual benefits debating proficiency can deliver; students

evolve as more effective communicators, attain superior scores on SATs and out-perform their peers (with no debating experience) on critical thinking tests. Additionally, Bellon opines that during debate, ‘students are encouraged to think aloud, specifically when they practice critical thinking skills with their peers, they gain experience they may then apply to their own internal reasoning processes’ (Bellon, 2000, p. 164) Additionally, Nisbett (2003) affirms the value of debating as a means for self-evaluation, as learners are ultimately compelled to reflect on the efficacy of their own arguments and logic during the process.

By virtue of the topical issues and related activities presented in the materials to foster critical engagement, students ‘gain transformative experience by problematizing the status quo. Through critical dialogue in class, students can gain control over their learning and gain critical view of ... society. Through the awareness of the link between their life issues and the macro socio-political, cultural context, they learn to make decisions in and outside the classroom’ (Shoe, 1996 as cited in Shin & Crookes, 2005, pp. 114-115). This is a starkly juxtaposed with Freire’s (1970) banking metaphor, which framed students as products. Instead, there is an orientation towards to problems and solutions, which enables learners to become effective analytical thinkers. In addition, a focus on fostering higher-order cognitive processes results in an inevitable learner-centred approach whereby the student voice becomes the focal point of each session (DeWaelche, 2015).

The materials consistently require learners to critically examine information that is situated in context, consider people’s reasoning and communicate with others clearly and effectively (Xu, 2013), while a range of further ancillary skills are integrated across the units.

In Unit 1, the learners are called upon to appraise several debate motions; which involves categorising and selecting (Cottrell, 2011). They also practice formulating their own debate motions and identifying arguments.

In Unit 2, students critically evaluate a persuasive speech by discussing the credibility of the content. When they draft their own speeches, they need to consider how their messages are directed to their audience and recognise techniques they can incorporate (Cottrell, 2001).

Furthermore, in Unit 3, different types of evidence are classified, which requires ‘analytical and evaluative processes of the mind’ (Paul, as cited in Reid 1997, p. 18), in conjunction with drawing

inferences as to the value of that evidence (Fisher, 2001). There is also a focus on recognising differences (Cottrell, 2011).

The culmination of the short course results in the application of extensive deliberation in Unit 4 – *Debating Live*, whereby the students formulate arguments, contrast main ideas, evaluate opposing speeches, present refutations by ‘thinking critically to find strong arguments to outperform the opposing team/debater and locate flaws in their arguments’ (El Majidi et al., 2015, p. 928), and finally, critically reflect on their own performance and learning.

Moreover, the activities accompanying the inspirational quotes on each page galvanize learners to infer meanings and understand others’ viewpoints (Cottrell, 2011). As Fisher notes, such exercises foster critical thinking skills as they require learners to “clarify and interpret expressions and ideas” (Fisher, 2001, p. 8).

2. Maximising production

In addition to the emphasis on critical thinking skills, the next guiding principle relates to maximising output opportunities. Ellis (2005) presents this as a vital facet of the language learning process, calling for ample opportunities for production in the classroom. Drawing on work Swain’s ‘Pushed Output Hypothesis’ (1985), Ortega also illustrates how effective language acquisition requires more than input and interaction; learners need to be prompted to face the uncertainty of producing meanings and messages that incorporate language slightly more advanced than their current proficiency; ‘by encouraging risk-full attempts by the learner to handle complex content beyond current competence, such conditions of language use may drive learning’ (Ortega, 2009, p. 63). Furthermore, if students are not pushed beyond their ‘comfort zone’, they reportedly pay less attention to the salience of grammatical structures necessary for their output (Nation & Newton, 2009). Accordingly, pushed output fosters a deeper understanding of form, whereby the learner’s ability moves ‘from a purely semantic analysis of the language to a syntactic analysis of it’ (Swain, 1985, p. 252).

Teaching formal speaking through speech presentation and debate is an effective means of using the pushed output approach (Nation & Newton, 2009). As the preparation for debate involves detailed planning, students can be taught using a gradual process approach, which is ‘effectively

encouraging learners to develop a strategy for dealing with formal speaking’ (Nation & Newton, 2009, p. 125). The approach consists of six key features, ‘goals and audience, gathering ideas, organising ideas, making speaking notes and presenting and monitoring’ (ibid, p.126), all of which are evidenced in the materials and are closely related to principle 1, critical thinking. Moreover, there are extensive opportunities for meaningful production through pair work and group discussion in every unit. Meanwhile, unit 4’s final homework activity is a five-paragraph discursive essay, which endows the students with the opportunity for extended writing production³.

At the activity level, the inclusion of ‘affect questions’ (McGrath, 2016) invites learners to make unconstrained personal judgements, facilitating increased oral production. Moreover, discussion and debates are open-ended, or divergent, tasks (Clark, 1987, as cited in McGrath, 2016), which harness creative output. As empirically established by Fukuda (2003), in a study with Japanese learner participants, debate materials lend themselves to encouraging freer forms of self-expression; ‘before the debates only 30.8% of the students were not afraid of expressing their opinions...After the debate this figure rose to 56.7%’ (Fukuda, as cited in Krieger, 2015, p. 1).

