

FE.15 Creating Materials for low-level ESOL students

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Aims

To improve low-level ESOL students' grasp of grammar and vocabulary by providing supplementary materials for class use and self-study.

Background

I am the Curriculum Team Leader for Skills for Life. I manage the ESOL provision at Barking College, which consists of about 350 students studying on full and part-time courses. We have nine full-time classes at Entry Levels 1 and 2, and four in the evening. I have been at Barking College for the last three years in which time we have been implementing the government's Skills for Life strategy. Despite the new materials made available by the government there is still a lack of materials for low-level students, who often need to work on one area of grammar repeatedly, studying it in a variety of ways that keep interest and therefore involvement and motivation high.

Intended Outcomes

These materials will provide revision of areas that low-level ESOL students have difficulty in mastering, given a year's study on a full-time course. Students will perform better on formative assessments such as class exercises, and summative exercises such as termly tests and external exams. This will be reached by having gained sufficient practice in grammar areas to be able to understand them thoroughly and be able to use them accurately in oral and written forms. Students will feel more positive about their progress and feel more capable in their daily use of English. Another potential benefit of more confident students would be greater retention on courses, despite the numerous factors that adversely affect ESOL students' ability to complete courses .

Implementation

I looked at various ways in which materials could be created by someone, such as myself, without any specialist ILT training. I attended various training events for producing interactive word documents using visual basic, for Hot Potatoes, for the college's VLE (Learn Wise) and for SmartBoard software. I thought that the classroom materials created through the Smart Notebook program would be highly motivating for students as they allow for hands-on interaction via touch on the SmartBoard, or via a remote mouse and / or keyboard.

I put together some fairly simple activities to support the Skills for Life materials I was using with an Entry Level 2 class, either taken from the materials or adapted for my group using SmartBoard software to add an interactive element. Students worked in groups to complete the exercises, using either touch on the SmartBoard screen or a remote mouse and keyboard to type in corrections to text on the screen. I also used the highlighter function to identify parts of speech.

The college's VLE provided a useful way to host materials and so all activities I created were slotted into the course materials section for the appropriate level. The students were trained in using the VLE and encouraged to make use of the materials both in class and in their own time. Access was available to students via any PC on the college system.

The materials would either be used during class time or set as work to be done out of class time. Either way, I would host them on the VLE so they would be available to students for further self-study.

Research

Interviews with students.

Questionnaire to suggest initial questions:

What do you think of using the SmartBoard?

What things do you like most?

What don't you like?

How is a SmartBoard lesson different to a lesson without computers?

Have you used the materials outside class?

What was good about that?

How could the materials (and lesson) be better?

Advantage of Interviews – allows for clarification of questions and further questions to develop answers. This is particularly important for low-level ESOL students as they may not understand the questions and need help in expanding their answers.

Findings

I felt that the lesson went very well. The students were engaged throughout and their performance was good on all tasks. The tasks also made it clear where individual students had difficulty with some of the grammar and vocabulary. Feedback was that the lesson was enjoyable and the students felt that they had improved their knowledge during the lesson. The only problem occurred with the last exercise, where I had colour-coded parts of speech. This was a new idea, so the fact that the students had trouble in working out what the colours meant was predictable. However, this did not affect their usage of the SmartBoard materials as the exercise was based on organising words into sentences. Some students are slow at using the remote keyboard and mouse, so confident students volunteered to be their team 'representative' and the others gave them verbal assistance. In other lessons, brief usage of this hardware builds ability and confidence for all students.

After the session with the materials I gained feedback from the students via a group focus discussion. This allowed them to support and develop each other's ideas and to feed back only if they had something they wanted to express. The students reported that working on the SmartBoard was more enjoyable and interesting than using paper-based materials. Most of all, they liked the fact that they could move/change items on the board and work as a whole class or teams to give answers. They said that they enjoyed working together and they liked the fact that there were a variety of activities that they could do on the SmartBoard. They said that the materials allowed them to learn better as they were more interesting and gave them a different way to study. Some students said that they were very keen to see the materials again, so that they did not forget them, and the VLE helped them look at them again, so they could remember more easily what they had done in class .

Conclusion

Given the success of this session, I will continue to use the Smart Notebook program to create materials and further investigate how I can improve the quality of the materials and the variety of activities delivered via the SmartBoard. I will also continue with a blended approach, mixing use of the SmartBoard with paper-based materials and other delivery methods and resources such as audio, discussions and computer programmes. This allows for all macro

skills and learning styles to be taken into account and the greater variety of activities also keeps motivation high.

Longitudinal report:

I felt that the high level of motivation created by using the SmartBoard would die away as the novelty factor wore off, but students are still keen to use it and it still provides a powerful way of keeping a group's attention, despite familiarity with it. The key seems to be the interactive element and using this for group work, both collaborative and competitive. As long as the materials are integrated with work done in class the elements of correction and of grouping are enough to keep interest levels and motivation high over the length of the course.