

Turning our students into teachers for the day, to enhance learning and help the community

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Introduction

In teaching language we often feel that the time we have available to us in the classroom is too short for us to achieve our desired goals of language improvement for our students. It is clear that language learners need to use language as much as possible outside of the classroom if they are to make good progress. The challenge is trying to find tasks that our students will do without our presence and which will ensure their use of the language. If we could find a way for our students to teach language this might be an effective means for them to learn through a 'real-world' task.

The idea of learning through teaching is not a new one, in fact it is a common idea that has been implemented in a variety of settings. Fremouw, Millard, & Donahoe (1979) reported on the positive results of psychology students acting as teaching assistants. Elmendorf (2006) taught a college science course for non-science majors on which students could choose between traditional learning in the laboratory or developing and teaching a five-week microbiology course in an elementary school. Her experience showed that this was very effective.

Although the idea of getting our students learning through teaching sounds good, the challenge is how to implement this idea in a way in which both those doing the teaching and those being taught consider the activity to be beneficial. The other challenge is to develop a teaching activity that can involve more than just a handful of students teaching.

This study describes a project where university students on an English proficiency course taught English to primary school children aged between 10 and 12 years old. This was run on two occasions the first involving about 24 groups of university students

and the second about 16 groups, from three different campuses teaching children from three different schools.

Implementation

The participants in this project were university students at a public university taking an English proficiency course as part of the compulsory, generic courses. These students varied in ability from beginner to upper-intermediate level (CEFR A1 to lower B2). Because of the desire to increase the language ability of all students, this activity involved all of the students taking the English course.

The idea behind this programme was to give university students taking English proficiency courses a real-world need to use English through teaching primary school children. Primary school children were chosen firstly because their low level of English ability meant it that even the weakest university students would be in a position of knowing more than the school pupils. Secondly, it was considered easier for the students to develop activities that primary school children would find fun compared to secondary school children who might be more critical and so harder to please.

This programme was held on two separate occasions: on the first occasion the university students taught the children in the primary schools and on the second occasion the primary school children came to the university.

University Students' Preparation

In the first week of the semester all university students taking the English proficiency course were told that they would have to work in groups of between 5 to 6 students to prepare a 20 minute, fun activity to teach English to primary school children in Year 4 and 5 of primary education (10 – 11 years old). Although we have labelled this 'teaching' it was emphasised to the students that they should prepare a fun activity in which the school pupils would learn some English rather than trying to 'teach' the school pupils some English. The students were given three weeks to prepare their activity and produce a simple outline plan including their objective, the main stages, who would be doing each stage and the estimated time the stage would take. To ensure that the students put sufficient effort into this task it was assigned 10% of their final course mark. The students were informed that the best group in each class would be selected to carry

out their teaching activity with primary school children. This was a practical arrangement due to the logistical problems of the number of university students who could be transported to the school in the first occasion and the number of school pupils who could be transported to the university on the second occasion. However, this arrangement added an element of competition among the student groups preparing the activity.

School Pupil Preparation

Arrangements with local primary schools (*Sekolah Kebangsaan Malaysia - SMK*) began with discussion with the State Education Department (*Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri – JPN*). After gaining their approval and support, the schools were visited and discussions held with the Head Teacher and English Teachers to explain the programme, agree on the best dates and to arrange the involvement of their students. Students aged 10-12 years old (years 4, 5 or 6) were requested as this was thought to be the most suitable ages for the university students to teach. Considering the low proficiency of some of the university students the aim was to involve school pupils at a lower level of English ability. Although normal class sizes can range up to 40 pupils in one class, groups of 15 pupils were requested to make the teaching more manageable for the university students.

Numbers and Timescales

Initially, the intention was to send different groups of university students to the primary school each Saturday over the 14 weeks of the university semester. The idea was that different groups of university students would teach the same group of primary school children giving these children an extended period of regular English activities. However, considering the timings of school half-term holidays and other practical matters it seemed best to run this activity over just two consecutive Saturdays.

