PASAA
Vol. 25
December 1995

Negotiating to Learn: A Beginning

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Abstract

This Article describes a teacher/research project carried out at a middle school in Springfield, Virginia, where the author (at that time the school's reading resource teacher) and an ESL teacher set out to answer the question What sort of theoretical framework should we use to best facilitate our ESL students' language and literacy development? This project and exploration led to the development of what the author refers to as a "negotiated" curriculum, in which students learned to negotiate and develop their English curriculum in conjunction with their teachers. During study, the students set their own goals, solved their problems, and developed their ideas and knowledge in collaboration with others.

Dear Lena and Agathe,

Hi! How are you? I'm fine. I'm so sad that we have to change journal partners. I hoped that we could be together this quarter, too. Today I read a book called "Shabanu." It was strange and also diskosting. In Pakistan, they don't shower until it is summer. It was also strange to marry a man I ever, never seen. In my age! No way.

The whole story about first chapter was about Paulan, Shabanu's sister's marriage. I would rather die that living with a boy that I don't like and worst thing is I always have to obey him. It is not fair. I want to do what ever I like to do and what I think it is right to do it. Do you like to be ladylike? I sort of don't. But I listen to somebody that I think what he/she is telling is right and fun. I don't like to obey though all the time. Do you?

Bye,

Sung

In listening to the voice of 13 year old Sung, I am reminded of her earlier responses and choices in books. Sung used to read and respond to text in a different way. She chose easy mysteries and responded to her reading *differently*; that is, she read to carry away information (Rosenblatt 1938). Like many of her English as a Second Language (ESL) classmates, Sung used to be concerned with retelling the events in the texts she read. She was anxious about finding the "right answer" — the answer the teacher wanted. Now, as her journal entry illustrates, she "lives through" her reading by responding to literary texts with her thoughts and feelings; or using Rosenblatt's term, she is reading *aesthetically*. How did this change come about?

It started with a question, a question Sung's teacher asked of me: "What sort of theoretical framework should I use in my ESL classroom to best facilitate student's language and literacy development?" Her need to answer this question and to find "a better way" to teach ESL gave birth to our conversations and explorations into how to best facilitate the language learning of her ESL students. What follows is the *loom* that we found useful as we thought about classroom practice and began to design the curriculum. We have chosen to use to word *loom* instead of the word *framework* because *framework* implies that the possibilities for developing a product or process are fixed. Weaving on a loom connotes many possibilities regarding the process as well as the finished product.

Our loom

Language and literacy are intricate and multidimensional where a heteroglot of languages both spoken and written are needed to describe each event. Different social languages create and express different realities. These languages also provide different patterns for customary ways of thinking and perceiving. Due to this complexity, we needed to create an ESL classroom that would allow for the differences as well as foster each student's English language and literacy growth and capitalize on the social nature of language and literacy learning.

Our beliefs about language learning continued to evolve throughout the year. Researchers, such as Atwell (1991); Barnes (1976); Bleich (1988); Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984); Jaggar and Smith-Burke (1985); Mayher (1990); Rosenblatt (1938); Rodby (1992) and Smith (1978), informed our practice. The following beliefs were reflected in our collaboration and our ever-evolving ESL curriculum: 1) language is best learned when learners are responsible for their own learning by setting the goals, solving the problems, and developing their skills; 2) language is best learned when it is whole and natural; 3) language learning is by nature constructive and creative; 4) language is best learned in social and collaborative contexts; and 5) language learning needs to be meaningful and experience-based.

The term "negotiated," borrowed from Garthe Boomer (1992), became the core for our thinking. This term means that learners set their own goals, solve their problems, and develop their ideas and knowledge in collaboration with others. Thus, our ESL students learned to negotiate and develop their English language curriculum along with us. This curriculum was always in process and evolving. As teachers we served as participants, as facilitators, and, most importantly, as learners. The students served in the same roles and, as Dong, a student, pointed out in one of his self-assessments. "Everyone in here is a teacher and I can learn from everyone."

