Creative assignments to help students connect English to the outside world and build confidence

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Abstract

Instructors at the Real Institute's ESL Foundation Program are continuously working on designing assignments that allow their students to practice the language skills taught in class while at the same time engaging with technology and connecting with life outside of the classroom. Through careful consideration and research, two assignments were designed and successfully achieved these outcomes. The assignments were adapted to a virtual teaching context and were equally successful. This article includes a detailed explanation of the projects that were created, the steps taken for students to accomplish all tasks, and the outcomes that resulted from their completion. Further to this is a description of the success achieved from their adaptation to an online learning environment.

Introduction

The Real Institute is home to the ESL Foundation Program at Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario. The ESL Foundation Program is a bridging program and is designed for students who have been given acceptance to an undergraduate program at the university conditional on completion of English studies at the Real Institute. Depending on students' linguistic proficiency, they are placed into levels for varying amounts of instruction.

Regardless of the level students are placed in, they participate in lessons to increase skills and proficiency in each of the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Students complete a range of quizzes, exams, and assignments that are reflective of the learning outcomes for each level. These learning activities are designed so that students practice the language structures and skills that they learn in class and will use in their undergraduate degree programs.

Designing the assignments for each level requires careful consideration and a good deal of creativity. This paper will describe our experiences as instructors and curriculum developers with two successful assignments from different levels in the ESL Foundation Program. Considerations for the particular group of students in the ESL Foundation Program, the incorporation of technology, constraints, and outcomes will be discussed. Suggestions for how to adapt these assignments for the virtual learning environment in response to Covid-19 will be offered.

Considerations for creating new assignments

When designing the two assignments described in this article for students in the ESL Foundation Program, we started by considering what the main goals are for our students to accomplish by the end of each level. A number of important elements needed to be considered including the curriculum needs and constraints, student demographics, group dynamics, appropriate tools, and pedagogical justification.

Most students in the ESL Foundation Program are 17-21 years old, and the large majority of students come from mainland China. Many students enroll in the ESL Foundation Program out of parental expectations and have limited interest in studying English or living in Toronto. Although a large percentage of students have attended high school in the GTA, they have little knowledge or understanding of the city. While they are usually friends with each other, they are reliant on and drawn to their phones and social media apps. Further to this, they tend to communicate largely in their first language and have trouble connecting the importance of English language to their daily lives.

For the reasons mentioned above, we felt that inclusion of technology, and more specifically smartphones, was important for gaining enthusiasm from students. We also wanted to ensure that they started to make connections between what they were learning in class and how that would help them going forward. It was also integral that students not only take notice of the English structures they were learning, but that they truly understand their uses and importance.

Engaging students with technology

As noted, to gain true interest from our students, inclusion of technology was key. In choosing the appropriate technology, it was necessary to consider accessibility, flexibility, device choice, popularity, real life issues, and creativity. To make assignments easy and accessible, it was important to choose technology that was readily available to all. This meant we needed to choose hardware and apps that students and instructors alike were familiar with, able to use with ease, and had easy access to. We agreed on the use of smartphones and personal computers, particularly (1) Word or Google Docs to write and compile pictures and (2) video software to edit and compile recordings.

Flexibility was necessary and students were allowed and encouraged to use alternate devices and tools if they saw fit. We had noticed that many students were avid users of Instagram and TikTok, which inspired the idea that taking photos and videos would capture student interest. This also gave them the opportunity to show their creativity while not precluding the less artistic students.

Constraints

As the ESL Foundation Program consists of three-week modules, we needed to be mindful of time constraints. In our particular context, the students are digital natives, meaning they are highly capable of utilizing phones and computers. Had this not been the case, we would have needed to include tutorials on the technology. That said, it was important to keep in mind the fact that our students generally have low motivation to complete work outside of class, so the assignment needed to be simple to complete while engaging students. We also needed to work within the confines of the class that the assignment was being created for.

The first assignment that will be described below was for the reading and writing course and served as the summative assessment for the first module of the first semester of programming. The theme of the module is 'Life and Language.' The assignment needed to focus on parts of speech, writing structures, grammatical accuracy, and vocabulary.

The second assignment described below was for the listening and speaking class and served as the assignment for the third module of the second semester of programming. The theme of 'New Media' needed to connect to the theme of the subsequent module, 'Health and Wellness.' The assignment needed to focus on speaking fluency and accuracy as well as grammatical structures and vocabulary.

Assignment 1: Connecting the classroom to the world through pictures

After careful consideration of all of the above ideas, we designed a project to encourage students to explore the city of Toronto, notice the language structures taught in class, and also practice writing skills. Students compiled a portfolio of pictures and sentences showcasing the language they encountered in their daily lives. They took pictures of the language structures while they were out enjoying their day, and then they wrote about the findings and experiences. The assignment consisted of two parts: (1) pictures and (2) writing.

For the first part of the assignment, students used their phones to photograph examples of the language structures they encountered that matched what they learned in class. As students had learned the four major parts of speech, they were required to take a picture of a noun, a verb, an adjective, and an adverb.