The Teaching

The activity began at 8:30 and ran to 12 midday with a 20 minute break. Primary school children participated in six activities over this time of half an hour each. Although the university students prepared 15 minute teaching activities it was assumed that an extra 15 minutes would be taken up in setting things up and finishing, and getting the school children from one room to another.

Changes made in second version

The second occasion this activity was carried out a few changes were made. It was found in the first version that the students had similar types of activities and similar English language content. To encourage more variety the students were given a list of possible activities to choose from and a list of vocabulary topics they could choose from.

The other major change was to run the activity at the university and to bring the school children to the university by bus. This was decided to enable the student to have plenty of time to set up the rooms they were going to use and because the environment of the university was thought to give the school pupils the sense of coming to somewhere special.

Results and Discussion

To gauge the effectiveness of this activity we have to consider two aspects: firstly the effectiveness of this activity for the primary school children and secondly for the university students who prepared teaching activities and those who were selected to teach the primary school children.

Shortcomings and weaknesses

Evaluating the teaching of the university students it is to be expected that their teaching was weak in many aspects. Although the intention was that the students would successfully help the primary school children learn, the objective was not to train them to become teachers. This is a slight tension in this project; it is not feasible to devote too much time and effort to training the students to teach, while at the same time the desire is that they help the school pupils learn effectively.

Besides the teaching ability of the students the main weakness was the duplication of topics and the duplication of activities used by the different student groups. The duplication of topics could easily be resolved by better co-ordination. The duplication of activities seemed to be caused by the lack of exposure to a variety of fun activities that can be used for teaching language. Creative students can often come up with innovative activities, but the majority were limited in their outlook to the activities they themselves have experienced. This suggests that these students have experienced very few fun activities while learning English both at school and at university.

The most significant shortcoming in terms of enabling the development of language ability in the primary school children was the short term nature of this activity. Language learning requires regular activities over a long period of time, clearly two Saturday mornings in themselves are not enough to make a significant difference. This activity could be extended over a much longer time-frame with more student groups involved. However, this would also mean a long-term, regular commitment for the primary school children and their parents every Saturday. It seems likely that parents and school teachers might be against this idea. If the activity was held during normal school hours during the week, it would not require much more effort on the part of the school, but there would be less of the novel and fun atmosphere created by a special activity on a weekend. A possible solution to this would be to adapt the activity to hold it in a residential community on a weekend drawing in children from the neighbourhood.

Feedback from schools – the pupils and the teachers

Despite these shortcomings, the school pupils were observed to enjoy this activity, although they became quite tired by the end suggesting that it might be better to reduce the duration of this activity. In order to obtain a clearer view of this activity from the perspectives of the school pupils and staff were given questionnaires. Although this was one year after the activity for the first school involved and about 6 months later for the second school involved. The results from the school pupil questionnaire are shown in the table below. Since the opinions were collected so long after the event the accuracy can be doubted. Furthermore, considering the similarity of some of the responses by the school pupils it is possible that they either could have answered according to what was expected or copied from their friends. Even considering these shortcomings the results present a picture that in general the school pupils found this a valued activity that they would like to do again.

Table 1: Results of questionnaire given to primary school pupils

How enjoyable was this activity?		
	Number	%
Very	37	39.8
Enjoyable	50	53.8

Somewhat	0	0
Not very	0	0
Not	0	0

Would you like to do this activity again?

	Number	%
Definitely	34	36.6
Yes	52	55.9
Maybe	1	1.1
Not sure	0	0
No	0	0

Was the duration too long or too short?

	Number	%
Too short	6	6.5
A little too short	13	14.0
Just right	61	65.6
A little too long	5	5.4
Too long	2	2.2

Do you remember anything about what you learnt?

	Number	%
Lots of things	5	5.4
Quite a lot	4	4.3
Some things	18	19.4
Not very much	53	57.0
Nothing	7	7.5

Did it make you want to learn more English?