Background

Sung and her classmates began their ESL learning in a public middle-school in the United States (at the ages of 12 and 13) with established ideas about what schooling should be — ideas based on their previous experiences being students in the countries of their birth. These students came from Korea, Pakistan, Iran, Norway, Chile, Peru, El Salvador, Indonesia, Thailand, China, and Italy and spoke as many languages. Most spoke very little English. The *banking system* of learning was the prominent mode of teaching in the schools that the students had attended. These students expected to be given a set of curriculum to be learned where they memorized decontextualized information and regurgitated it on tests and

worksheets. Thus, our classroom practice and our desire for "negotiation" and "collaboration" were at odds with our students' ways of knowing and being in school. They entered a context where, in addition to learning to read, write, speak, and listen in a second language they needed to learn new ways of being and acting in school. For example, most students were used to a much more hierarchical relationship between students and teachers. In American classrooms, this hierarchy is much less pronounced, and in our "negotiated" classrooms, even less so. Consequently, the students needed to adjust to the fundamentally new concept of school as a place which valued them as producers and creators of knowledge and encouraged their active participation in deciding what was to be learned and how to go about that learning. They would no longer be passive vessels for an institution's curriculum.

Besides our students learning new ways of perceiving and being in school, we were also learning to think about teaching and learning in ESL classrooms in a different way. The year before, my colleague used workbooks that focused on vocabulary and grammar drills to teach students to read, write, speak, and listen in English. Students filled in answers to questions about reading passages and practiced writing based on grammar skills that were being stressed in the workbook. The ESL room was arranged in straight rows, which was the practice in this middle-school but not conducive to dialogue and language learning. So the changes that Sung's teacher was now making were in opposition to what she knew about being a teacher and teaching ESL students. She had to learn new customary ways of teaching, and I was the one familiar and comfortable with the theoretical loom that was to inform our classroom practice. Thus, I would make suggestions about directions to take, share research and professional literature, and my colleague, skeptical all the time, would question my thinking. While questioning me, she took risks and implemented the ideas that we developed, and we grew and changed together.

Our classroom practice

Our classroom practice began with some institutional parameters. First, we would have the ESL beginners for first and second periods and the students who had been in ESL for one year would join the beginners for second period and then stay for third period. These periods lasted for 48 minutes. Within these arbitrary time constraints, we wanted to provide the students with many opportunities to use language — the spoken language as well as the written language. Initially, we designated first and third periods for writing and collaborating and second period for reading and collaborating. For homework, we decided that students would read texts of their own choice and respond to those texts in journals. Due to our time constraints and our desire that students receive constant feedback on their reading and writing, we decided to have the students write in their journals about their reading with a partner. Because we believed that language is best learned in social contexts, we wanted our students to have many opportunities to work in collaboration with others. Providing students with time for reflecting on what they have achieved, assessing where they needed to go and keeping records of their learning, were also part of our initial parameters. Finally, we knew that we had to create a learning context where students would see many possibilities for English language use and be immersed in using English to transact with written as well as spoken text.

Our initial plans included giving students experiences and ideas about how to transact with texts, media, language, so they could gain the knowledge and experiences they would need to draw from when negotiating their own curriculum. (As will be shown later, our initial assumptions about what the students needed did not always match their real needs. In effect, we were falling into the tendency — common among educators of not taking into account how much students can already do and know before we begin working with them.) During the first month of school, first and third periods were designated as the times for writing process. Second period was initially used for helping students learn to work in collaboration with others and then for a picture book unit. Once students began writing picture books, the writing time became second period and reading was moved to first and third periods. The initial general requirements for the students included: 1)

keeping daily reading records of all books read; 2) keeping daily records of each day's writing in a writing folder; 3) keeping daily individual plans for classwork and homework; 4) reading and responding in journals four nights a week; and 5) reflecting on their English learning by actively participating in self-assessment. The following will provide a more detailed account of our teaching/learning and our students' learning.

Collaboration

Based on our past experiences with middle-school students, especially ESL students, we decided to begin the year by helping the students learn to collaborate. Falsely believing that students could not collaborate to learn without our first teaching them how to do so, we designed some lessons to teach collaboration, which were the central focus of the first three weeks of school, during second period. In groups of three or four, the students used language to create and perform dramas about what makes a group work well together and what makes a group not work well together. Then, after much discussion, they generated lists of ideas for *What Makes Groups Work* and *What Keeps Groups From Working* and shared these lists with the class. We concluded this transaction on how to collaborate with others by having the students develop a poster showing what their group had learned about collaborating to learn in groups.