Additionally, they were required to take pictures of simple sentences and imperative statements. Students were advised to look in places such as the subway, restaurants, parks, billboards, shopping malls, and newspapers. Examples of this included pictures of words like "stop" from a stop sign, "hamburger" from a McDonald's menu, or "Park here" from a local parking lot sign.

In the second section of the assignment, students were required to reflect on the pictures they found and what they had learned from them. They needed to write ten simple sentences explaining how the project had affected their thoughts and feelings about the language they were learning in the classroom. They were then asked to write ten imperative sentences instructing other students and giving advice on how to improve their English skills. This included sentences such as "Subway ads were a useful way to practice my reading" and "Make sure to read the items on a menu for new vocabulary words."

Assignment 2: Using awareness campaign videos to improve language and confidence

The second assignment that we created to build interest and engagement with students involved creating awareness campaign videos on health issues that are connected to the overuse of new media. This both directly connected to the themes of the corresponding modules and to the lives of our students. Unlike the first assignment where students were asked to work alone while going about their daily routines, in this assignment, students were required to work in groups of three or four. Because this assignment was for a speaking and listening class, collaboration was important.

It was necessary to explain to students that an awareness campaign is a marketing effort to help people recognize particular issues, raise awareness about the issue, educate about the effects of the problem, and inspire and encourage action. As videos can convey powerful emotions and can be easily spread and shared, they are useful to convey important messages. Students were shown multiple examples of awareness campaign videos.

Next, students were asked to choose from a list of topics including: cyberbullying, gaming addiction, phone addiction, health issues related to overuse of technology, and isolation as a result of social media. They then needed to brainstorm specific ideas and conduct research about the topic. Students were provided with a list of questions to guide their conversations such as:

- Why is this an issue?
- Who does it affect?
- What are the negative effects associated with the problem?
- What should people know about the issue?
- What actions should people take to resolve the issue?

Upon review of the above information, each group needed to determine exactly what message they wanted to convey with their videos and determine which format would be the most effective for doing this. This could take the form of an interview, news report, dramatic representation, or music video with voice overs. It was also stressed that each member of the group needed to appear in the video and speak for approximately equal amounts of time. The video needed to be three to four minutes long and could include printed captions. Still pictures were not accepted as this was meant to be an actual video recording.

On the date that the assignment was due, students shared a link to their videos on the learning management system so that the instructor could easily access it. All videos were shown during class time, and then the class voted on the best video based on content and creativity. Later that week, all students from the same level were brought together to watch the top videos from each class and vote on the best awareness campaign. The winning group received a small prize and had their video shown at the end of term celebration.

Outcomes

In order to justify the pedagogy behind this assignment, we researched the benefits of using personal devices, inviting creativity, making real life connections, collaboration, and competitive experience.

Personal Device Use

As mentioned above, our students are attached to their phones and personal devices, and for this reason, integrating the use of these devices in assignments was important. While many instructors consider such device use in the classroom disruptive, they can in fact have a positive effect on language acquisition.

Godwin-Jones (2018) explains the many benefits of using mobile devices in the language classroom. He describes how they offer unique opportunities for language learning that are very difficult to achieve without their use. One of these opportunities is the facilitated integration of multimedia in the classroom. This was a clear and successful outcome in the assignments we created. Personal devices allowed students to take pictures in one of their assignments and co-create and share videos in another. Another benefit of personal device use is facilitating collaboration between students (Godwin-Jones, 2018). In the Awareness Campaign assignment, students collaborated on different aspects of the assignment using their personal devices; they also used them to record and edit their video. A final benefit that is relevant to our assignments is facilitating and encouraging learning outside of school (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Students were required to notice language in their daily life outside of school and use their phones to capture it. They were also required to communicate with others in English and collaborate on recording a video using a personal device.

Creativity

Many instructors consider creativity as an element that has only aesthetic value to assignments. However, for language learning, creativity plays a much bigger role. The act of selecting and using words of a second language to express feelings, thoughts, and ideas requires creative thinking skills, and by allowing students room for creativity in assignments, instructors help them practice these skills (Fehér, n.d.). Creativity also provides room for self expression, which leads to more motivation and increased self-esteem. In addition, requiring students to creatively complete a task, pushes them to communicate and discuss, leading to more authentic language exchange and greater engagement and interest (Fehér, n.d).

In the first assignment, students were very creative in the places they looked for language. In the second assignment, students were given the opportunity to be creative in choosing the style of campaign video, script, setting, props, music, and costumes. The winning assignment indeed reflected substantial creativity in all of these areas.

Connection to real life

Designing tasks that are connected to real life makes the language classroom more relevant, useful, and interesting to students. Burk (2006) mentions that one of the roles of an instructor is to balance curricular requirements with students' interests. In designing assignments that require students to think about a topic that is relevant to their lives, they become more invested in class and see a bigger purpose for language beyond the assignment at hand. Burk (2006) also mentions that task-based activities force students to communicate to accomplish the assigned task, and this engages them with language that they can then use in real-life situations.

Both assignments were connected to real life—that is, life beyond the classroom—in different ways. The first assignment showed students that language is a part of their daily life and is useful and relevant in many contexts, and the second assignment allowed students to use authentic language to communicate and accomplish a task on a topic that is relevant to them.

