



Encouraging learner-generated content

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looks to her students for content.

As an ELT trainer in adult education, I have found that giving my learners space to provide content has a number of advantages. It helps learners to stay engaged and provides motivation, as it is personal and gives them the opportunity to acquire and use language they need. Giving learners space to come up with ideas for using language often leads to creativity. In addition, frameworks to be filled with learner-generated content make use of different types of input and output by giving learners the chance to both speak and listen to others. As the bulk of the lesson is based on the learners' reality, the chance that they will take what they learnt with them back to the workplace is high, so the lesson

goes beyond the walls of the classroom. And finally, learner-generated content is generally more memorable for those who took part and contributed to the discussion or writing task.

Creating new things in the classroom has long been one of the ways we encourage learners to think for themselves and express their own ideas.

There are a number of areas in which this method of teaching can be applied. This article will cover the following: vocabulary; grammar; critical thinking; creativity; making use of images; speaking freely; and using texts. The main focus of the article will therefore be on activities which address these different areas with rationale explaining what about them makes use of learner-generated content.

Vocabulary

The first of the activities is taken from the popular boardgame Outburst in which learners are put in groups, given cards with general categories and words which belong to them, and instructed to shout out which words they think are on the lists the others have. This activity, however, works extremely well as a review of specific areas of vocabulary. The instructor simply chooses several categories which have recently been taught and instructs the learners to work in a group and choose

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five words which fit into the categories. Once they have finished, they work together with another group who are told only the category and have to guess the words by shouting them out. The activity is timed and when time is up, the group guessing gets a point for each correct guess and the group who supplied the words gets two points for each word not guessed. This encourages learners to think of more unusual words when creating their lists and when guessing. Once all the groups have finished guessing, the points are added together to determine the winners. The vocabulary which the learners have provided can then be used for a further writing or speaking activity. This simple game is an active strategy for vocabulary review, can help learners to remember by organising words into categories, sparks learners' ambitions to think outside the box, has an element of play and focuses on teamwork.

Grammar

The second activity is used to review the past tense, giving learners a chance to practise a particular grammar point. Each of the learners is given a small card and asked to write their name on it. They then think of a minor problem they had within the last week. As this is a mingling activity, the learners are told to begin by finding one person to speak with and then exchange their stories and the card with the name of that person whose story they heard. They are then instructed to find a new partner to exchange stories and name cards – but they have to change some of the details of the incident they were told. Once learners have spoken to five or six different people, the activity is stopped. They are then asked to tell the story of the person whose name card they have without mentioning their name. The others listen carefully and try to pinpoint their original story. If they have guessed correctly, they then tell the group the

original. The advantages of this activity include: the active use of connecting the past tense to past actions; the use of personal stories and ideas; the need to speak clearly and listen attentively in order to pass on information; the creation of new ideas; and the authentic use of language.

Critical thinking

Moving on to thinking critically, I have adapted a game from *Games for Vocabulary Practice* by Felicity O'Dell and Katie Head (2003) in which learners are given lists with four similar objects or verbs and asked to find the odd one out and then explain their reasoning to the others. This has been slightly adapted by giving learners lists of vocabulary they should be familiar with and asked to give reasons why *each* of the items in the list could be the odd one out. When they have finished, they then write their own list with four words in which each possesses an attribute making it somewhat different from the other three. This is then exchanged with another group who has to find out what particular characteristic of each item makes it distinct from the others. In working through this activity, learners have to: actively analyse and evaluate different objects or actions; form their own ideas; consider terms from different perspectives; make decisions based on evidence; use logical thinking; and be able to give reasons for their opinions.

Creativity

Creating new things in the classroom has long been one of the ways we encourage learners to think for themselves and express their own ideas. However, giving them a framework to work with can aid them when they feel stuck or are unable to come up with their own ideas. This activity on storytelling involves personal involvement, as well as practice in

putting together a cohesive story. Groups of learners are given several photos or pictures (either the same for all groups or different ones for each). They are then told to create a story about the people in another group (determined by the teacher) and explain what they have done since the last class. They are told that they can be as creative as they like and only need to use the photos as an impulse for ideas. It is also emphasised that they need a clear beginning and ending of the story, and, in this case, use various past tenses correctly. At the end, each of the groups reads their story aloud, naming the people they have incorporated into it. This activity makes use of: brainstorming in a team; cohesion by putting a story together; raising interest for the learners due to the personal touch; intrinsic motivation to complete the task using language they find themselves; and listening skills at the end, due to natural curiosity about what was written about them.

