Using In-Class Tutor Practice to Facilitate Language Use Outside the ESL Classroom
Isaac Gaines, University of Oregon

Many of us have had the experience of studying abroad and, like our ESL students, many of us were guilty of using our L1 too much outside of class. This obviously defeats the point of studying a language abroad. However, for our students who intend to stay more than a semester and need English for future success, the stakes are higher. Poor integration into the target culture can have long-lasting and debilitating effects on language learning.

To confront this issue, I have created a useful classroom activity to help prepare ESL learners for successfully using English outside the classroom for various authentic tasks. I have also added a suggestion for implementing this activity within a task-based model in order to systematically provide learners with scaffolding and support.

In-Class Tutor Practice

The goal of tutoring is to practice target verbal and non-verbal communication with tutors[1] to build students' oral fluency, socio-cultural, and pragmatic competences to prepare them for performing out-of-class language tasks.

Instructions

1. Review language, body language, and discuss what is socially acceptable or awkward when interacting with strangers in the target context (e.g., when asking strangers for directions).
2. Introduce or remind students of the out-of-class task (which will come later) and how this is useful practice to prepare them for successful interactions in the real world.
3. Have everyone stand up. Arrange classroom to allow the tutors to make a large circle around the classroom.
4. Give directions: Students line up and proceed around the classroom to take turns approaching and interacting with the tutors (and the teacher) to practice and mimic the interactions they would have with a stranger in the target context. Students have a specific task to repeat (e.g., asking for directions to a specific place). Tutors try to act naturally in order to simulate an authentic situation. For an even more realistic simulation, tutors can assume different roles to act out (e.g., being too busy, being helpful, pretending to not hear the request, not knowing directions well, etc.). After each interaction, tutors give students brief feedback about their verbal and non-verbal communication. In just a matter of minutes, students can complete the circuit around the classroom making several attempts. Finally, the teacher addresses the whole class to explain common problems or give

---

[1]My institution has a program that hires tutors to come into the classroom once a week as teaching assistants. There can be as many as five tutors to assist in a class with roughly 15-20 students. This program provides great opportunities for a variety of classroom activities. If your institution doesn't have an in-class tutor program, I encourage you to make a proposal to your institution or seek volunteers from the community. Alternatively, you can still prepare activities like the one detailed below by making a worksheet with instructions for students to give to their tutor (outside), conversation partner, or home-stay parent.

suggestions. If necessary, the teacher can model the interaction with one of the tutors to demonstrate ideal or unnatural verbal and non-verbal communication.

Rationale

Repetition of the target language and exposure to different kinds of responses, attitudes, and feedback all serve to prepare students for what they might encounter outside, but in a comfortable and supportive environment. Successful interactions and positive feedback will give students confidence for using English outside. However, for lower-level ESL learners, at least some failure or rejection is inevitable in language use outside the classroom. Exposure to rejection and communication breakdowns in the classroom prepares students for those negative experiences that would otherwise be counter-productive by lowering students' confidence and motivation to use English outside. Either way, practicing verbal and non-verbal communication in this simulated way is a step toward successful communication in the real world.

Implementing Language Practice within a Task-Based Model

As an isolated activity, the above activity isn't as useful as it could be. My suggestion is to use the In-Class Tutor Practice within a series of activities and lessons that culminates in students performing a language task outside, and doing reflection activities about it afterwards. Ideally, within a task-based model, the target language and task are intertwined with the textbook and other course content. The target language and context is first presented through authentic video or dialogue. Then, students are led through various activities that transition from receptive to productive practice. Role-plays and other interactive activities that require creative production directly precede the In-Class Tutor Practice activity. After the In-Class Tutor Practice, students do the target language task outside the classroom. Finally, students engage in some kind of reflective activity, such as group discussions or a written diary, to consider strengths and weaknesses in their communicative abilities.

The sequence of activities I've detailed here is just one model for how ESL instructors can promote language use outside the classroom. There may be other equally effective ways. However, the important thing is to build confidence, motivation, and autonomy in our students. This is particularly important for lower-level learners who generally lack the linguistic ability and socio-cultural awareness to take advantage of their immersion environments.

Isaac Gaines has over 10 years experience teaching ESL/EFL. He currently teaches in the IEP at the University of Oregon where he has been trying to improve international student integration into the local community. He also has over seven years of EFL teaching experience in Japan.