The Newsletter Project: A New Student-Teacher Dynamic

Wade Carlton

Ibaraki University

This paper describes a newsletter project conducted by third-year students at a Japanese university. In addition to the steps involved in planning, writing, editing, etc., the paper addresses elements of autonomy that can be adjusted to suit the needs of other students and teachers. By completing this project, students not only gain valuable experience in teamwork, employment of English, and newsletter production, but also learn to view the teacher-student relationship in a different way than they are accustomed. The most tangible outcome of the project, the newsletter that they have created with their own hard effort, is the best reward possible for an English project experience and one which they treasure long after their university days are finished.

Introduction

The author and Joyce Cunningham presented at JALT2003, teaching the attendees how to conduct a newsletter project—in particular, one that emphasized learner autonomy (Benson, 2001; Fried-Booth, 1986; Thomson, 1998). Before, the teachers doing the newsletter project had made many of the decisions from beginning to end, including all actual editing, despite their title of "publishers." The author and Prof. Cunningham wanted to give the students much more control and autonomy, even eliminating the "publisher" title to show they were serious; this paper describes this new, autonomy boosting process. In order to save space and to ensure accuracy, this paper will discuss the project only as the author conducts it. At Ibaraki University's Department of Communication Studies, the students have hundreds of 90-minute English classes with native speakers: five times a week their first year, three times weekly their second year, and once weekly their third and fourth years. In their third year, they use the skills they have developed to put together a newsletter that is printed professionally off-campus and distributed widely. This paper will describe that process, from teaching about newsletters in general to the final stages of production and distribution.

The newsletter project

Preparation

In the first class of the project, the teacher passes around newsletters, for example JALT SIG newsletters, alumni association newsletters, etc. Students work in groups, looking at several newsletters to see how they are different, what things look good, and what things don't look so good. For example, they consider how photos and graphics are utilized, how editors write editorials and place them, and the general layout of the newsletters. They are also encouraged to look at newsletters produced by previous classes, to see what improvements can be made and what things (that worked well) may be included in some form.

After that, the students are asked to volunteer for positions. Currently, the class has about 20 students, so an editorial staff of four is just about right: an editor, assistant editor, photographer/ graphic designer, and an inputer. The other 16 students work on one of four article teams, each consisting of three reporters and one article chief. The students are told to volunteer for at least one non-reporter position, to list their preferences in order, and to provide reasons for their choices. The teacher takes up the students' preferences and puts together the editorial staff first, trying to select people who really want the job, have attended classes regularly, and, especially in the case of the editor and assistant editor, have good English skills. Similarly, article chiefs are chosen who want that position and give good reasons, and the remaining students are reporters by default. The roles reverse when another newsletter is produced the second semester. Placement on the article teams is at random.

Depending on the level and experience of the class, the teacher may want to teach or review some basics about writing articles.

These might include: what makes a good title, proper paragraph length, leads (attention getters), use of quotes and factual information, use of visuals, the process of drafting, editing and revising, etc. Naturally, if this project is repeated, less or no review may be required, and could be summarized on a single handout to serve as a reminder. On-the-spot advising can always take care of lapses in memory

Working on articles

The students get into their groups and are asked to brainstorm ideas for article topics for about five minutes, increasing their sense of autonomy (Nunan, 1988). These ideas are written on the board for all groups to consider. The editorial staff is given a lot of autonomy from the beginning, deciding such things as how many articles each group will produce, the length of the articles, and which topics are given approval. When all ideas have been collected, the teams then choose what they would like to write about, and make an informal presentation to the editorial staff, who gives approval, approval with conditions, or sends the group back to the drawing board with a good reason, for example, the fact that the proposed topic doesn't fit in with other selected topics or would overlap one or more of them.

Once all groups have approved topics, they can get to work deciding how they will research, report on, and write up their topics. The editorial staff may give such guidelines as deadlines (after consulting with the teacher) and length of each article, and will start thinking about how the articles should be laid out. The article teams decide who will be doing what jobs in order to put their article together. For example, if they are reviewing local restaurants, they will decide who will go to which ones, who will be interviewing, who will write it up, etc. They will also have to think about what photos or graphics might enhance

their article, and the photographer will want to get a handle on this early in order to know what photos need to be taken and/or graphics found.

