

Making Connections across the Curriculum

Andy B., Mary Jo, Yuriko, Zorana (compiled by Andy B.)

Andy: We looked at the handout with the issues that people had raised before the retreat on email, and then chose the ones that we would like to talk about together. As Zorana mentions, we had three or four issues that at least one of us wanted to focus on. I made notes about our discussion, but those notes are presently lost somewhere in a pile of boxes in my office, as I have to pack everything away before the start of the vacation (Building 2 is being made earthquake proof, and having asbestos “treated”, this summer).

My main recollection is of three things – the first is that I talked a little bit about academic literacy in the beginning as that is what our curriculum is based on developing, and there are different ways of understanding what academic literacy is.

One image I often use is that of a swimming pool (probably a Marty Feldman scene?) where a film is being made and the actors have to dive in...but there is no water in the pool. The director keeps the cameras rolling and says something like “Great! OK! Let’s try it with water now!” This image reminds me of what we can end up doing with skills – we may encourage students to practise and practise various skills with content-lite (or content-free!) tasks, so that they can then try the tasks with water (or real content!) when they have got all the skills in place. We may feel in control as teachers, but what about the learners? Perhaps they end up, at the bottom of an empty swimming pool, without any engagement with content that interests them....

I notice more and more that it is students’ engagement with content and their interest in social, political, legal or global issues that drive them (i.e., the what). Once they have started engaging with such content, then it makes sense to help students reflect on the how (or the processes of developing academic literacy through English that they actually use, so that they can notice what they do and then consider alternative ways of engaging with content and developing their knowledge of the world further).

So, I think we talked a little about content and process reflections together. We also took time to discuss how long the cycles of work are that we use in different courses. I mentioned that I used to do three cycles of 4 weeks, with a final week for review, but I tend now to do two cycles of 5 weeks, with one week for review of the cycle, self- and peer-assessment and portfolio development. I feel that this generally makes for less of a hectic time, and helps create more space for engagement with content and process for the

students – and as they do that, then, over time, they become gradually much more directive about what they do. Here, we talked about portfolios too and ways of organizing them.

Zorana: Here is my reflection on our group's discussion at the retreat.

If my memory is any good (I definitely need to improve my note-taking skills) our discussion focused on three issues:

1. academic literacy
2. assessment
3. discussion strategies

Andy emphasized that the goal of Chuo English programme is to develop academic literacy of our students. In order to reach this objective, we must work on raising autonomous learners, but learner autonomy in itself is not the objective of the curriculum. I think this is a very important issue, and I hope we can talk more about it in the future.

As for assessment, one way to reduce teachers' grading time and make students learn from their mistakes is to encourage peer evaluation and self-reflection. This could be done in a review lesson at the end of each research cycle. Students should be encouraged to reflect both on the process and the content of their research. They should also monitor their vocabulary learning. It is important that they learn word collocations as it can help them improve their productive vocabulary.

Yuri mentioned that some students find it difficult to interrupt a speaker during class discussions. We agreed that in addition to giving them language they can use for "interruption" and "clarification", it is important that students learn to watch other people's expressions and body language, and also confirm listeners' understanding.

I would like to thank you all for a very stimulating and interesting discussion.

Zorana

Mary Jo:

Hello all... Thanks again for a great retreat. I felt especially energized after Sunday (despite the lack of a day off) and my teaching seemed to go a lot better all week.

Chuo Law English Teachers Retreat, June 2007

I've had a look at my notes, and what I've mostly written about is our discussion about assessment. As far as grading goes, I haven't felt a real conflict. Usually, by the end of the year there are a few students who stand out as being "the chosen few" who deserve the As. What has bothered me is the difficulty I've felt in giving enough individual feedback - especially for discussion classes where most of the work is done with groups and pairs. I've had them write reflections and give peer feedback for the small group presentations, but that hasn't really felt like enough. I think having a whole class devoted to self-reflection and peer review at the end of each cycle will really help.

At the end of each cycle the students are really tired and need some time to "recover" and think about what they've been doing over the past few weeks. A review class would be really good for this. So after our discussion I'm going to try doing things this way:

Have students keep a portfolio of representative pieces of work they've done throughout the cycle, e.g. notes, daily reflections, useful vocabulary / collocations, research goals, poster. Reflections would be clearly divided into two parts: reflections about research content (*What was interesting? / What you want to know more about?*) and research & discussion process (*Were your notes helpful to use for speaking? Could you explain your research easily? What could you do to make it easier to explain in English? etc.*). Knowing their peers would eventually evaluate the whole portfolio might keep students focused on consistently producing quality work.

At the review session students could look at their own work as a whole and then share it with a partner. They could discuss what they thought and then write a comment about their partner's work. Students could then read the comments and write their final reflection.

I'm really looking forward to trying this, as I think it will help some of my less focused students get more focused!

Thanks again for all the great, inspiring ideas!

Mary Jo

Yuriko:

Thank you again for the retreat, and I will write what I cultivated from the wonderful discussion last Sunday.

Mirroring--

I've heard about the words, but I haven't tried this in my class yet. This will definitely make students improve their note-taking skills and retelling as well as listening to speakers carefully. I will try this this week!

Each cycle peer-assessment--

As Mary Jo mentioned followed by the ideas from Andy, I totally agree with you. I will have students keep all of the stuff they've done throughout each cycle, and reflect and do peer-assessment. I'm sure this process will inspire each students to produce as quality works as possible. Students tend to do their best if they are reflected and assessed by their peers!

Moving into "real" discussion--

In order to assist students move from pair work activities and groups of three/four activities to "real"? discussion, not just turn taking activities, speakers should look at the listeners' expressions carefully and make sure the listeners have followed the speech and have got it clearly--- This sounds-like a very general idea and gives me an answer to the questions from a few students of when to interrupt the speakers' talk and how to do it. Not only listeners but also speakers have to care about if speech is clear enough for listeners to make any comment and move into discussion.

Thank you all, and I love you guys so much :)

Cheers,

Yuriko Ishizaka