

# Ask Your Students for a Change: Using Student Produced and Selected Materials (SPSMs) in Dialogic Pedagogy

Tim Murphey

*Kanda University of International Studies*

<https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTTLT45.5-2>

While I have found several good textbooks to use in my university classes over the years, the defining quality of my classes always seems to have been the creation and use of texts that students themselves have produced from their own experiences. In this piece, I will describe seven types of activity structure teachers can use to stimulate the production of student texts and then loop them back into the classroom for further student use. I will also describe four principal results of adopting such materials through this methodology—student-centered teaching, level and content sensitive materials, socialization, and emic pedagogy—and explain their impact on students in terms of SLA, identity construction, and community formation.

私が大学で教鞭をとってきた中で、良い教科書はいくつかあったが、授業の質に決定的な影響を与えたのは、学生自身が文章を書き、それを教材として使用することである。本論では、学生が自らの経験を綴ることを手助けし、それをさらなる学びの教材として授業で循環させる七つの手法を紹介する。それらは、学習者中心の教授法、学習者に適したレベルと内容の教材の使用、学生同士の交流、(学習者の周辺環境や文化を包括した) イミックな教授法 (emic pedagogy) の活用であり、その手法による、主な四つの効果と第二言語学習、アイデンティティ構築、そしてコミュニティの育成構築に与えるインパクトについても言及する。

## Background

As a Master's student supporting my thesis entitled "Situationally Motivated Teacher Produced Texts," I wrote "a teacher . . . can better produce [their own materials] for a particular class and make [them] relevant to any specific group than can a whole group of specialists [from afar]" (Murphey, 1978, p. v). A few years later, I clarified that "Situationally Motivated Teacher Produced Texts (SMTPTs) are of course not new; many teachers have been producing them for years. Most textbooks are, in fact, adaptations of SMTPTs originally designed to meet the needs of a particular teacher's (the author's) class and then transformed in an attempt to reach a larger audience" (Murphey, 1985, p. 6). I also noted that in this transformation, the content usually becomes generalized, losing its flavor

of particular details, and resulting in a loss of any sense of keen relevance for specific groups. While I still use some textbooks that I consider appropriate for my students, I think student/teacher-constructed collections of student-produced texts on topics of shared interest are more accessible to other students in the same class and more likely to fall within their particular language proficiency levels, that is, their zones of proximal development, or ZPDs (see Vygotsky, 1962).

Later, in Switzerland, I gave a string of workshops on "Insearch," demonstrating how the most relevant material for language learning involves new language that is mapped onto the content that students bring out from within themselves (Murphey, 1991). In other words, appropriate material is found not so much through teacher research as through student insearch. Students' own information, opinions, and reactions are the most potent content material to map onto their own personal language learning (see Meddings & Thornbury, 2009). For, as Paley (1986) asserts,

"The first order of reality in the classroom is the student's point of view" (p. 127). Students' own personal content gives them a compelling motive for studying English, namely to explore themselves through socialization and searching within. "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-student and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself/herself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (Freire, 2000, p. 80).

More recently, in an attempt to be even more intensely relevant to our particular learners, I and my colleagues have begun to experiment with structures that stimulate students to produce situationally motivated, insearched material in student-produced texts (Murphey & Falout, 2010). We loop these texts back into the classroom for students to learn even more from them. By "texts"

we mean any written or orally produced sequences in the target language. Most of us work at universities; however, many of our student-produced texts (SPTs) would be suitable for high school students as well. I also think that high school students could participate in the activities described in this article if well-guided. These texts have been successfully used with first-year students in academic English preparation courses and with second-, third-, and fourth-year students in mixed content and language integrated learning (CLIL) classes, as well as in large (i.e., enrollments of 80 to 150) “lecture” classes.

Research shows that student-produced texts inspire greater degrees of student investment because they comprise high-interest, level-sensitive materials within their group’s collaborative zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962; Williams-Mlynarczyk, 1998). These texts are also relatively easy to obtain once certain classroom structures are in place. Hereafter, I will describe how teachers can stimulate the production of student texts and then loop them back for further student use. I will also describe four principal results of adopting such materials through this methodology (namely, student-centered teaching, level and content sensitive materials, socialization, and emic pedagogy) along with their impact on students in terms of second language acquisition (SLA), identity construction, and community formation.

### Structures for Generating SPTs and Looping Them Back into Class

Below are seven examples of activity types teachers can use to obtain student-produced texts and ways that they can further use them with students for a variety of goals.