Images

The next activity, learnt from Andrew Wright in a workshop he gave in Graz many years ago, also makes use of creativity and is a good example of using an image as an impulse. Learners are put in pairs or small groups. Each group is given a piece of paper and told to draw a circle on it. They are then instructed to pass the paper to the next group who draw the eyes, then to the next group who draw the nose, according to the instructions of the teacher until the drawing is complete. The final work of art is then passed on one more time and the learners are told this is a portrait of a new friend. They are instructed to create a persona about the person by answering questions such as the person's name, how old they are, their profession, their hobbies, how they met, anything unusual about them and so on. The final step includes introducing the new friend to the others in the class and answering questions the others have. This activity makes use of an image created by the class as a whole and necessitates following guidelines to come up with ideas. They are instructed to connect the information they create about the person to the image directly and, because the class has contributed to the drawing, the reading aloud at the end piques the interest of all.

Speaking

Speaking freely is often the goal of learner-generated content but not always easy to practise in a guided manner in the classroom. This next activity works quite well, especially if learners need to give presentations with Q & A sessions or speak in meetings on subjects they know about but have not prepared for in detail. Learners are told that they are going to practise presentations in the next lesson and one learner volunteers to prepare one on a subject they know. However, when the learner comes to class with their notes or slides, they are told that the format has changed and that the group has the opportunity to have questions answered during the talk rather than afterwards. The topic is announced and four or five learners are invited to write their questions on the board for the speaker. The learner who volunteered to give the talk then presents on the topic but must incorporate answers to the questions asked by the others. To make it more challenging, the presenter can be told that they have to answer the questions in a way that is logical for the talk and not in the order they are written on the board. At the end of the talk, the learners give feedback on how well the questions were answered. This activity makes use of learner-generated content both in the original preparation for the talk and the questions asked, as well as the way they are handled by the speaker. It involves on-the-spot reactions and speaking without a prepared script. The learners listening also have to pay attention to make sure the questions are answered satisfactorily.

Texts

The last category is making use of a text. It is important to choose an interesting text with several people mentioned in it and which is slightly above the level of the learners. The learners are told the title and less familiar vocabulary is presented to them and explained or translated. They are then asked to write a story in groups using the words they have. These can be read aloud when the learners are finished depending on the size of the group. The original text is then given to the learners and read aloud by the teacher. Because they have worked with the vocabulary themselves, they should understand it quite well. Further text work can be done



such as: adding in extra words; changing words by using synonyms; making 'true / false / maybe' statements and so on.

Once the teacher feels that the text has been exploited, the next step is a role play. Learners can volunteer to play different characters in the text and create situations that could have happened before or after the story took place, giving them the chance to speak freely and use their imaginations while remaining true to the storyline. There are various aspects in this activity which encourage learners to come up with their own content. At the beginning, learners have the chance to create their own version of the story based on vocabulary they are given and have to find a way to weave it together into a cohesive whole, they create their own true-or-false statements showing a basic knowledge of the text, whereby the 'maybe' questions again make use of critical thinking strategies and the learners are given freedom to create their own dialogues in the spin-off role plays based on the text.

All in all, these activities can be used for a variety of levels, in a variety of settings and adapted to help learners become more confident in: using new vocabulary and grammar; defending

their ideas; creating stories; thinking on their feet; and playing roles. They gain practice through the act of filling in frameworks with their own content and have the chance to experiment with the language, leading to more confidence and originality. As the language comes from the participants, it is transferable and can be more easily taken out of the classroom and both put to use and practised in the real world of the learners.

Resource

O'Dell, F. & Head, K. (2003). *Games for Vocabulary Practice* Cambridge University Press.



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has been teaching in Austria for over 40 years at tertiary level, with adults, corporate clients and with teachers. She has written several methodology books on learner

preferences, as well as coursebooks and photocopiable materials for general and business English. Marjorie is an NLP Trainer and has used the techniques in the classroom, as well as in teacher training courses. She is a past president of IATEFL.