Collaboration and peer interaction

The Awareness Campaign Video assignment required collaboration between group members on the different assignment parts. Students had to work together to agree on the various aspects of their video. This helps strengthen students' language learning because they can teach each other through peer collaboration "by addressing misunderstandings and clarifying misconceptions" ("Collaborative Learning: Center for Teaching Innovation," n.d.) with one another.

The assignment also required students to heavily interact with one another, and this was a goal in itself as creating opportunities for meaningful social interaction between students is essential for language acquisition (Swain, 2000).

Competitive experience

Chen (2019) explains the benefits of designing activities that have an element of competition; He concludes that having students work in groups and compete against each other increases interest levels and lowers tension, and it also leads to increased problem solving and better retention of ideas.

The Awareness Campaign Video assignment was a group assignment with an added element of competition as described above. Although students were somewhat anxious about having their video evaluated by their peers and possibly played to the whole cohort, it made them more accountable for their work. In addition, it added an element of fun and anticipation.

Adapting assignments for the virtual environment

Both of the described assignments were successful in the traditional classroom setting of the ESL Foundation Program. However, discussion of these assignments would be incomplete without explanation of how they were adapted for the virtual learning environment brought on by Covid-19. Once programming switched to virtual formats, we were required to re-examine and change assignments.

Considerations

Adaptation of all assignments required significant creativity and consideration as the barriers were multiple and diverse. Of utmost importance was the fact that once classes switched to virtual formats, many students in the ESL Foundation Program returned to their home countries. This meant that students were living and learning in various cities, countries, and time zones, and this made group work challenging. Connected to this is the fact that, if students had returned to their home countries, access to everyday English was limited, and this challenged the foundational principles of the assignments.

Additionally, it was important to ensure that students could access all technology, tools, and platforms required to complete these assignments regardless of where they were in the world. Although we had always been flexible with respect to the tech tools that students used to complete assignments, this became even more important, and we made efforts to encourage students to use whatever technology was easily accessible. We provided students with lists of alternate tools they could use.

Despite the intricacies involved with adapting these particular assignments, we adhered to best practices for designing online assignments by ensuring that our assignments reflected student learning objectives

and course outcomes, remaining flexible, and encouraging creativity ("Adapting to Online Teaching," n.d.). With respect to our particular students, from experience, we knew that it was necessary to give clear and repeated instructions, show examples, and use technology wherever possible.

Adapting and extending Assignment #1: Connecting the classroom to the world through pictures

As described, the intention of this assignment was for students to explore Toronto and to take pictures of the structures and language taught in class. As many students had returned to non-English speaking countries, it was difficult for students to find examples of English in their everyday lives. This was further complicated by restrictions related to Covid-19, and the fact that people across the world were encouraged to stay home as much as possible. To respond to these problems, we decided to allow students to submit photos, pictures, and examples of language that they found online. Students needed to complete these searches in English, and they could also complete this from the safety of their homes.

To manage issues of access, we expanded submission options for students. Wherever possible, students were encouraged to submit work through Ryerson University's learning management system; however, if students experienced difficulties doing so, we were open to allowing students to submit work through other avenues such as Padlet or Google Jamboard.

Further, to create a sense of community among students, the assignment was also extended, and students were required to view and comment in writing on a classmates' work. This task reduced the distances that existed between students, and it contributed to an environment where students got to know each other and care about each other's work.

Adapting and extending Assignment #2: Using awareness campaign videos to improve language and confidence

As noted, this original assignment required students to work in small groups to produce an awareness campaign video. Once classes shifted to virtual environments, collaboration and group work became challenging, particularly if students were living in different time zones or did not want to spend extra time online beyond class.

In response to these challenges, we decided to allow students the option to work individually or with a partner to complete the assignment. Fortunately, and perhaps surprisingly, most students did indeed choose to work with a partner, which demonstrates that students did genuinely want to connect and work together. Students were still required to appear and speak in their videos. We provided students with a list

of free film-making tools that they could use to complete this assignment.

This assignment was also extended in an attempt to create community and relationships among students. Students were required to post their videos and then watch three other videos. After watching the videos, they needed to create an audio recording reflecting on a prompt provided by the instructor. In their response, they needed to consider their classmates' work and make connections to their own ideas and thoughts.

Conclusion

Overall, these were successful assignments with our student population in both face-to-face and virtual contexts. Through these assignments, students engaged with the world around them and practiced the English taught in class. Students were motivated through the use of technology and were able to express their ideas and learning in creative and meaningful ways. These assignments are examples of how to make what is taught inside the classroom relevant to students' lives outside of the classroom.

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Author Bios

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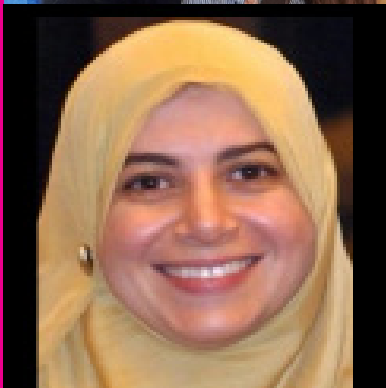
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