

Doing it Differently: This Time with Cardboard!

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In order to enliven what, at the time, seemed a rather routine Year 1 Semester 1 (Y1S1) English for Academic Purposes course for intended Engineering students, I decided to introduce a practical team activity that, it was hoped, would engage students' interest, challenge their ingenuity, build relationships, encourage elementary planning and organizational skills, demand some basic constructional abilities, and inspire the use of English on the basis of students having to communicate with each other out of life-like necessity. This "innovation" was all rather ad hoc on my part: urged on by a mild desperation, rather than pedagogical theory, to do something absorbing. Instinct leading where academic-style reasoning lagged behind, I sensed (as teachers often do) the activity would prove successful. Students had to design and assemble a river craft.



The idea was inspired by previous instances I had experienced where obvious practical need appeared to facilitate language learning; where language materialised out of necessity. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), for instance, a car repair shop I visited far too frequently employed workers from India (mechanical repairs and shop manager), the Philippines (car bodywork), Sri Lankans and Syrians (stores), and Egyptians (front office clerks). The language of communication was

necessarily in English. It was even more so since the customers' common language was English too. The practical need for all to express themselves and to understand each other had to be met. English filled that need. It was the language of the tyre-repair, of the oil-change, of the valve replacement, of the fixing the front wing, and of the account and payment with the customary wrangles and eventual discounts added in.

Such use of English as a lingua franca in the region was not, however, confined to vehicle repairs. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russians began to journey to Dubai and Abu Dhabi in large numbers. Their purpose was to buy jeans and other western clothes for shipment back to a freshly liberated, Russian market gluttonous for these symbols of emancipation from Soviet drudgery and shapeless trousers. Soon, the Cyrillic alphabet was used to advertise products sold across Pakistani or Yemeni counters, whose jovial and obliging proprietors mastered with startling alacrity the elementary language of overcharging their Muscovite mercantile-class purchasers on their first trip abroad. Deeply impressive, this achievement was driven by immediate practicalities, and quite possibly a taste for the fast buck (or Dirham).

On the strength of these visible instances of language growing to match an obvious requirement, I set my Y1S1 English for Academic Purposes class the "Model Boat Building Project", as it was grandly termed, certain that something useful would come out of it: as indeed it did. In deference to the environmentalism that I felt my students believed in despite their public tendencies to fling litter, the chosen challenge was to design and construct a vessel for removing rubbish from the local Suzhou canals. The emphasis was firstly on "impossible" ingenuity and imagination, brought back to practical reality by what a marine-engineering genius might realistically achieve with a cardboard

box, scissors and a length of twine. The students, organized into small teams, had to allocate tasks, collaborate over the design, plan the work, gather materials, keep a written account of progress, timetable their enterprise, and finally assemble their inventions, all using as much English as they could manage. In short, they had to improvise and think at an active and entirely relevant level. This means “relevant” as an engineering project for aspiring students of that field, and at a language level they could confidently address. English was, as far as reasonable, to be the medium for this: the working language of creativity, discussion, organization, recording, and practical cooperation. It was KSA and Dubai déjà vu all over again in a Suzhou classroom.

English was also the language of presentation and explanation. At the end, each group was obliged to show off their construction, to describe what it was supposed to do, how, and why, and to answer questions as arising. This, in conclusion, each group did with admirable enthusiasm and genuine pride, leaving me – and the University’s newspaper¹ – with the sense that something educationally positive had happened. Students built their boats (twin-hull, single hull, multiple extending arms with pincers, solar panels, conventional engines, bio-fuelled, shallow-draught, and so on), enjoyed doing it, and learned much from it. My instincts had been vindicated.

Moreover, student feedback was deeply encouraging: “When we got this assignment we were really surprised because we have never done anything like it and that was quite a challenge.” “We can sail our imagination like we sail our boat model.” And, “Through this presentation I became more confident about giving a speech in front of people. What’s more, questions from the audience made me think from other angles...”

Implications are several:

- *Students seem to respond well to tasks engaging their natural interests.*
- *Students willingly use language necessary to an interesting, pertinent task or activity; consolidating and practicing the language they know and extending it to meet reasonable fresh demands. As their interest is cap-*

tivated, so their tendency to employ language as required increases.

- *The project incorporated students’ own ideas, thus encouraging ownership and management of it. In this sense it was student centered and “negotiated” in that participants shaped their own activity.*
- *The project promoted inventiveness and a healthy, creative rivalry between groups.*
- *It integrated a range of skills and aptitudes necessary to students’ current and future studies.*
- *Students enjoyed a sense of achievement and success, which motivated them.*
- *The activity was cheap and required almost no extra resources other than waste material and simple craft items.*
- *It confirmed the value of teacher intuition; that innate sense of what is possible and what works.*
- *It showed the benefits of sensible flexibility in instructional approach and the rewards of prudent classroom modifications to a set syllabus. It provides support for the argument that teachers and students, when free to create rather than just to conform, can devise worthwhile and memorable activities that everyone can enjoy and gain from. A next step, then, might be to research into the measurable language outcomes from this kind of creative approach.*



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¹ A description of the activity appeared under the title ‘Learning English is fun!’ in Issue 8 December 2010 of *The Exchange*, Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University’s internal newspaper.