Task negotiation to overcome the limitations and the dislike of the textbook

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Abstract

Lack of motivation, inattention, boredom, noise, etc., are some of the many problems that teachers in general complain about. We often blame the students' lack of interest and manners when it is impossible to reconduct a group, no matter how much time we devote to lesson planning or to polish our relationship with the students. The following study highlights textbook selection and students' learning style as factors which may lead to a bad learning environment if not dealt with properly. According to the results reached, task negotiation appears to be a valid solution when students show a dislike for the textbook and, besides, it allows teachers to cater for different learning styles.

   Key Words: Task negotiation, learning styles, self-assessment

Resumen

La falta de motivación o de atención, aburrimiento, ruido, etc., son algunos de los muchos problemas de los que los profesores en general se quejan. A menudo se echa la culpa a la falta de interés o de modales de los alumnos cuando nos es imposible reconducir un grupo, por mucho tiempo que se dedique a planificar clases o a pulir la relación con los alumnos. El siguiente estudio pone de relieve la selección del libro de texto y el estilo de aprendizaje de los alumnos como factores que pueden contribuir a crear un ambiente de aprendizaje malo si no se manejan adecuadamente. A juzgar por los resultados obtenidos, la negociación de las tareas parece ser una solución válida cuando a los alumnos no les gusta el libro de texto y, además, permite a los profesores atender a diferentes estilos de aprendizaje.

   Palabras clave: Negociación de tareas, estilos de aprendizaje, auto-evaluación

1. Initial reflection

Most foreign language teachers have struggled at some point with teaching materials in order to adapt these to different groups of learners. Difficulties may arise when textbooks are chosen by the school or centre of studies forgetting that not only every group of students is different but that teachers have their preferences too. While the decision of which textbook to use is shared in most centres, it is not usually the case in private language schools or language services' companies that are hired to teach extracurricular classes. Budget restrictions or merely editorial convenience make these companies forget about teachers' counsel and present them with a textbook that they must use before even meeting the students for the first time.

2. Problem identification

2.1 The context

I taught English as an extracurricular activity to students of secondary education (ESO) in a private school in Madrid during the academic year 2007-2008. The mother tongue of all the learners was Spanish. Each group

44

Task negotiation to overcome the limitations and the dislike of the textbook
Marina Díaz Cristóbal   *Encuentro 17,* 2007, pp. 44-51

met twice a week for 55 minute sessions. Specifically, the group that worried me the most was integrated by fourteen students (9 girls/ 5 boys) of 1st and 2nd year of ESO (12-14 years old) who attended the class to improve their English. The classes took place from 2 to 3 p.m. after lunch and before their afternoon curricular lessons. This schedule was problematic in itself because students were not given time to rest in between their morning and afternoon classes. Besides, the previous teacher, who had been teaching these students for some years, quitted the classes at the beginning of the course leaving me with a textbook that he had chosen. In many aspects I found the textbook non-appropriate for my students' level of English and for their age. Everything indicated that my students felt the same way due to their obvious lack of motivation and inattention when working with it.

2.2 Hypothesis

Planning and preparation on my part was rather exhaustive so I discarded this factor as a possible cause of my students' lack of interest. The schedule was not very convenient either and caused anxiety and lack of concentration but, unluckily, there was nothing I could do to change that. Therefore, I decided to deal with the problem of the textbook. The dislike of the textbook appeared to be generalised because students usually misbehaved and complained when they were told to work with it. It is relevant to state here that the textbook was edited in 2007 and was aimed at students of ESO. However, the visual materials included (photographs, cartoons, drawings, etc.) were too childish. Likewise, the texts were non-authentic and, in my opinion, they were too easy for the learners' current level. My initial hypothesis was that the textbook was hindering my students' progress to a great extent and it was not contributing to the creation of a learning friendly atmosphere in the classroom. Students got easily distracted when working with their textbook and the class was noisy because many students were off-task. This hampered their progress significantly.

I wanted to change how my students felt about the textbook by making them active participants in the process. I presumed that, if they were guided to consider the textbook as a tool which they could reinvent and choose from, their interest would increase and, in the long term, it would result in a better behaviour and a more appropriate learning atmosphere for all sorts of activities. Negotiating the tasks could contribute to engage students in their own learning, taking into account their specific learning style as well.

3. Plan of action

I designed a detailed chronogram for a month (January 9th to February 11th 2008). During this time I had to cover two units and reach the objectives set in the syllabus at the beginning of the course. The chronogram was elaborated to organise the actions and to remember the necessary planning to do for every class (photocopies, materials preparation…etc.) For the observation prior to and during the research I used the following techniques:

- Teacher's diary: I took notes about the students' behaviour, their acceptance and commitment to do the tasks as well as other general impressions. However, these notes were rather sketchy so I decided to use other techniques as well.