#### 1. Action Logs and Newsletters

After each lesson, students in my classes write action logs (Hooper, 2020; Murphey, 1993; Murphey et al., 2014; Murphey & Woo, 1998a). In these logs, they comment on what we did and on what they liked and didn’t like as well as provide various kinds of feedback. Teachers can learn a lot by reading these different perspectives, which can help them better plan their future classes because the timely feedback points teachers to “where to next” (Hattie & Clarke, 2019; Miyake-Warkentin et al., 2020). Students can also learn a lot when teachers select certain comments from the action logs and put them into newsletters that are distributed to the class. Comments may be about the usefulness of a new strategy, a change in attitude or belief, or requests to do things differently. In class, students

read their classmates’ comments and identify more closely with them than with those of the teacher and often develop much faster as a result (Murphey, 1998a, 1998b, 1998f).

#### 2. Vocabulary / “Strange Stories”

My students often have about 25 vocabulary quiz items each week to learn from other teachers. To help them remember these words more easily, I ask them to use the ones they are less familiar with to write stories about themselves and people they know. They send me the stories by email. I then correct them a bit and either print them out for everyone or send them back via the class mailing list. Students find it very enjoyable to read each other’s “strange stories” each week. Not only is it a good strategy for remembering vocabulary, but it is also a type of personalized, student-selected, and controlled input and output flooding. As one example, one teacher once gave my students some positive psychology terms (e.g., persevere, mindset, grit, gratitude) while another gave them some kitchen words (e.g., oven, mix, dishes). Here is the resultant “strange story” one student wrote about her mother: “My mom perseveres like an oven always on. Her mindset never frozen. With grit she mixes different things, and with gratitude we eat new dishes.”

#### 3. Student-Made Tests

Inviting students to make up their own tests after receiving a certain amount of instruction allows them to decide what is relevant to their learning and what is not. The act of creating questions is a powerful act of learning in itself. The students usually produce many more and much more varied questions than teachers can. This activity is an opportunity for the teacher to evaluate which aspects of the course students see as most personally important and valuable. I usually print all their questions on a handout, along with a few of my own that I think are important, and give it to them to study (Murphey, 1995, 2019a, 2019b, 2020, 2021a).

#### 4. Audio and Video Conversation Transcripts

Another useful activity is to have students record their conversations and transcribe them later to focus on what they need to improve or correct and compare their transcriptions with those of their classmates (Murphey & Kenny, 1998; Murphey & Woo, 1998b), as some communication strategies are easier for students to understand when they can actually hear themselves using them. Although audio-only activities help students practice the sounds

they need to acquire in a foreign language, seeing themselves actually talking in a foreign language can also shift their multilingual identities in their mind to help them learn even more (Kindt, 1998). It allows them to notice their non-verbal language communication as well.

### 5. Favorite Song Presentations / Contributions

For this type of activity, the teacher models a slide show for an eventual student-led class presentation on a favorite song, including information about the artist, the song, difficult vocabulary, reasons for liking the song, etc. (Murphey, 1992). This model presentation should also include a video of an artist singing the song with the lyrics or subtitles at the bottom of the screen. After the model presentation, the teacher can circulate a class name list and ask the students to write beside their name the titles of favorite songs to possibly present on in future classes. Everyone is asked to present a different song. Students should provide a copy of the lyrics and a video link a few days before their presentation in class to allow the teacher to prepare for possibly difficult language. They can then write short texts describing their songs and their presentations. The slide show is made outside of class and the student has the option of sharing it with the teacher before their in-class presentation for corrections and advice. Students watching and listening all take notes on the song and the presentation and can ask questions at the end.

### 6. Language Learning Histories / Class Publications

Asking students to write their own language learning history (LLH) prompts them to become more metacognitively aware and to think about learning developmentally. LLHs are also level-appropriate reading material for fellow students within the group ZPD and can greatly inspire readers as they come to recognize appropriate beliefs, strategies, and attitudes (Murphey, 1998d, 1998e, 1999).

### 7. Near-Peer Role Models and Diversity Models

For this type of activity, students are asked to present three of their near-peer role models (NPRMs) and three diversity role models (DRMs) (Ogawa & Murphey, 2012). As an illustration of this assignment, for my own students I presented first and explained that my father was a big role model for me and near to me for the first 20 years of life.

But the real near peers were my brothers and sisters, who also played sports and sang a lot with me. The third group was my black basketball teammates in high school, who taught me a lot about basketball. For the diversity role models, I chose Mulan (a Disney character), Charlie Chaplin in his dictator speech (which I showed in class), and the renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead. I explained why I liked them and wanted to be like them in different ways. The teacher should not only demonstrate what is expected in terms of slides, pictures, speaking, and presentation skills but also describe why they find these particular NPRMs and DRMs admirable. When I did this most recently in a Zoom class, I could feel so much positivity that it astounded me. The students were recognizing people that they seemingly had not fully appreciated before. So, my last suggestion to them was to tell their NPRMs and DRMs (if possible) that they were in fact part of our class and that they had talked about them.

