

Using learner-generated materials to personalize learning

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When approaching a teacher's office, one is frequently greeted by the sound of the teacher tapping away on the keyboard making materials for class. Unquestionably, creating materials is an important part of teachers' work. Although having a handout can give teachers a sense of satisfaction or security, we sometimes do go overboard with materials creation. This may be true even in cases where learner-generated materials would suffice, or even be more effective than teacher-generated materials. The following lesson plan gives one example of how to replace a standard ESL/EFL lesson with a new and improved "paperless" lesson.

Giving learners a map of a city and having them practice giving and receiving directions is a common ESL/EFL task. However, asking people to talk about places they've never seen is less meaningful to them than talking about a place they know very well: their own neighborhood. The procedure for such a lesson might look something like this:

1. The teacher draws a simple map of his/her neighborhood on the chalkboard. Be sure to provide a starting point, such as a bus stop or store, as well as five or six unlabelled "mystery" buildings or locations. One of them could be the teacher's home. The learners copy the map on a piece of paper.
2. The teacher guides the class through his/her neighborhood using the target language forms (for example, "Go straight to the corner. The building on your left is the supermarket."). The learners listen and label the mystery locations.
3. The learners confer and check their maps with a partner. If necessary, they can ask the teacher questions such as "Where is the supermarket?" or "Is the supermarket on the right side of the street or the left?"
4. The class debriefs, with the teacher asking them "Where is the supermarket?" and getting them to respond with appropriate explanations. For lower level classes, the teacher could simply point and ask, "What is this building?"
5. The learners draw simple maps of their neighborhoods following the same guidelines as for the teacher's map. A five-minute time limit is helpful.
6. Partners take turns describing their neighborhoods to each other and labeling the mystery locations. Again, encourage learners to ask their partners questions if they have not understood something.
7. Finally, learners check their understanding with their partners by asking questions such as "The park is next to the swimming pool, right?"

Although this lesson focuses on speaking and listening, it would be easy to add a reading and writing component by, for example, asking students to write a paragraph describing their neighborhood (or what they like or do not like about it). They could then exchange papers and read and summarize a partner's composition.

The range of topics for which teachers could create lessons using these types of tasks is only limited by one's imagination. Although the teacher still needs to have a well thought out plan, using lessons like this requires less time on the computer, takes less paper, and involves students in genuinely meaningful use of the target language. These lessons exploit one very basic principle: People generally like to talk about themselves and their lives.

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