While extended output is a key objective, the content contains scaffolding, to ensure that learner confidence develops as the materials increase in cognitive complexity, in terms of the activities, the length and depth of the reading passages and the vocabulary support given. Additionally, as recommended by Harmer (2007), there is adequate time provided to plan arguments and speeches, especially between Units 3 and 4. The incorporation of authentic articles and videos reflects Guariento and Morley’s (2000) proposition that advanced students should be exposed to texts that will push them, in terms of ‘both of skills development and of the quantity and range of new language’ yet some reasonable textual modifications have taken place to aid accessibility (McGrath, 2016). Further individual output is endorsed via the inclusion of daily homework activities. Moreover, the materials promote language production through autonomy; the student centric approach engenders minimal reliance on the teacher as the authoritarian. Instead, the instructor’s professional identity shifts (Howard 2021a), as they may subsume the positions of ‘counsellor, facilitator ... resource’ (Little 1991 as cited in Mishan, 2005, p. 9). In turn, there may

³ The essay would be subsequently submitted for grading and feedback.

be a direct correlation between increased output and self-esteem, a sentiment shared by Tomlinson (2011, p.10), “I prefer to attempt to build confidence through activities which try to ‘push’ learners slightly beyond their existing proficiency by engaging them in tasks which are stimulating, which are problematic, but which are achievable too.”

3. Promoting Collaboration

Promoting collaboration is the final precept influencing the development of the materials. Collaboration, or cooperative learning, can be utilised effectively in all educational domains, and ‘with some confidence at every grade level, in every subject area, and with any task’ (Johnson et al., 1995 as cited in Dörnyei 1997, p. 482).

Cooperative learning encompasses ‘a set of instructional strategies in which students work together in small groups (or pairs) to help each other learn academic content’ (Slavin, 2009, p. 177). Drawing on socio-cultural theory, Lin (2015) cites Vygotsky (1978), explaining how his constructivist paradigm reflects the importance of a socially interactive mode of knowledge acquisition; ‘learning is first mediated on a social level between a child and other people in his or her environment, and then is internalized by the child on an individual level ... learning on the social level often involves mentoring provided by more knowledgeable persons, either by adults or peers, who engage in activity with less experienced persons in a process of guidance or collaboration’ (Lin, 2015, p. 12). Accordingly, as all classrooms include learners of disparate levels to some extent (Bruton, 1997), embedding opportunities for peer scaffolding enables the entire group to advance through Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (Lin, 2015); the students with higher capability can furnish their peers with advanced conceptual understanding to build a “mutually beneficial social process of learning” (Lin, 2015, p.13).

In the EFL context, researchers Enright and McCloskey (1985) support the notion that successful language acquisition necessitates a classroom environment that supports synergy and intercommunication. A collaborative ethos can also help to reduce superfluous teacher talk time, freeing instructors to offer individual assistance where necessary (Howard, 2019). Additionally, as learners work together in pursuit of a common goal, this facilitates cohesiveness, improves the inter-personal relationships between team members, rouses feelings of duty and responsibility for

the group's achievement and ultimately moves students to 'engage in cognitive processes which enhance learning' (Slavin, 2009, p.181). Dörnyei (1997) upholds the value of collaborative learning as an effective pedagogical intervention, especially with regards to affective factors. As the learners share accountability and work cohesively, this can effectively raise confidence levels, while diminishing learner anxiety and stress. Lastly, extensive global research has established an association between collaboration and increased student motivation (Dörnyei, 2001), which is of considerable relevance for learners who operate in intensively competitive educational domains, such as Korea.

The theoretical perspectives described above are exemplified in the materials. Firstly, uniformly throughout the instruction headers is the use of 'Let's' (Let's Discuss, Let's Think, Let's Work Together etc.) to foster a classroom culture of 'togetherness', driven by the notion that 'interaction produces talk which is transformed into content' (Fathman & Kessler, 1993). Moreover, the collaborative activities embedded in every unit exhibit a variety of interaction patterns; while working in dyads is generally considered optimal for speaking tasks, this is also accompanied by small group tasks and the final debate is a plenary session, meaning that all participants will work collectively. In Unit 4, team leaders need to be elected, which involves negotiation and group-decision making. Furthermore, Unit 4 is designed so that accountability in the debate is shared; whilst there will of course be a winning team, the emphasis is on performing cohesively. Moreover, Fallahi and Haney's (2007) study established that debates result in a positive sense of team achievement and engender a future preference for collaboration (as cited in El Majidi et al. 2015). Finally, learners provide mutual assistive feedback, for example in Unit 2's *Let's Speak*, and they are invited to personally reflect on not only the course, but on the value of their collaborative learning experiences, in Unit 4's *Let's Review*.

Conclusion

Debate 'training' should not be conceived of as a discreet activity, it has broad applications beyond the course; throughout life the ability to persuade, argue and defend one's position are of paramount importance, so the academic competencies harnessed in the materials are not only transferable across curriculum subjects (McGrath, 2016), but also represent solid foundations for the future (El Majidi et al., 2015).

Returning to the observation in the introduction ‘there is little for adolescents to get their teeth into; there are very few life hooks’ (Hillyard, 2005, as cited in Banegas, 2011, p. 80), the short course I present responds to what I interpret as an implied call to action. The EFL learners in the target context not only require stimulating and authentic subject matter, but engaging and enjoyable texts and tasks that promote both language acquisition and skills development. Materials, whether produced in-house or commercially, should directly and wholeheartedly acknowledge learner attitudes, expectations and interests. In this project, I have sought to achieve this, by producing visually stimulating materials, underpinned by three salient principles; the need for critical thinking to be encouraged, the value of maximising language production and the advantage of promoting collaboration in the classroom.

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