- Observation sheet: An observation sheet adapted from Lasagabaster and Sierra (2004: 146) which I filled in after every class with information on both the students and myself.

- Questionnaire 1: short questionnaire in Spanish that I designed to confirm whether the assumed dislike of the textbook was generalised. It was anonymous to guarantee honest responses.

- Questionnaire 2: (annex 1) devised to get an idea of the students' intelligence type and learning style following Gardner's multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, 1983).

- Final interview and questionnaire 3: to assess the effectiveness of the measures taken and assess their improvement since the negotiation of tasks started. The interviews were rather casual and held in private.

4. The results

The answers to questionnaire 1 confirmed my initial presupposition. Textbook activities were given the lowest grade by 50% of the students, 40% gave them 5 points and only one student gave them 10 points. It also showed that students preferred amusing tasks whereas none listed working with the textbook as their favourite. Eleven students (78.5 %) chose the textbook as the material they liked the least. When asked about the textbook's level of difficulty, 50% of the class rated the textbook between very easy and easy and another 50% considered it to be their level. None rated it as difficult or very difficult. More illuminating is that 64.2% considered that it was very boring or just boring whereas only 28.5% thought it was fine. Only one student was of the opinion that the book was entertaining. On the light of these results I decoded that most students liked the varied activities that we were doing in class and half of the class thought that the book was appropriate to their level. This challenged my first assumption that the book was too easy for the majority of my students and revealed that the main problem was that they found it boring. I therefore concluded that, being my class an extracurricular activity for them, and taking into account the activities that were their favourite, there was an identification of my class with time to have fun whereas they associated the textbook with boredom and routine.

To test this once more, I showed the class four different reading exercises. Two of them were extracted from another textbook used for teenagers and the other two were extracted from the last units of their own textbook. They were asked to tick the reading exercise that they would select to do if they could choose one. Again, the results confirmed that students did not find their textbook appealing. Eleven students picked the activities from the other textbook even though these were longer which indicates that the learners were not afraid of challenging activities as long as they were motivating.

The results to questionnaire 2 were equally enlightening as figure 1 represents:

Figure 1
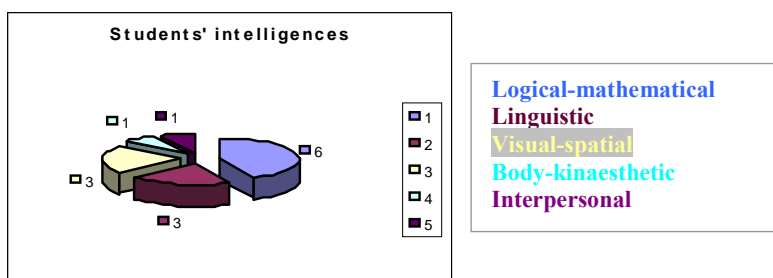
All the male students in the class plus one female student had a more developed logical-mathematical intelligence and most showed a high proportion of the interpersonal type as well. The abundance of logical-mathematical learners in the class concerned me as I do not have much of this kind of intelligence myself (according to my own results on a test that I took online[1]). I noticed that I was not catering for the diversity extant in my class as my activities and explanations were mostly directed to visual and linguistic students but not that much to logical or kinaesthetic learners.

As the data shed light on the problematic and illustrated that the textbook was a disturbing factor in the classroom, I started to negotiate the tasks in the textbook with my students. I gave them different options to choose from taking into account their learning styles, their interests and the kind of activities that they liked the most. I shared the graphs resulting from the study of questionnaire 1 with the class to briefly comment the results. They were all interested in finding out which activities had been rated highest and they acted naturally when I told them that the textbook activities were rated the lowest. I showed my concern about the fact that they disliked it so much and proposed them to find the way to work through it together as that was the material that their parents had paid for and I was compelled to use. I also gave them the results of the intelligences' test and a few tips for their learning style. I encouraged them to consider these to improve their learning experience but also to work on the less developed sides of their intelligence. Then, I explained them the plan to follow during the next weeks. At the beginning of each unit we would devote some time to identify the textbook activities that they found unhelpful or uninteresting as well as those that they liked. I committed myself to take their opinion into account and to discard the tasks that the majority regarded as unhelpful. Apart from games, contests, role-plays and other activities that I usually planned for the class they would be asked to work on an activity of their choice from the textbook in every class. I would adapt certain activities to make them more appealing or we would adapt the activities together. Their initial reaction was good and they committed themselves to give it a try.

