Five Steps to Using Your Textbook to Build a More Dynamic EFL Conversation Class

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When students hear the words, "turn to page 15 in your textbook", they probably feel like it's going to be just another boring English lesson. This doesn't have to be true, however, if we use our EFL textbooks as a tool for providing a way of making the students assume more responsibility, thus making the class more interactive.

With the recent emphasis on learner centered communicative methodology, a good EFL textbook can provide what is missing - specific language goals and reassurance for learners. A communicative methodology is more effective if there are specific mini-language goals set for students to accomplish. A textbook will usually provide these goals but is often not a motivational source for students. A communicative methodology, on the other hand, offers students motivational tasks but is also a "set of principles loosely bundled together" for no specific purpose other than speaking English (Van Lier 1988:72). I believe that students learn better if they understand what is expected of them and what or how much they can experiment with everyday tasks. Thus, a well chosen textbook should offer students classroom stability by letting them know what is going to be expected of them as well as integrating motivating communicative pair-work.

Introduced here is a 5-step methodology which has been successfully used with Japanese first-year EFL college students. In the proposed methodology, I have attempted to simply describe an interactive way of teaching via a textbook where the teacher slowly relinquishes control by giving students more responsibility so when it comes time for the communicative task pair-work, learners are able to speak more accurately and confidently.

Step 1 - One Quick Question

As you take attendance, tell students that they must acknowledge their presence by asking one quick question based on the previous lesson as a review. So for example, if we were studying the conversation strategy of, "Have you ever....../ When did you last......." Students would begin the class practicing this one particular conversation tactic.

- Example:
    - S: Have you ever spoken Spanish?
    - T: Yes, I have.

Repetition is vital for these students particularly since they only have the class once a week for 90 minutes. Repetition does not have to be boring for students but can be made learner-centered.

Step 2 - Assigning New Partners Every Lesson

Next, after having completed the roll call and answering these student review questions, class is officially started by putting students randomly in pairs. I usually do this by having each student choose from a stack of cards labeled 1A, 2A, 3A etc. and...1B, 2B, 3B etc. Thus, if a student's card reads 1A his or her partner is the 1B cardholder. If there are 20 students there will be 10 pairs. Students then pair off and sit facing each other.
By randomly assigning students to a new partner every lesson, the class is more dynamic and perhaps more significantly, after a few weeks the class, as whole, becomes familiar with each other which builds a supportive, relaxed speaking atmosphere. Students also seem to really enjoy having the control to "choose" their partner by taking a card number.

Step 3 - Dialogue Practice

When students are seated facing each other in pairs, they listen to the example conversation in the textbook as a class and then practice saying or repeating problematic words for pronunciation. Now is the time to practice any problematic phrases or cultural concepts or for any pre-teaching of difficult structures.

Step 4 - Creating a Variation of the Dialogue.

Next, students are told they must change the conversation by substituting words in the dialogue.

Once students have decided which words to substitute, they are given about 10 minutes to memorize the dialogue depending on difficulty. After 10 minutes, student pairs are asked to "volunteer" to perform their conversation. I say "volunteer" because students are told that they do not have to do the conversation if they don't want to, but if they do "volunteer", each student will receive a "+" for the day. This way students receive a daily mark which gives an accurate record of their willingness to participate in addition to motivating them to try harder without direct teacher induced pressure. When students have finished "performing" their memorized mini-conversations, they are ready to move on to a related listening exercise.

Step 5 - Communicative Pair Work

Up to this point, students have been studying one kind of communicative strategy via a controlled conversation memorization and listening drills. Now they are adequately prepared to assume all responsibility by trying it by themselves via a pair-work communicative task. They now have the opportunity to speak freely in English but are also sufficiently empowered to do so. The teacher, by walking around evaluating each pair, can easily decide where problems reside and correct them or decide to follow up the pair-work with additional question-answer practice between student and teacher.

Conclusion

Japanese college students need more than just one kind of classroom methodology. They also benefit from a variety of classroom activities such as short classroom videos, oral presentations or computer lab days. These types of extra activities can be integrated within the week-to-week class curriculum and provide an additional motivational source from the usual routine. Since the average Japanese first-year college student has 15 or 16 classes per week, they need variety but also control to maximize the short time they have to learn English.

Repeatedly using this 5 step methodology, the classroom becomes a place where students know what is expected of them while keeping the class interactive and interesting. The method can maintain student motivation and give students more confidence by slowly relinquishing teacher control while giving them more classroom responsibility. Finally, students are empowered to succeed and feel a sense of accomplishment at the end of each lesson.

References

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