	Number	%
Definitely	49	52.7
Yes	36	38.7
A little	2	2.2
Not much	0	0
No	0	0

The feedback obtained from the teachers indicated that they felt this was a beneficial activity for their pupils. Amongst the benefits they listed were improved vocabulary,

“exposure to other people involved in English,” motivation to learn English and giving the pupils an experience of speaking in English outside of the school environment.

In terms of improvements, several suggested dividing the school pupil groups of 15 into smaller groups for the activities. It was also mentioned that more variety of activities would improve things.

Effectiveness for university students

Considering the effectiveness of this activity from the point of view of language development of the university students, one factor is the level of the language focused on in their teaching activity. Since they were teaching primary school children and focusing on vocabulary, this task did not force them to learn a lot of new language. This does not mean that there was limited language learning, although the content of what they were teaching did not lead to significant growth in language ability, the process of teaching and running their activities was done mainly in English and this probably led to significant improvements in fluency, confidence and vocabulary development as they sought to explain what they were teaching.

Besides language learning, the university students also developed soft-skills as they worked together in a team preparing and then delivering their teaching activities. The preparation phase involved time management and organisational skills, carrying out their activities they experienced unexpected problems they had to overcome and they had to adapt their plans to the situation. Working with primary aged children they also developed their people skills.

Feedback from university students

Feedback from the students who participated would have given a better perspective however, feedback forms were obtained from only nine students. Of these students, all nine stated that they would recommend that this activity be done again for other students with the addition of “sure,” “positive,” “absolutely,” and “definitely” from five of them. In terms of their perspective on how much this improved their English, two felt that there was “some improvement,” five felt that there was “significant improvement,” and two stated “very great improvement.” In terms of how they felt their English improved and what soft skills they felt it improved or taught them, all of them mentioned something to

do with “speaking,” “communication,” or confidence to speak in front of groups. Under the heading “other things learnt” the students mentioned “ways to transfer knowledge,” teamwork, and leadership.

The students had a variety of suggestions on how this activity could be improved in the future. Five of them mentioned running the activity outside and doing outside activities. Other suggestions were making the groups of university students smaller so that everyone has a chance to teach, including secondary school children, increasing the time allocated for their teaching and more training on how to teach. These appear sensible suggestions that could be quite easily implemented.

Increasing the amount of language development

Looking at other improvements that could be made to this activity, one approach to increase the level of language learnt by the students could be giving the students the task of trying to teach secondary school children, focusing on language content they themselves have not yet completely mastered. Or they could be given some tasks where they have to take content they need to master and simplify it down to a level that is appropriate for primary school children. This would certainly reinforce their understanding.

In discussing the methodology of task-based teaching Ellis (2003) points out that some parts of the “‘pre-task’ or ‘post-task’ phases are non-obligatory but, ... can serve a crucial role in ensuring that the task performance is maximally effective for language development” (p243). Pre and post tasks were lacking in this activity. Better ‘framing’ of the task at the start and the addition of some sort of reflection and evaluation at the end would make a significant difference to the language developed by the students through this activity.

Something of this ‘framing’ of the task was carried out by Elmendorf (2006) in her project to get college students teaching in an elementary school. She made her students work in groups of just two or three. She also spent time “brainstorming about topics, planning and refining lessons, developing hands-on activities, and practice teaching” (p. 38)

Conclusion

The feedback obtained from the university students and the primary school children and teachers indicate that this activity was deemed beneficial to all those involved to the extent that they would recommend that it is repeated again. The degree to which it really made a significant difference to the language ability of the university students or school pupils is unclear and could be very limited. However, if it creates an opportunity for real use of language and leads to a positive experience and development of soft skills then it should be repeated. By giving more focus to the setting up of the task and adding some sort of post task language learning is likely to be improved. This model seems to be an effective model for partnership between universities and schools that can lead to a positive outcome for all involved. The model could also be adapted for secondary school children to teach primary school children. Students as teachers is a workable model that provides an effective “real-world” task that develops both language ability and soft skills of the students involved.

References

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