

9

FACILITATING CONTENT ACQUISITION THROUGH LANGUAGE : THE ‘WALL POSTER’ TECHNIQUE

MASPUTERIAH HAMZAH
ABDUL HALIM ABDUL RAOF

INTRODUCTION

The ‘wall poster’ activity is one of the tasks conducted in English for Civil Engineering (ECE) classrooms aimed at facilitating learners’ acquisition of the content area of the subject in their specialized discipline of civil engineering.

The English for Civil Engineering programme is based on a research project on English for Specific Purposes conducted in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. The research was an attempt to create a programme which is derived from and integrated with the Faculty of Civil Engineering’s mainstream academic programme through collaboration between the English language instructors and the subject specialists. (Please refer to Khairi et al, 1995 for a description of the programme; Masputeriah et al., 1995 and Abdul Halim et al., 1996 for a discussion on the approach to materials preparation, nature of activities and the role of language instructors and language learners).

THE ENGLISH FOR CIVIL ENGINEERING PROGRAMME (ECE)

The ECE programme evolved from a functional definition of ESP (refer Khairi et al., 1995) which aims to prepare learners for effective

participation in a specific academic or professional community of civil engineers.

The objectives of the project include the following:

- (a) To develop the communication skills and English language competence of Civil Engineering undergraduates so as to enhance efficiency in their academic work.
- (b) To assist the Civil Engineering Faculty, via the development of language competence, in its effort to prepare the learners for effective participation in the professional community of Civil Engineers.
- (c) To enhance the marketability of the Civil Engineering graduates through the development of communicative competence and the inculcation of attributes such as independence, initiative and confidence.

THE ‘ WALL POSTER’ ACTIVITY

The ‘wall poster’ presentation is an activity which is conducted to achieve the main objective of the ECE programme, which is to enhance English competency of Civil Engineering undergraduates to ensure efficiency in their academic work . The aim is to assist learners to independently extract relevant information from Civil Engineering texts, take down main points from their reading and subsequently present key information concisely and accurately. These skills are regarded as vital to enhance learners’ understanding of concepts and principles related to their academic subjects. The reading skill is also seen as an essential part of the learning process in the academic training of civil engineering undergraduates before they embark on more demanding tasks of oral and written communication both for academic and professional purposes.

The task of preparing the ' wall poster' is part of an enculturation task which aims to assist learners in the process of initiation and assimilation into the academic culture of civil engineering. Being a new member of the civil engineering field, learners need to be exposed to the subject matter of civil engineering subjects to ensure that relevant linguistic and conceptual data are made available to the learners. The learning activity is built around conceptual areas / topics of a reading based on a civil engineering subject. The civil engineering subject identified in this task is "Materials in Civil Engineering" which is one of the key subjects towards the understanding of civil engineering principles and applications.

The 'wall poster' activity is thus generated by and built around the requirements of the "Materials in Civil Engineering" subject in terms of key texts to be used, conceptual areas to be covered, notes to be taken and vocabulary and structures to be acquired. With the practice provided in skills such as identifying relevant information and taking down key information from their reading, this activity will help to enhance learners' performance in the "Materials in Civil Engineering" subject. It is important to note that although lectures are conducted in Bahasa Malaysia and that the medium of instruction is also in Bahasa Malaysia, it is imperative that learners refer to reference books which are mostly in English and gain access to key information in their academic subjects so as to become more competent in their studies.

The reading task for the 'wall poster' activity is thus purpose-driven. Learners treat the reading texts as vehicles for information where they extract relevant information, share and exchange key points from their reading before deciding which information to include in the posters. The process of gathering information is done through group work activities which allows for interaction and negotiation of meaning. The acquisition of content is facilitated by creating the conditions necessary for reading in class rather than teach the skills in isolation.

THE PROCEDURE INVOLVED

The various stages of work involved in the process of accomplishing the ‘wall poster’ activity are outlined below. Please refer to the task sheet and procedure for the task in Appendix 1.

Explanation on the objective of the project

As mentioned earlier, this activity is part of the enculturation task aimed at assisting learners in the process of initiation and assimilation into the academic culture of the civil engineering course. Exposure to the content area including the conceptual and linguistic data related to the subject is useful to enhance learners’ understanding of the subject matter in their civil engineering course.

The objectives of the project work are highlighted to the students namely to develop skills of team-work, initiative, independence and time- management. This is to enhance learners’ confidence and autonomy in the learning process. Thus, the training provided in the ECE programme not only aims towards the development of communicative skills in English but the underlying objective is also aimed towards the inculcation of attributes such as independence, initiative and confidence.

In preparing learners to be able to participate effectively in the academic and professional community of civil engineers, it is necessary that learners are given training within the larger educational context of human resource development to include the inculcation of personality traits such as confidence, independence and initiative. The need to go beyond linguistic skills can be seen in studies conducted by Anie Atan and Louis (1993) where they discovered that in addition to linguistic skills, initiative and independence are highly valued in industry. By making students aware of the objectives of the project, they will see the relevance of the exercise as part of the learning process.