The writing process

The students are encouraged to do their best on their first draft, but not to get too concerned about mistakes at this early stage. Those can be fixed at later stages in the process. After they have written up their first draft, they are asked to make sure everyone on their team has read it before handing it to the editorial staff, along with a floppy disk with their article in Microsoft Word format. They will give suggestions for how to improve the article, taking care to not seem too condescending. The editorial staff by this time has been taught how to use Microsoft Publisher software by their seniors, and create a file for the newsletter, first starting with a template the software provides. (There are other kinds of software, including Microsoft Word, that have newsletter templates and do a fine job.) The inputer will put each article into the newsletter file to see if any of their lengths need to be adjusted. Then the article teams get the articles back and go to work, implementing the suggestions as much as possible and making other improvements.

They then hand their second draft to the editorial staff, and the process is repeated. It's really up to the teacher (who may want to leave the decision to the editor) as to what the editorial staff looks at with each successive draft. Normally, revising (looking only at content) comes first and editing for mistakes comes later. However, it may be decided to perform both tasks on all drafts from first to final.

Many teachers may wonder if the students can do all this while maintaining usage of English in the classroom. One way I attempt to steer students toward more English is by having them complete an end-of-class report, which includes self-evaluating their and their group's use of English. For example, "Today I spoke English 70% of the time." On the same informal report, they are asked what they did in class that day and what needs to be done to complete the article. The teacher may wish to collect these self-evaluations every class, to do spot checks, and/or to have the students keep them to turn in at the end of the project in a portfolio. In addition, the group is given a group report to fill out at the end of each class, which has similar information.

The final product

The teacher may feel uncomfortable with the amount of errors remaining in the newsletter, but I would encourage as much as possible to maintain a hands-off posture and let the students enjoy the feeling of authorship that is only possible if their words are left alone. I do step in when they have a specific question or when I notice a mistake that affects meaning, but as a general policy I don't change small mistakes that I notice when I am walking around or when I am handed drafts.

When funding makes it possible, it is really nice to have the newsletter printed in color on nice stock at a printing company. At Ibaraki University, we have successfully applied for grant money from our department's project committee to do just that. This makes the newsletter a real treasure for the students, as many of them have noted in their end-of-project evaluations. If it's not possible to get funding, the newsletter can be printed up on a mimeograph at school, in which case the teacher will want to recruit students to help with assembling the newsletters. Either way, the newsletters can be distributed to other classes by

members of the editorial staff. This is particularly impressive to the first- and second-year students in our program; they really look forward to becoming third-year students and getting to make newsletters themselves.

To wrap up the project, the teacher will want the students to evaluate their own work and hand this form in with all the other paperwork they have completed during the course of the project. This self-evaluation is a crucial element of learner autonomy (Murphey, 1998; Small, 2002). In addition, other classes may be asked to give their evaluations. These informative evaluations are particularly useful when the same class makes newsletters again. I reward the editorial staff for all their hard work and extra hours with a treat that is proportional to their effort. I took my last staff to the local Australian-managed and staffed bar and grill. They obviously enjoyed it immensely, and from the looks on their faces they seemed to think they were in Australia!

Conclusion

This project gives students an excellent opportunity to put their English knowledge to work while completing a task that serves real purposes, while at the same time increasing their autonomy in the classroom. It requires students who are responsible enough to tackle such a job in earnest, and teachers who are able to step back and play a background role in the production of the articles and the newsletter itself. The results are well worth any trepidation felt by teacher and students, and the newsletter can also serve to motivate junior students who will be in charge of completing the same task in a later year of study.

References

Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning.* Harlow, U.K; Longman.

Fried-Booth, D.L. (1986). *Project work.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Murphey, T. (1998). Motivating with near peer role models. In B. Vigatis (Ed.), *On JALT 97: Trends & transitions* (pp. 201-205). Tokyo: The Japan Association for Language Teaching.

Nunan, D. (1988). *The learner-centered curriculum: A study in second language teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Small, J. (2002). Language digestion: Student self-assessment. In A.S. Mackenzie & E. McCafferty (Eds.), *Developing autonomy* (pp. 195-198). Tokyo: The JALT College and University Educators' Special Interest Group.

Thomson, C.K. (1998). Junior teacher internship: Promoting cooperative interaction and learner autonomy in foreign language classrooms. *Foreign Language Annals,* 31(4), 569-583.