All activity types above (except #5) ask students to create texts, written or recorded, which are then looped back to them for further learning. Number five gets students to select songs they already have some investment in and to contribute these for classroom use. Thus, technically, it involves not student-produced but student-selected texts. Its inclusion here is to show that students do not necessarily have to make the texts themselves but can choose what texts are chosen for study in a more partnership education style (Eisler, 2000). Number six, language learning histories, is a great way for first-year students to discover how they have developed over time and in what directions they wish to go in the future. Number seven, role models, is a great way for older students to acknowledge who they have modeled, are modeling, and wish to model more. Written versions of these could also be asked for afterward to create publications.

### CLIL/CBI Classes Special Topics

The last format category for publications is CLIL courses, in which students choose topics to research and write about in detail. Since most of my students are English majors, and many plan to teach English later, it is useful for them to start learning about MEXT policies and the education systems that they will be working in. Thus, many of their chosen topics were about language learning in Japan.

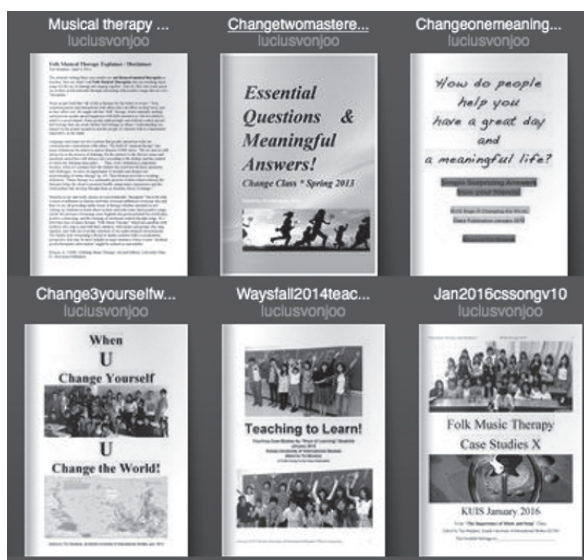
Many of their finished texts have ended up in class publication booklets, enough print copies of which are made for the writers, the next cohort, and attendees at my presentations who may potentially wish to seed the idea that students can create their own English

narratives. Twelve case study booklets about teaching songlets (Figure 1) and four others about various topics (Figure 2) are publicly available at <https://sites.google.com/site/folkmusictherapy/home>.

**Figure 1**  
Twelve Case Study Publications, Each Approximately 40 Pages



**Figure 2**  
A Justification for Musical Therapy, with 4 Diverse Booklets from Student Research



## Advantages of Student Produced and Selected Materials (SPSMs)

SPSMs are intensely student centered since they are produced or selected by students dealing with their own perceptions and experiences. It is also easy to see that these materials are level sensitive in that they are produced by the same learners who will be consuming them, and *ipso facto* must be at their level or highly interesting to them for some reason. It also follows that the content will be mostly in line with that which is interesting to fellow students of the same approximate age. Additionally, when communication about themselves is the main content of the course, students socialize more profoundly, making friends and forming learning communities.

Finally, there are great advantages for teachers using SPSMs, most notably less of the strained tension that comes from trying to adapt alien texts to students or students to texts. As Underhill (1987) says, "One inherent problem is that the course book is written by someone else, somewhere else, who has never met my students or me, and does not know our backgrounds or our learning styles" (p. 12). Thus, while the idea of student-produced texts may seem like more work at first, it actually is less because the material is selected and created by the students.

Teachers also learn that good materials and methods can emerge dynamically from the group. However, a certain amount of flexibility and trust is required to invite students to collaborate in their own education. This "emic pedagogy" (Murphey & Woo, 1998a) creates intensive teacher-learning of students' perspectives and can greatly stimulate teacher development and promote partnerism with students rather than domineering over them (Eisler, 2000).

## Impact on Students

There are three areas that impact students and warrant looking at more closely: SLA processes, identity construction, and community building. In SLA terms, when the texts are produced by the students (with editing corrections, when possible, by the teacher), they are level-appropriate materials which peers can learn from and feel stimulated by. SPTs are at once both input and output and can become meaningfully negotiated in classroom activities. Interest in reading what their peers have written means that students will probably be more aware and notice more (Schmidt, 1990; Schmidt & Frota, 1986), particularly the gap between their own productions and those of their peers (Ellis, 1997). Reading and viewing peers' works also sets up cognitive comparisons that

further allow students to “notice the gap.” Moreover, certain types of SPT (e.g., LLHs, audio and video conversation transcripts) effectively constitute their own genre, characterized by frequent repetition of similar structures and expressions, and thus provide a flood of meaningful and relevant input (Murphey, 1998c). The fact that the genre repeats itself quite heavily means that the same types of structures and expressions are flooded in the learners’ environments and more available to be noticed and absorbed. In particular, when they are dealing with their own texts, students seem to increase their metacognitive, metalinguistic, and metacommunicative awareness as they construct material within the group’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962). As one student wrote:

When I read the newsletters, I can learn a lot of things. I agree or disagree to classmates’ opinions . . . In addition, I can also learn some useful expressions which I don’t know or which I usually don’t use. So I’m always looking forward to having newsletters. The newsletter is one my textbooks for learning English!

