

LEARNER CENTRED PUBLICATIONS

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The idea for this paper came from English teaching experiences in Thailand. The practice of encouraging student-centred learning is not new. It was advocated by Paolo Friere in his influential book, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (Friere, 1993). Indeed, it was outlined by Professor David Nunan in his keynote address at the 1995 Thai TESOL Convention (Nunan, 1995). We know that this practice is found in many teaching situations all over the world including English language teaching.

The student-centred approach is also known as "learner-centred" and the terms are used interchangeably here. The approach still remains, however, for many reasons, far removed from the general practice in teaching. I am especially grateful to English language students at Rajabhat Institute in Kanchanaburi and in the English Language Center, Assumption University in Bangkok for their energy, willingness and enthusiasm in their publications. This paper is a description of their two publication projects.

As teachers, we are no strangers to the encouragement, demand, indeed (in many universities) pressure to publish. We are expected to generate a wider worth to our work than simply teaching in the classroom. The student, however, does not face such demands and simply concentrates on pleasing the teacher. Various strategies are evolved,

ranging from getting to know the teacher's preferences to a "trial and error" process of working out the acceptable level of unoriginality for any given piece of written work. In the arena of publication, more care needs to be taken. The initial effort of catering for a wider audience is usually compensated for by the feeling of greater worth experienced on seeing the work in print, and generally more care is given.

By definition, all learning must be student-centred because it is the student who is doing the learning. It is essentially the teaching process which influences the quality and quantity of the learning. Under "so-called" teacher-centred methods, the focus is on the teacher owning the body of knowledge and interpreting the best way of "trickling it down to others". Student-centered approaches must begin with the student and, in this context, "process" (encompassing the human aspect of the learner-teacher relationship) should precede "content". Understanding by the teacher of such aspects as strengths, weaknesses, hopes and fears places projects more clearly in the student's ownership. Process learning demands that understanding is achieved by the teacher placing emphasis on the affective domain as well as the cognitive domain. In simple terms, this means getting to know the student better at a personal level (affective) rather than concentrating on the content-based knowledge (cognitive). Adopting the role of "facilitator" or advisor ensures that learning is less likely to be teacher-led, and strengthens the emphasis on the affective area. In one respect, a project becomes an original form of task-based teaching-learning for each student. Publication is but one type of project that may be enhanced in this way. I wish to offer experiences with two publications. THE RAJABHAT ENGLISH REVIEW is a periodical from Rajabhat Institute, Kanchanaburi. THE ORACLE is a newspaper from the English Language Center, Assumption University. I was involved with both publications from the outset, and they continue to be a medium for writing in English for Thai undergraduate students.

HOW DID THEY BEGIN?

As with many projects, the briefs came from the Heads of the respective English Language Centres. Guidelines were loose and budgets modest. I suspect one eye was on educational experience and another on public relations value. With the latter in mind, it was important to ensure that the final product looked good.

As well as following these broad guidelines, it was also necessary to consider the prospective readership and their demands, as well as those of the writers and their needs. This required some preliminary discussion with teachers and students. It rapidly became apparent that the "Thai market" really appreciates humour and that the "Thai writer" welcomes examples of themes and ideas. Few teachers can really tap the ideas that attract student readers. These ideas have to come from the students themselves in a safe atmosphere, where they can experiment. Time needs to be allocated for student-centred learning with minimal involvement from the teacher. Any group of students already has its own informal organisation for the solution of learning tasks, and English language students are no exception. However, since learning English is not always seen as a fun activity, encouragement is vital.

HOW TO MAKE IT STUDENT CENTRED

As was mentioned in the introduction, student-centred learning begins with "process". Students need to feel ownership of the project, and in this context, ownership of their own writing and the publication. They also need to feel confident about what they are doing, as this assists their language exposition and originality. In Thailand, young people, in their classes, appear to have a well developed system of cooperation. This is not often evident in Western countries, where there is a stronger

tradition of independence. Whatever critics say about copying, Thai students clearly help each other and frequently work as a unit. This is perfect for a publication project, as the group makes use of the strengths of its members. The group also finds it easier to follow the lead of prominent members within it.

On the reverse side of the coin, encouraging original, written work may be more challenging. Nevertheless, if they suspect that their work will be widely read, the evidence in these publications shows that Thai students of the English language are capable of producing fine quality work. In addition, several drafts of a particular piece of work contributes to learning as well as the refining of ideas. Although more competent students may be involved in this refinement process, participation is generally high from all students, using their varied gifts and talents. Student-centred learning, then, exploits the energy of the learners and the group dynamics. This is achieved by encouraging the students to take as much responsibility as possible for their projects.