From this superficial beginning, we moved towards more academic pursuits. Over the course of the program, we learned that our students already knew what made groups work and what did not; what they did not know and what we did not help them understand at the time, was how to learn and collaborate with people that are different from themselves. From the beginning, the students formed alliances with other students along ethnic lines. Although placed in groups with members of other ethnic groups, they tended to sabotage these groups as it was the underground ethnic peer groups that fundamentally determined students' behavior in class. Thus, the Hispanic boys and one Hispanic girl chose to do nothing in their groups. The pressure from their underground group kept any group that we put these students in from working. In addition, this seemed to be to spite the Korean boys, who were only concerned with grades and as a group refused to cooperate with any student who was not male and Korean. We were continually helping the students to assess their own roles (positive or negative) in a group and to help them create groups that worked. For example, the following is taken from a self-assessment:

> What did I do yesterday?
>
> I listened to other group's story and I tried to give them interesting ideas. I asked some questions. I did some body (eye) talking. I shouldn't do that! But, I understanded the story and I gave them some ideas, I guess.
>
> What do I need to do to help the group?
>
> I think I have to think a lot and give a lot of ideas. Also I have to ask questions apart that I don't understand and make sure that I understand the story.

The students were allowed to select their own groups and negotiate how groups were to be formed. In spite of the difficulties we encountered, our belief in and dedication to learning as a collaborative activity (based on assumptions about the social nature of learning) kept us from abandoning our approach, arranging the room in straight rows, and returning to the traditional canon. As the year progressed, all of us learned more each day about working and learning together. To our surprise and relief, in their quarterly self-evaluation notes, many of the students in response to the question, *What is your best learning experience this quarter?* answered, "Learning to work in groups." Most of our students, although not all, were beginning to understand the richness that dialogue with others brings to their learning and that, without this dialogue, their learning could be narrow and incomplete.

Writing

While our students were working on collaboration during second period, we devoted first and third periods to the writing process (Atwell 1991, 1987; Graves 1983). We began by having the students develop lists of possible writing topics, sharing their lists and adding to the lists, and then choosing an initial topic about which to write. They chose their own topics, forms, and content. The

students had time to draft, dialogue with their peers about their writing, revise, dialogue some more, revise, and eventually edit. We wanted to allow them the opportunity to set their goal for writing, solve their problems, and develop their own skills.

Jennifer, who had just arrived in the United States and spoke very little English, chose to write her first draft about Korean food:

> Eat Korean food
> Cook food
> Kimchi I eat
> I like eat Korean food
> Eat food friends

She struggled with her text, dialoging with her peers and us until she had a form that she was proud to share:

> My favorite food is Korean food. I like to cook Korean food and to eat it with my family and friends. In Korea, my mother and I would cook Korean food for our families and friends. My favorite foods are Kim-chi and rice. We eat this food a lot in my family.

This process was very difficult for the beginners because their peers, whom they relied upon for help and feedback, were just learning English. We found ourselves as teachers needing to take a much larger role in dialoging with and helping the individual writers. Eventually, writing was moved to second period so that the beginning English writers would have models for writing and peers with whom they could collaborate. In this way, they did not depend as much on the teachers and thus on seeing such a limited view of the possibilities for writing and for negotiating their writing curriculum.

On the other hand, the third period writers could and did collaborate and help each other with their writing. They experimented with mysteries, adventure stories, narratives, poetry, and non-fiction. To our abhorrence, the boys from different parts of Asia became fixated on the themes from Thai and Korean adventure comic books. In retrospect, we were privileging our definitions of texts over theirs. We kept insisting that they write other genres, but the boys kept returning to these story lines.

At first, discussing, revising, and working on a piece of writing was alien to these students. Over time, they came to rely on their friends for ideas and insights into their writing and realize how crucial revision is to most texts. Conferring at times became problematic for us because the storylines for the adventure comic-strips never made sense to our Western idea of story. These texts were almost impossible for us as teachers, but other students could help the boys make their stories more easily comprehensible. After many revisions, these texts were shared and enjoyed by the students in the class, if not enjoyed by the teachers.

And finally, Jack wrote in response to the question: *What's the most important or useful thing you've learned as a writer in the first quarter?*

> I learned that my story got better each time I thougt about it. I changed it many time. It got better and my friends like it much, too. Writing gets better when I asked my friends and get there ideas. It's easier to write with friends giving ideas and not by self.