Peirce (1995) notes that learners’ “investment . . . must be understood in relation to [their] multiple changing, and contradictory identities” (p. 26).

Norton (1997) similarly suggests that

Every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. They are in other words engaged in identity construction and negotiation. (p. 410)

I believe that constructing a supportive L2 identity component of one’s self goes hand in hand with successful use. The students whose texts are used as classroom learning material feel a certain pride at seeing their work in print. The recording processes especially serve to construct a substantial personal sense of a second language voice that raises self-esteem and enhances further investment. As one student wrote in their student action log, “Today we did videotaping. I enjoyed talking about what I am going to do. I was very aggressive. . . . I think that this kind of lesson is very very good for us to improve my English ability.”

Finally, SPTs can add greatly to the feeling of community when students read, view, and comment on one another’s oral and written texts and create more texts in the process. They begin to model their peers and try new strategies and beliefs. SPTs allow students to more quickly access and cre-

ate a community of learners as they progress with their peers from legitimate peripheral participation to a more central role in the learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

## Conclusion

I do not want to imply that conventional, traditional, and commercial textbooks are without use in our profession. They have their uses in appropriate times and places. However, to rely totally on texts coming from other places seems a terrible waste and a professional neglect of the rich resources sitting in our classes every day. I think we can greatly benefit by re-centering our students’ stories and perspectives in our educational endeavors.

Well-meaning teachers work too hard at guessing what students will like and can learn from. Often this guesswork occurs among groups of government officials or university researchers, both of which are even further removed from the site of action. I suggest that what is most relevant to anyone is themselves, their experiences, and their opinions. *Ask your students for a change!* Then give whatever they give you back to them recursively (Murphey & Falout, 2010).

As teachers, we can create structures that will do this (like the ones described in this paper), but we cannot predict the full content of the course because the best plans emerge from our inspirations that come from tuning in to our students. The creation of periodic retrospective syllabi can help to show the organization of a course, like the maps that explorers make after having traveled through new territory. Obviously, they can’t make such maps beforehand, but they can prepare some of the tools they predict they will need.

“The substitution of socialization for acquisition places language learning within the more comprehensive domain of socialization, the lifelong process through which individuals are initiated into cultural meanings and learn to perform the skills, tasks, roles and identities expected by whatever society or societies they may live in” (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 582).

We should be constantly constructing small societies in our classrooms. These can become small caring, sharing, and critically aware democracies, or they can move in degrees in the other direction, toward more totalitarian types of education. An easy way to go toward the more democratic end and to educate all involved, teachers and students alike, is by using what is already there—the students, their lives, their experiences, their opinions, thoughts, and dreams (see Medding & Thornbury, 2009, for

an eloquent argument in this direction). In the words of Freire (2000), “It is to the reality which meditates men [sic], and to the perception of the reality held by educators and people, that we must go to find the program content of education” (p. 96).

This content can be found highlighted through SPTs, which can provide successful language learning experiences while supporting identity and community construction through rich socialization. SPTs are the texts of our students' lives. What could be more relevant for students to deal with in the new language than their own well-becoming and socializing selves (Murphey, 2016, 2019a, 2019b, 2021b)? It is up to teachers to *dare to ask* for student help (Canfield & Hansen, 1995; Palmer, 2014) in creating texts that can display students' work to the world and to repeatedly disrupt and solidify groups through educational dialogue that allows them all to participate in improving our world.

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### Acknowledgements

First, I want to thank the students who have created all these texts for the world to see. I also want to greatly thank Lucius Von Joo for his technical assistance in putting them up in the Cloud so others could see them. Finally, I want to thank the JALT editors: Theron Muller, who believed in this manuscript enough to work with me on it for over a year, and Paul Lyddon for his awesome editing assistance over the last few months.



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**Tim Murphey** (MA University of Florida, PhD Université de Neuchâtel, Switzerland), semi-retired professor in the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education (RILAE) at Kanda University of International Studies and part-time instructor in Wayo Women's University Graduate School of Human Ecology, juggles while skiing and makes lots of miss-steaks to increase his opera-tunes-it-teas for learning. He is currently researching-learning about connections between Eisler's partnership education, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Watson-Gegeo's language socialization paradigm, Mynard's learning advisor training, and Aaker and Bagdonas's serious humor. His books *Voicing Learning* (Candlin & Mynard, 2021) and *Group Dynamics in the Language Classroom* (with Z. Dörnyei, Cambridge, 2003) expound many of the main points in this article.



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