According to the chronogram I planned seven classes. As a general rule I gave them three options to choose from bearing in mind the different learning styles. The following will serve as an instance of the kind of tasks that they were asked to do:

CHOOSE ONE OPTION:
    (After the introduction of vocabulary related to TV, phrases to express opinion and agreement and adjectives to qualify TV programmes according to the didactic unit "Television")
a) You are a script writer: write a dialogue for a TV series that you like. This task suited linguistic students mainly (adapted from a textbook activity).
b) You are a researcher: Conduct a survey to find about the TV habits of your classmates. Plan the survey, poll the class and draw conclusions to present to the class. This task suits logical-mathematical learners as well as kinaesthetic learners because they need to stand up and ask the others. Visual learners could find it appealing as well because they have to devise graphics to show to the rest of the class (activity from the textbook).
c) You work for an advertising company: Write the text for an advertisement to perform in class (adapted from a textbook activity).

In the previous example every task had a stage for individual or group work in which students worked on their own (with the teachers' guidance) and a phase for everybody in the class to participate or enjoy the other's work. I accounted for the abundance of interpersonal learners in my class and thus chose activities that could be carried out in groups and performed later on. In the end we had time enough to cover two units of the syllabus as I had planned, carrying out textbook activities and a variety of other tasks.

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[1] See www.bgfl.org for a thoroughly designed multiple intelligences' test online.

47

Task negotiation to overcome the limitations and the dislike of the textbook
Marina Díaz Cristóbal   *Encuentro 17,* 2007, pp. 44-51

I also wanted to make them responsible for their learning and self-assess their own work so I introduced a tool that I called "the passport" which resembled in some ways the Council of Europe's portfolio (CEFR[2], 2001). Within it, there was a section called "traveller's diary" where students could indicate their thoughts and further impressions of the day. The passport was used systematically acting as a means of self-assessment, to test the efficiency of the measures taken and as a tool to increase motivation. I collected a few passports every day to be "inspected by customs" so as to monitor the learners' task choices. The class grasped the value of this tool soon and they filled it in detail. At the same time, they found the process amusing, particularly when they were called to hand it out to "customs" (the teacher).

4. Observation

After comparing the observation sheets and taking into account my general impressions and also the diary's notes, I could conclude that the problematic situation described above had improved. The class in general progressed and a better classroom atmosphere for learning was created. The areas in which I appreciated a more noticeable enhancement were:

- *Students off-task*: Before the negotiation of tasks I used to be the one who controlled time and noise in class and had to interrupt students' interventions or explanations many times. After the research period I did not have to control the noise in the classroom as much as before and students were almost always concentrated on their tasks. The students seemed to have gained in maturity and also in motivation.

- *Differences between teacher's and learners' intelligences*: The negotiation of tasks taking into account their learning styles was successful. I ended up knowing my students better and managed to engage some students who were distracted mainly because I was not directing my classes to their specific learning styles. I tended to over plan lessons and initially thought that it was not the cause of the problematic situation but, in fact, something in my planning was missing. I worked hard during the research period in order to adapt some activities of the textbook to suit my students' learning styles and preferences. Surprisingly enough I felt that the students appreciated my efforts and some took a special interest answering back with the same attitude.

- *Dislike of the textbook:* During the chat with my students at the beginning of the research I learnt that most of them were feeling the same way as me in relation to the textbook and the demotivation issue. It was comforting and relieving for both parts to talk about it openly in class. As the negotiation of tasks advanced, the students seemed to trust the teacher more and felt more confident to express their point of view or give ideas on how to improve certain things. They gave the textbook a second opportunity and, even though some still considered it boring by the end of the study, they complained less and accepted it as a tool that could also entail entertainment and fun.

- *Self-assessment:* The "passport" made students analyse their own learning as well as the tasks. However, I noticed that they always expressed what they had learnt in terms of vocabulary or grammar. I realised that I was not always explaining the tasks' objectives specifically and that the learners needed to know them. Thus, I started to write an outline on the board at the beginning of the class specifying the objectives of the tasks to do. It would be interesting to further study whether this measure is effective and the learners are able to assess their work and monitor their progress more effectively when they have a clear idea of the objectives to be met.

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[2] *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment.*

The comments that they made in the final interviews were useful and proved that the actions taken had improved the initial problem. From what the students told me I could decode that:

- They associated the textbook with grammar and with school time whereas they wanted to relax and have fun in my class.
- Some of them considered the textbook routinary and loved when I planned original activities and games.
- Most of them found "the passport" useful to remember the activities that they had done in each unit and to think about what they had learnt.
- They felt at ease in the classroom in general and some of them admitted to enjoy group activities more because they knew other people in the class better after this period.