Team spirit among students

In order to accomplish the task, learners are required to work in groups aiming towards common goals. This is to encourage independence and responsibility in learners to take charge of their own learning. To ensure group coordination and foster team spirit, learners are required to work closely under the leadership of a group coordinator. Group effort and team spirit are prerequisites for success in the completion of the task. A group mark of 10% will be awarded, hence, the need for team work, careful planning, group collaboration and cooperation, peer editing and exchange and sharing of information among learners.

Reading of simple texts

Before learners embark on the task of preparing the wall posters, they are exposed to simple texts, the content of which relates to the subject of 'Materials in Civil Engineering'. The aim is to familiarise learners with the conceptual and linguistic data on the topic before they are exposed to more challenging conceptual and linguistic data.

For this task, learners will be required to work in their groups, some to read Text A and some Text B. Based on their reading, learners are asked to make notes and exchange information. They could also be asked to prepare a semantic map showing the main ideas of the two texts.

Although the content of the simple texts might be of a general nature as compared to the key texts that learners have to refer to, the background information does provide learners with exposure to new knowledge they might not have or, they might build upon existing schema which they can take with them into their reading experience. This can help to facilitate content acquisition that can lead to increased comprehension and understanding when dealing with key texts related to their area of specialization.

Strategy to implement the task

The task is learner-centred with the teacher playing a more secondary role as a facilitator and manager of learning. Learners have to work out the action plan for completing the task based on group discussions and negotiations. They are given the freedom to decide on the topics and sub-topics they wish to work on. With a time duration of about two and a half weeks for this wall poster project, learners have to manage their time, draw up a work schedule, and decide on roles and responsibilities of each member of the group. The group will also determine how best they could present the information on the posters. Thus, through support and coordination among group members, learners independently take responsibility for the direction of their own learning.

Information gathering and content selection

Having discussed the strategy to complete the task, students will be sent to the library to gather information from relevant sources of information. Both primary and secondary sources of information are acceptable. Thus interviews with senior students and lecturers are encouraged as methods of collecting data apart from information gathered from key references, magazines, journals, etc.

Learners are also made aware of the fact that they have more authority than the language instructors in terms of content. The language teacher's role is made clear right from the beginning as a facilitator in the learning process, assisting the learners with any problems related to language and not assisting them on content matters. Further explanation on the role of the language instructor is provided later. For content validation, learners can seek clarification from their subject lecturers, professionals in the field, senior students and their peers in the civil engineering course. They might also refer to civil engineering texts as accurate sources of information.

After gathering the relevant data that they need, students are expected to share and discuss the findings of their work, finalise their plans and submit the written plans to the instructor. Learners are

encouraged to nominate their own categories of information although suggestions have been given by the lecturers.

The training provided in library skills, referencing work, information and data gathering, exchange and compilation of information can help learners to be more autonomous in taking responsibility for their own independent learning.

Preparation of Posters

Once the relevant information has been identified, learners will start working on the posters. Each group will be given a marking scheme. This will make learners aware of the mode of assessment so that they will have an idea of the criteria needed to fulfil the requirements of the posters. As such, learners will be more prepared in handling the tasks given as they can work towards achieving the targets they have set for themselves.

The criteria for assessment include adequacy and clarity of information, grammaticality and appropriacy of language, careful planning and good team work. To ensure the quality of the final product, peer editing, group responsibility and team effort are called for.

The 'Wall Poster' Presentation

Once the task of preparing the 'wall poster' is completed, the different groups will hang their posters on the walls of the classroom. Each group is asked to prepare a 'duty roster' so that at least one member of the group will be "on duty" to answer questions from the participants.

The learners are encouraged to ask questions. While the language instructor is going around assessing the learners' posters, learners are also asked to assess their friends' posters based on the criteria given. They are asked to give comments on positive aspects of the posters and other aspects which could be improved. What is important is that learners learn from one another as they go through the other groups' poster to enhance their understanding of the concepts

and principles related to the subject matter.

THE ROLE OF THE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS

In this activity, the role of the language instructor is that of a facilitator or manager of learning. The language instructor is responsible for creating the necessary conditions for learning to take place and managing activities in the classroom.

For classroom management, the instructor prepares a schedule for individual groups to meet him or her. At the same time, the other groups will be working in the library, discussing and exchanging information based on the data they have collected. Through consultation with the language instructors, learners are helped in the preparation of the written outline to be submitted to the language instructor. The language instructor will also help address language problems to facilitate learners' acquisition of technical content through language while assisting learners in the preparation of their draft posters.

It is however stressed to the learners that the language instructor is not a disseminator of knowledge on the content area of the learner's discipline. As mentioned earlier, the learners have more authority than the language instructor in terms of content. In the ECE programme, learners are not merely passive recipients of the learning process but they are active participants of learning. Learners are expected to take a much more active role in directing their own learning and to bear responsibility for the success of the learning task. This is part of the training given to make them more independent in the learning process.

