Event-based learning: The benefits of positive pressure

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Keywords

The benefits of integrating public events into an English curriculum are discussed with reference to a case study: carol singing in Hiroshima Peace Park. Event-based learning is distinguished as being different to task-based learning. It is argued that event-based learning can be enjoyable and lead to deep processing of the language used due to the positive pressure such events create.

公的な行事が英語のカリキュラムに組み込まれて行く利点について、広島平和公園での聖歌合唱を事例研究として参照し、討議する。イベントに基づく学習はタスクに基づく学習とは全く異なるものである。本論では、イベントに基づく学習は楽しめるものであり、またイベントが生み出すポジティブな影響によって、学習者の英語理解の深まりをより助長すると述べている。

NERVOUSLY clutching song sheets as the sun sank on Hiroshima Peace Park on a cool December evening, a group of college students wearing Santa hats broke the calm with a faltering rendition of *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*. Emboldened by the encouraging reaction of passers by and the warm glow of the illuminations that had just been switched on, the group then launched enthusiastically into the second song they had spent the last few weeks practicing in class.

What is event-based learning?

Over the last 15 years or so, task-based learning (TBL) has established itself as an attractive approach to language instruction, one that has finally gained recognition in Japan (Little & Fieldsend, 2009; Willis & Willis, 2009). The focus of TBL is the completion of a central task, with the language studied being determined by what happens as the students complete it. Proponents of this approach (Nunan, 1989; Robinson, 2001; Willis & Willis, 2007) argue that it increases student motivation because it allows students to creatively apply previously acquired knowledge to different contexts. Recent studies into TBL have underlined its effectiveness in language learning. A study comparing TBL with traditional communicative methodology (De Ridder, Van Gehutchten & Gomez, 2007) showed that students following the TBL approach significantly outperformed other groups in terms of social adequacy, grammatical, and lexical knowledge. Since the underlying concept of what I call *event-based learning* (EBL) is similar to TBL, it is possible to view it as an extension of the task-based approach. With EBL, however, while much of the task preparation is done in the classroom, there is also some sort of main event or performance which is open to the public. This is in contrast to TBL, where the completion of tasks takes place solely within the safety of the classroom. The need to prepare for this final event helps make EBL tasks more intrinsically motivating for the students. Since highly motivated students achieve greater proficiency in their language studies (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003),

it is hoped that an event such as public carol singing will spark interest in the language and the culture in which it is embedded, provide positive pressure to practice, and thus lead to increased proficiency.

The Christmas carol singing event

In December 2007, about 100 college students wearing Santa hats sang five popular Christmas songs at different locations around Hiroshima Peace Park for about 30 minutes. Preparation for this event involved a lesson on winter festivals towards the end of November, and 20 minute rehearsals at the end of each class in December, which included activities to focus students' attention on the meaning of the lyrics. For example, students listened to various versions of each song to give them an idea of what kind of performance was expected. To encourage autonomous study, CDs of the songs were passed around among the students.

Why use music in a language course?

In a fascinating book on the evolution of music and language, Steven Mithen (2005) argues that language and music are universal features of human society, developed concurrently due to a need for group cohesion and hardwired into our brains at a very early stage. His extensive review of research in a number of fields supports the view that language and music are strongly linked, with some shared cognitive areas, such as rhythm and pitch. By bringing out our students' innate musical sense in the language classroom, and by taking advantage of the links between music and language, we can support our students' language development. As Murphey (1992a) notes, since the language used in songs is often familiar, repetitive, and slow compared to normal speech, it is fairly easy for L2 users to cope with and (more importantly) enjoy.

Why sing Christmas carols?

One might argue that Christmas carols are not particularly useful examples of English to memorize, and that modern pop music is better suited for students (Murphey, 1992b). For example, the English in *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* contains infrequently used words such as *fig*, *kin,* or *merry*. In addition, the thought of a student responding to a greeting with "good tidings we bring, to you and your kin" would of course be strange. The word frequency list in Table 1 (Leech, Rayson and Wilson, 2001) confirms the rarity of these words:

Table 1. Frequency of fig, kin, and merry

	Occurrences per million words
fig	16
kin	Less than 10
merry	Less than 10

While this song clearly contains examples of rare English, it should be noted that it also contains high frequency words such as *new*, *good,* and *year*:

Table 2: Frequency of new, good, and year

	Occurrences per million words
new	1145
good	795
year	737

Much of language is acquired in chunks or clusters, in phrases such as *a happy new year* (O'Keefe, McCarthy & Carter, 2007). Over time these chunks get broken down into their component parts and can then be reformed into original constructions. Learning songs is a good way to acquire these pieces of language. The music and lyrics all get taken in as a package, and hopefully, as some of these words and phrases are met in other situations, students can begin to unwrap the package and gain deeper understanding of what these phrases mean and how they can be used.

Another reason for choosing Christmas carols rather than modern pop music is that they are regularly played on the radio, TV, and in supermarkets during the run up to Christmas. Students will likely already be familiar with the melodies and some of the lyrics. Consequently, when learning these songs, students are not starting from scratch. The biggest drawback of most pop songs is their short popularity life span. Christmas carols, on the other hand, have survived the test of time. Like kimonos or beer, they never seem to go out of fashion. As a result, effort spent learning carols is time well spent.