ORGANISATION

I feel that there is really no ideal organisational model for the development of a publication project. Faculty do, however, need to support ideas enthusiastically. The process-stage should then begin to move towards a concern for content and production. Not all students will have the same enthusiasm or understanding at the same time. It is in this respect that "leaders" amongst the students will emerge, who may take on more responsibility and encourage others students in their work. Two examples of learner-centered publications follow.

RAJABHAT ENGLISH REVIEW

This was developed from a course in Extended Writing for third year students planning careers as English teachers. The project was

outlined, and a general discussion took place on what content would be required. This was based on the interests of course members and a consideration of published material, including the Nation Junior and the Student Weekly. We looked at the strengths within the group and discovered that one or two were motivated to edit and oversee the publication. One student had word processing skills and others had wide ranging interests from sport to poetry.

Within a short time, we were able to look at the first drafts. The student editors and I were able to form a picture of what the "Review" would look like. Some of the work was completed in groups, whilst other articles were submitted individually. It was obvious that, within class and outside class, this extended writing was the product of substantial liaison and consultation. The organisation had become increasingly student-centred. More and more, I became a "consultant" to the project, providing advice, as and when requested, and obtaining resources through our budget. Other faculty were also brought in by the students to make contributions to surveys, biography, or to assist with specialist text or word processing requirements.

The first Rajabhat English Review was completed by the students in 1994. By this time they were in their final year. There was a tremendous feeling of satisfaction when all the copies were bound, collated and distributed. The extended writing course was offered again in the second semester in late 1994. It seemed appropriate to repeat the student-centred process with a new group of third year English majors. As with the first group of students, the second group "worked and worked" at their writing and final production with their own organisational system. Contributions in the form of articles came in from students in other groups who wanted to see their work published. By the end of the semester, as the first group began their careers as English teachers throughout Thailand, Rajabhat English Review 1995 was ready.

THE ORACLE

At the first team meeting of the English Language Centre, Assumption University (ABAC) for Semester 1 in 1995, the Director expressed the wish that a student-centred newspaper should be started and nominated two faculty, a cartoonist and a writer to act as catalysts. The newspaper should be written primarily by immersion students for ABAC students, and the budget would be ultimately self-generated!

At the University, almost all courses undertaken by students are through the medium of English, and the Immersion programme is designed to assist those who need help with basic skills prior to entry into the undergraduate programme. The classes are small, fifteen students or less, taught by experienced teachers, and have a duration of 300, 400 or 600 hours. Class-contact takes place on alternate hours and the cardinal rule is that English only is spoken.

With eleven classes and more than twenty teachers, the organisation of a newspaper writing project could not be repeated in the same way as the one-class experience in Kanchanaburi. It was therefore decided to invite each class to nominate one or more "chief reporters" to act as go-betweens. These chief reporters would carry information about the newspaper from their own meetings to their respective classes, known as sections. Teachers would also be kept informed by memo, so that they could encourage their "reporters" to have the confidence to write.

This organisational structure was a major challenge to cartoonists, writers, teachers, chief reporters and reporters alike. There were many instances of miscommunication as students politely struggled with understanding English from native speakers, at varying pace and pitch, and of course trying to get to grips with each others accents, in Thai English. Somehow, through their own ability to organise and their own energy and determination in writing, articles began to appear, as did drawings, cartoons and photographs.

The format of a newspaper is very different from other written media. Some computers were available for students to experiment with layout, but fortunately an engineering undergraduate was able to compile the complete issue. By August, it was time to launch the first issue. We could not resist a bit of hype. The problem page, as in many newspapers, had become a very popular letter writing and answering exercise with students. Dear Auntie, our problem solver, was invited to formally launch THE ORACLE with a welcome speech and the presentation of a bouquet. Regular features are included on topics such as travel, music, sport and news. Limited advertising support has been obtained, now that students have begun to take responsibility for selling. Cartoons, drawings, games and puzzles are often included. The quality of our illustrations has improved, as has the quality of our humour. There is a major commitment by many teachers and their groups to each issue. Above all, we know that the newspaper is read. The print run has increased from 500 to 3000.

Copies of the paper are available. The result of the students efforts may be seen through their pages of writing. The intention has been to avoid correcting everything so that the deep structure of the written word prevails. Provided the English is understood, it is acceptable. As always, the typing errors are entirely the responsibility of the editors. We have recently published Issue 4, which was released for St Valentines Day. If you would like to receive a copy or to become a sponsor of the ORACLE, please contact the English Language Center, ABAC.

References

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