The answers to questionnaire 3 confirmed that the actions taken were overall successful. Twelve students considered that the situation had improved since we started to work together to make the book more appealing. They were all optimistic and ascertained that they spoke in Spanish "a little less" (13 students). Again, the vast majority liked to negotiate the tasks and as a consequence found the textbook less boring. Some commented that they were able to remember the activities that they had done more vividly than before thanks to the passport.

5. Reflection

It can be said that the improvement in students´ commitment during the research period was great. The first days that we negotiated the tasks many students felt insecure and ended up choosing the task that other friends selected. Progressively, they felt more confident to deviate from what their closest friends chose and the learning atmosphere was better because students from different groups of friends were working together at times and finding out about each other. I also noticed that I was not interrupted as much as before and I did not have to interrupt the class so often because students were off task. The most talkative students were not so distracted and proved to be a great asset for the classroom when they participated because of their sense of humour.

During the research I realised that I was not counting on my students nor sharing the responsibility to make the class work with them. I thought that exteriorizing my worries would make me lose authority in front of the students and I was therefore striving to change how they felt about an issue without even telling them. I have understood that counting on the students and allowing them to manage their own work is highly beneficial for their learning and for their personal development as well.

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49

Task negotiation to overcome the limitations and the dislike of the textbook
Marina Diaz Cristóbal   *Encuentro 17,* 2007, pp. 44-51

QUESTIONNAIRE 2

WHAT KIND OF LEARNER AM I?	☺ Very much!	😐 A little	☹ No way!
1- I am good at painting/puzzle building/craftworks			
2- I love talking and explaining my opinions to others			
3- I like working with numbers, calculators and computers			
4- I become nervous if I am sited a long time, I prefer moving			
5- I play at least one musical instrument well			
6- I like working in groups in class			
7- I think a lot about myself, my dreams, the future…etc.			
8- I like it when teachers use videos, images and maps in class.			
9- I enjoy listening to people: in class, debates on TV, my parents…etc.			
10- I like doing experiments			
11- I am very good at one sport at least			
12- I remember song lyrics easily			
13- It is easy for me to recognise the feelings and moods of other people			
14- I know very well my strengths and weaknesses.			
15- When I study, I draw or make diagrams to understand better.			
16- I am good at convincing others of my point of view in a polite way			
17- I am very curious about the world and always make questions: why…?			
18- I dance well and have good physical coordination (Aerobics, for example)			
19- I sing a lot (alone or in group) and enjoy doing it			
20- In my group of friends, I am the person who solves problems many times			
21- I usually prefer to work alone than in a group			
22- I paint or draw to express my moods and feelings			
23- I memorize dates and names easily			
24- When I was a child, I liked building blocks a lot			
25- I prefer a biology class at the laboratory than watching a movie on biology.			
26 - I like listening to music when I study or do my homework			
27 - In my group of friends and in my family I am a patient person and try to understand everybody.			
28 – I do not like to speak in class, even if I know the answer.			
29 – I like watching movies, it's one of my hobbies.			
30 – When I study, I repeat the lesson aloud or tell it to somebody.			
31 – I like chess or strategy games			
32- I like acting and theatre activities in class			
33- Sometimes I make little songs to remember things			
34 – I have many friends everywhere and have different groups.			
35 – I think I am original in some aspects			

50

Task negotiation to overcome the limitations and the dislike of the textbook
Marina Diaz Cristóbal   *Encuentro 17,* 2007, pp. 44-51

Answer sheet						
I	**II**	**III**	**IV**	**V**	**VI**	**VII**
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
8	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**
15	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**	**20**	**21**
22	**23**	**24**	**25**	**26**	**27**	**28**
29	**30**	**31**	**32**	**33**	**34**	**35**
Total	**total**	**total**	**total**	**Total**	**total**	**total**

2 points - ☺   1 point   - 😐   0 points - ☹

Majority in I: YOU ARE VISUAL-SPATIAL INTELLIGENT

Majority in II: YOU ARE LINGUISTIC INTELLIGENT

Majority in III: YOU ARE LOGICAL-MATHEMATICAL INTELLIGENT

Majority in IV: YOU ARE BODY-KINESTHETIC INTELLIGENT

Majority in V: YOU ARE MUSIC-RYTHMIC INTELLIGENT

Majority in VI: YOU ARE PEOPLE INTELLIGENT

Majority in VII: YOU ARE SELF INTELLIGENT

MIXTURE OF MORE THAN ONE TYPE IS ALSO POSSIBLE!!