Does event-based learning work?

An end of semester Likert-scale questionnaire, given one month after the caroling event, was filled out by 69 students in an attempt to collect data on whether they enjoyed the event and had acquired some language as a result.
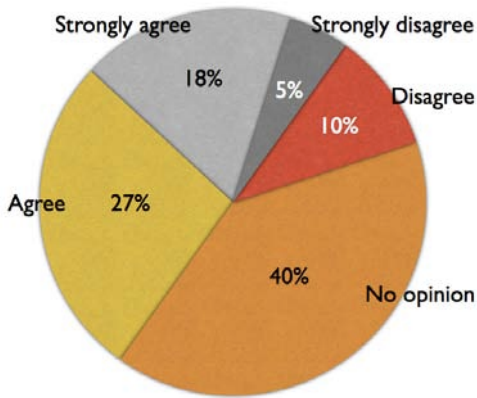
Figure 1. *I enjoyed the carol singing event*

Some students didn't enjoy themselves (15%), 40% expressed no strong opinion, and 45% responded positively. The number of positive responses thus indicated that many students viewed the event as a fun element within the curriculum.
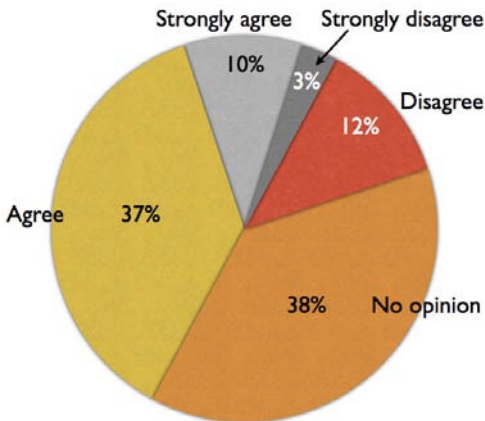

Figure 2. *I remember some of the songs from the carol singing*

Figure 2 shows how much language students felt they had retained one month after the event. Encouragingly, a large proportion (47%) felt positive about this, while only a few (15%) indicated they did not remember the songs. Given research showing how quickly memory of newly learned vocabulary can fade (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Waring, 2003), what could account for the high retention rates of the Christmas song lyrics?

Perhaps one reason these songs were not forgotten so quickly was due to the pressure students felt when they knew they would have to perform in public. This pressure forced students to practice together in groups during their spare time in the weeks leading

up to the performance. It seems that the event served as a source of extrinsic motivation that led students to work harder and process the language more deeply than normal, thus improving their retention.

Developing the event

Given the general positive reaction, this event was included in the 2008 curriculum and followed the same basic format. This time, we decided to look into the idea that such events actually lead to long term language acquisition. To accomplish this, we included some carol-specific vocabulary on a portion of the students' final exam to evaluate whether they had picked up and retained these items from the singing event. This part of the test contained two of the carols used during the event with the following words removed: *bright, silent, tender, calm* and *infant*. These items were chosen because they were not taught on the course and were unlikely to have been covered in other English courses. If students could retain these words, then it would give a good indication that the event and lead up to it had directly resulted in their acquisition.

Of the 80 students who took part in the event, retention scores for the carol-specific vocabulary averaged 18.75%. While seemingly low at first glance, it should be noted that as with the 2007 survey, this test was given about a month after the event. The scores therefore reflect vocabulary most probably retained within long term memory. If the test had been given a day after the event, the results would have probably been far higher, but this would have merely been a measure of short-term retention. This test shows retention of a few previously unknown low frequency words. What it does not show is the recycling of previously known high frequency words, which we can assume is also occurring. While not directly tested for, recycling is important for increasing depth of word knowledge.

One problem with the test was that only a very limited number of items were tested (five words). Another was that students were not asked to demonstrate any deep knowledge of these words but merely whether they had remembered the forms. While the results cannot be viewed as conclusive evidence of language acquisition, they do support the claims made by 47% of students in the 2007 questionnaire that some parts of the songs were remembered. Clearly these initial findings warrant more rigorous empirical study.

What other events could be used?

Carol singing is one example of EBL. There are, however, many other events that could be inte-

grated into an English curriculum, depending on the maturity and ability of the students. One example is a speech contest, where students seek writing advice from teachers and practice in the weeks leading up to the event. Student generated poster sessions (Kirschenmann, 2007) could also lend themselves to such a public event. Poster sessions tend to be less stressful since students would be addressing their talk to only one or two people at a time as opposed to a large audience. A more ambitious project would be a short play or pantomime that could be used as part of a school or local cultural event. Written work could also be made into an event by having students publish a piece of original writing. Inclusion in a monthly English newspaper or magazine could bring similar benefits in terms of depth of language processing if it were published outside of the classroom.

Conclusions

Using an event as a way to focus our students' studies is nothing new; schools the world over regularly hold sports days, plays, concerts, competitions, pantomimes, and singing events. Since the dawn of education, teachers have intuitively realized that the positive pressure such public events generate can be utilized to encourage students to practice hard and perform at their best. Not only do students gain a great deal of satisfaction from having successfully been a part of one of these events, but they also learn something in the build up to it. The challenge for us as English teachers is to recognize what events in our area we could utilize or start up in order to harness this powerful motivational force for the benefit of our students.

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