Reading

During this time the students read many texts that gave them more models and insights into writing. Their homework each night was to read and then respond in their journals. They chose a partner to correspond with and journals were traded every other day. The only directions we gave students was for them to write their thoughts and feelings about the texts they were reading. Periodically the students would share their entries with the class and we would collect and read the journals on Friday.

We saw many benefits from this homework arrangement. The students were always writing for an audience. And the audience demanded that the writing make sense as Sung's entry demonstrates (page 91, above). The students had an opportunity to use the English that they were reading, and by writing about their texts, they could make these texts make sense for themselves. They also began to read and respond differently to text — both published and peer text. Rather than just retelling the events in the texts, they were beginning to ask questions as they read and to respond

to texts with their thoughts and feelings. Through the sharing, the partners ended up reading each others' books, and this dialogue about books entered the classroom curriculum.

Were we negotiating or controlling? or why did we do this?

As teachers we decided that the students needed to see many possibilities for how to read, write, and use oral language in order to better negotiate and develop their reading/writing curriculum. Therefore, after lessons on collaboration, we began a picture book unit during second period. We believed that the students needed models and ideas for developing their reading units and we chose picture books because they were books that both levels of ESL students could help each other read. We also felt that the wonderfully rich descriptive language in the books would enhance all the students' English language learning. (Notice the *we* — the teachers.) The students were given a week to read and respond to a variety of picture books with their group. They were then asked to pick one of the books and bring it to life through drama, readers' theater, or puppetry.

In watching our students' first attempts at bringing books to life, and knowing that we would encourage them to use different types of drama in response to text, we felt it necessary to spend a few days giving our students an opportunity to develop guidelines and assess what makes a good drama (Johnston 1987). Some of the guidelines they developed were: "Body language — move your body to show your feelings"; " Pretend to be the characters"; "Talk loud, so everybody can hear"; "Have all the materials ready"; and, "Practice before you give the drama."

We then returned to the picture book unit and had the students in their groups explore and develop guidelines for what makes a good picture book. Some of their ideas included: "Draw pictures that show feelings and tempers"; "Make the pictures full of action"; "Make pictures easy for the audience to understand"; "Make illustrations that fit the story"; "Repeat the words or pictures"; "Use interesting words and a rich vocabulary." Using these guidelines, the students were then asked to write and make group picture books that would be shared at the nearby elementary school. Our purpose here, in having the students write group books, was for each individual student to see many more possibilities for their own writing and learn more about writing English through collaboration with each other.

The students argued, laughed, and sometimes quietly discussed every decision they made — topic, characters, action, what the pictures should look like, the revisions. At one point the class decided that they wanted a whole-class conference for each group story. The guidelines that they developed for what makes a good picture book were used in these conferences. This took much time, but the groups received the feedback they felt they needed to revise and improve their books.

After making drafts of each page of their picture book, sharing, revising, and editing, the groups decided that they were ready to meet with us, their teachers, for a final editing. We taught many mini-lessons during this editing process lessons on possessives in English, English plurals, the writing of past tense verbs, just to name a few.

The books were cute, some cuter than others. The students did learn to read, write, and speak more English. But as we watched and reflected upon our students' learning during the rest of the year, we noticed that there was very little carry-over from this unit into the writing and reading of texts at these adolescents' interest level. We wanted the students to fit our model, and through our control and our decisions about what students needed, we seemed to have limited the richness of the language environment.

It gets a little better

Once the students began writing and making picture books during second period, we moved the reading time to first and third periods. (Notice how the *we*, referring to teachers, keeps reappearing.) We decided to spend more time helping students see more ways that they could respond to text before giving them the total freedom to weave their own reading units. (Again, the control.) Both first and third periods had a choice in the selection of the books that their class would read and respond to as a group. (It gets better.) We had class sets of a few titles of books. First

period chose *The Drinking Gourd* and third period chose *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. Art, various forms of drama and role playing, character interviews, class and group discussions where students brought their own questions to the discussions, research, and journals were used to help students respond to, create, and explore the possible meanings in the texts. Besides weaving general class agreements as to the meanings of the texts, individual students deepened and created their own meanings of the texts.