PRINCIPLES AT WORK

Based on the earlier discussion, some of the principles at work in the wall poster activity can be summarised as follows:

- Learners are placed at the centre of activities with this student- centred approach.
- The language instructors play the role of facilitators and managers of learning, creating the necessary conditions for learning to take place.
- The wall poster activity provides the basis for an enculturation activity to assist the learner in the process of enculturation and assimilation into the academic culture of civil engineering.
- Learners have more authority in terms of content knowledge. The language instructors are not disseminators of information but their role is to address language problems that impede comprehension of content.
- The task is purpose-driven aimed towards enhancing learner's performance in the academic subject.
- Learners are trained in note-taking skills which will help towards meeting academic needs.
- Learners' motivation is increased as marks are awarded not only for relevant information but also for creativity in the presentation of information and visuals.
- Learners are encouraged to present facts accurately and concisely.
- Learners determine the topics/ subject areas they wish to work on and include in the assigned task.
- Learners invest their responsibility, initiative, time, energy, effort and creativity to ensure successful completion of the task.
- Learners discuss strategies to complete the task, to draw up an action plan and work schedule and to manage their own time.
- Learners cooperate and negotiate in activity groups through discussion and exchange of information. Group interaction and collaboration foster team spirit, learner independence and confidence.

- Learners who are more independent are helped towards greater autonomy through support from their more independent peers. Learners thus become less dependent on the teacher.
- Learners are trained to inculcate leadership qualities by becoming group leaders and coordinators.
- Learners are given the freedom to take charge of their own learning and set the direction of their own learning paths.
- Learners have more control in planning, organizing and implementation of the learning task.
- Learners are active participants in the teaching - learning process and not merely passive recipients of learning.

CONCLUSION

The 'wall poster' activity is aimed not only to enhance learners' understanding of concepts and principles related to the civil engineering subject. It is also designed to promote interest and creativity among students while immersing them into the content area of their academic subjects. Most importantly, the activity promotes team spirit, group coordination and learner independence and responsibility to ensure successful completion of the task. These are traits deemed important for learners to acquire towards becoming more independent and become effective team players.

REFERENCES

Abdul Halim Abdul Raof, Louis, AF, Masputeriah Hamzah and Khairi Izwan Abdullah. 1996. Relevance through integration and collaboration. Paper presented at the Malaysia International Conference on English Language Teaching

(MICELT'96), Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, Penang, 20-22 May 1996.

Anie Attan and Louis, AF 1993. Designing language profiles meet customer needs. Paper presented at the Regional Language Centre international seminar on "Language for Specific Purposes: Problems and Prospects", Singapore, 19-21 April 1993.

Khairi Izwan Abdullah, Louis, AF, Abdul Halim Abdul Raof and Masputeriah Hamzah 1995. Towards a framework for curriculum design in ESP. ESP Malaysia Journal, Vol.3 Issue 1

Masputeriah Hamzah, Abdul Halim Abdul Raof, Khairi Izwan Abdullah and Louis, A.F. 1995. Designing learning materials for civil engineering students. ESP Malaysia, Vol. 3 Issue 2

APPENDIX

Phase 1

Enculturation Activity

AIM

To assist students in their process of enculturation or assimilation into the culture of the academic and professional community of Civil Engineers, the task assigned will help students in discovering for themselves the scope of 'Materials in Civil Engineering' and its relation to the field of Civil Engineering.

TASK

Make notes on the topic 'Materials in Civil Engineering' based on the reading texts given and on information collected from other sources.

- a) Use the notes to prepare for a wall poster presentation on the same topic.
- b) Your posters should contain sufficient, relevant and self-explanatory information appropriate for someone new to the subject.
- c) Prepare a glossary list of at least 10 key terms in ‘Materials in Civil Engineering’.
Use the following format:

GLOSSARY – ENGINEERING SURVEYING

Word/Phrase	Bahasa Malaysia Equivalent
1 _____	_____
Sentence:	

Procedure for wall poster presentation

1. Work in groups of five or six. Appoint a group coordinator.
2. Study the requirements of the task and discuss your understanding of what you are required to do.
3. Plan out a strategy to complete the task. You could include the following in your discussion:
 - (a) categories of information which your group would like to collect
(e.g. main topics covered, types of assignments, etc.)

- (b) methods of collecting information
(e.g. reading, interviewing, etc.).
 - (c) distribution of duties among the group members
 - (d) the work schedule for completing the task
4. Collect information in the library and/or in your faculty resource room to get a general idea of the chosen topic. When you have collected the necessary information, meet to share the information with your group members.
 5. As a group, plan for and prepare the posters. All members of the group should be prepared to answer questions on the posters during the wall poster presentation session.
 6. On the presentation day, display your group's posters on the walls. Take turns to be stationed near your group's posters and to go round the class Excerpt 4