These group readings led some third period students to do research on the size of the atomic bomb, the damage the bomb caused, and on World War II. They then shared their findings with the class. Other students showed the class how to make paper cranes and told us that in their countries the making of paper cranes is supposed to bring good luck. The discussions sent us down many different paths as we explored the thoughts and feelings of the characters within the context of the times and then explored our feelings, thoughts, and questions in response to the texts. Efferent responses to literature became less and less frequent as students began to "live through" their reading. Here Sung captures the changes our students began making in their responses to literature:

> In the 7 Chap., Sadako's mother made her favorite food. It was expensive, but she couldn't eat because she was too weak. I felt so sad when Sadako hugged her mom and cried. I felt angy when Mr. Sazaki said Sadako became like a lady. The truth was, Sadako was too weak to play around.
>
> I couldn't understand why she felt better when we was dieing. I admire her spirit not to be afraid of death. I want to be like her.

and in response to informational texts:

> ... Today, I read 5th grade S.S. book again. I'm going to keep up until I really knowing about America history. I read chap. 4. It was about French and Dutch settlers. They came to America to find route to Asia, gold, fish, furs, and land. They did find all except gold and route to Asia.
>
> I felt so stupid about them. They should just cross the Pacific Ocean. If I were the settlers, I would go through the North America and leave some people on North America and go to another side of the land. I don't understand of the people at that time was so uneducatible. But I admire Marco Polo, though...

So far my colleague had been "going along with me." She began to ask crucial and important questions: "How do we know what the students learned? We didn't pre-teach any vocabulary. How do we know that they know the meanings of words?" In response to these questions, at the conclusion of these respective units, we asked the students 1) to write about what they learned and 2) to write down the English words that they learned and now know from their readings of these texts. The following comes from Daniella, a first year ESL student:

> I learned about the underground railroad. I never heard about it before. I thot it was a road. I learned that there were brave people. I didn't know what Drinking Gourd was. It the stars that the people follow nort. The big dipper. I know that now... I didn't know abut slaves. I heard, but didn't know. That sad.

The average number of words that the students said that they now knew and did not know before their readings and their responses and discussions to their readings was 20. My colleague's trust in our new teaching direction was restored. As the year progressed and students took more charge of their learning and determined the directions for our curriculum, the language environment was richer. It was very difficult for us as teachers to not control our students' learning, although the best learning seemed to come from the unexpected, the gaps, and not from our best envisioned plans. Like Sy, a student in Fu's (1995) research, our students made the most progress as readers, writers, and language users when they were given time to choose and try different genres which became vehicles for self-expression and learning.

During the balance of the year, after we finally "turned them loose" to design, develop, and negotiate their own English language curriculum, we watched, struggled, encouraged, and rejoiced with Daniella, Sung and their classmates as they developed and changed as readers, writers, and learners. The students were now setting their own goals, solving their own problems, and developing their own skills, and creating their own

learning. In collaboration with our students, we continued to negotiate and design our collaborative practice serving as learners, as facilitators, and as participants. As their teachers, we provided a variety of written texts, fiction and non-fiction, and some small group sets of like titles from which students could choose and then design their readings. (In other words, students set their own goals, decided on the paths of their discussions, etc.) Texts as models for writing were also provided. Students were encouraged to use the library and their communities in their explorations. They continued to be invited to use art, drama, and dialogue in their transactions with texts. Finally, we continued to provide our students with the time for reflecting on what they had achieved and assessing their English language learning.

Our past as teachers continued to haunt our teaching, causing our practice, at times, not to match our theoretical loom and evolving beliefs about second language learning. The realities of our students — the lack of participation and the behavior of a few, the slow progress of some — dragged us back to ask and question our practice. Along with our students, we needed to learn to "negotiate."

In sum, our students learned and we learned. Together, the students and their teachers learned new ways to respond and think about texts, write texts, and new ways to be teachers and students in an ESL class. Critical to our beliefs about teaching and our "negotiated" curriculum was the desire to create an inclusive classroom where all students could use the English language, written and spoken, to learn and explore their worlds — not just to reproduce the standard. But did we perpetuate our own ideology at the expense of our students? Whose stories did we allow? Did we continue to define and recreate the status quo — the standard? (These questions will need to guide our future teaching.) We wanted to help our students use language to read, write, and talk their way out of narrow renditions for using the English language. We fell short of this dream; but with the help of the students, through many negotiations, we created a beginning, and our teaching will never be the same.

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