STUDENT-INVESTED MATERIAL:
BALANCING TEACHER CONTROL & STUDENT INTEREST

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Abstract

There is some consensus to date that for students to be motivated in the
EFL class, their classwork should include content which is of personal
interest to them. Problems can arise, however, in trying to bring content
with greater student appeal into the classroom. Teachers may feel
obligated to sacrifice, to some extent, the instructional focus of the
coursework. This paper describes a procedure, called the Student-
Invested Material procedure (SIM), that the authors developed to solve
this dilemma. SIM does so by incorporating topics of personal relevance
to students into activities that focus on language skill development, by
having them generate their own material. In the procedure, students first
use teacher-prepared material, then make their own material patterned
after the teacher's, and finally use this student-made material in com-
municative activities. In settings as diverse as Japan, Niger, and Greece,
SIM has enabled the authors to maintain both student interest and the
framework of the curriculum.

1. Introduction

EFL teachers, even those who stress active communication in the class-
room, may occasionally find students yawning or checking their watches in
the midst of a lesson. This can be disconcerting. At such times, teachers may
feel tempted to turn to materials of ever higher interest levels. However, does
so doing risk altering, diminishing, or even sacrificing the instructional
focus? Ideally, a balance can be struck.

Those in search of ideal communicative classroom activities will find
that, in the EFL/ESL literature available to date, suggestions abound. For one

thing, it is held that for a communicative activity to be meaningful to students it should involve students in situations whereby they "exchange with others messages of real interest to them" (Rivers & Temperley, 1978, p. 47). For another, in order for language acquisition to take place, students should have a "stake" or "personal interest in the outcome" of a lesson (Taylor, 1983, p. 71). Furthermore, Taylor goes on to say that in order for lessons to motivate students to actually initiate conversation, there should be a focus "on con-tent and real isssues" (p. 81); this focus is likely what Dulay et al. (1982) refer to as "concrete 'here and now' topics" (p. 4). Similarly, Krashen and Terrell (1983) state that, "For acquisition to take place, the topics used in each activity must be intrinsically interesting or meaningful so that stu-dents' attention is focused on the content of the utterances instead of the form" (p. 97).

At first glance, it might appear that free conversation would be the perfect activity, for what could be of greater personal interest to students than self-chosen topics? However, a number of scholars have warned against this choice. Taylor and Wolfson (1978) claim too much freedom "robs students of valuable instructional time" (p. 31). Krahnke and Christianson (1983) point out the importance of providing students with "comprehensible input and supporting it with meaningful interaction" (p. 641). Rivers and Temperley (1978) assert that "we cannot send students off in groups or pairs and tell them to interact. Motivation to communicate must be aroused in some way" (p. 47).

In other words, a meaningful communicative activity should allow the teacher to control the input and structure, and yet it should allow students the autonomy to shape that material into an event of personal import. As Stevick (1980) says, there has to be a balance between the teacher's "control" and students' "initiative" (p. 17). Should the teacher exert too much control, there will remain little margin for students' personal involvement in a lesson. On the other hand, insufficient teacher control can result in the situation typified by Stevick in his description of "the little boy in the progressive school who said, 'Please, Miss Jones, do we have to do just whatever we want to again *today*?' " (pp. 31-32).

2.   A Procedure for Using Student-Invested Material

Nonetheless, one may be overwhelmed by the task of searching for content which will arouse the interest of students who are likely to be of a generational and/or cultural background differing from that of the teacher.

Moreover, organizing and carrying out activities so that students will have a personal stake in them can become a logistical nightmare.

This article presents a procedure that meets this dual challenge because it (a) brings personal relevance to a lesson (regardless of its focus), and (b) can accommodate a wide range of language learning tasks (depending on students' needs, curriculum, etc.). Both these goals can be met, as the procedure makes use of material produced by the students themselves, but which has been based upon samples provided by the teacher (or the course text, though for purposes of simplicity it will be assumed here that the sample material is teacher-produced). Furthermore, from a practical point of view, the SIM procedure is organized so that neither does the teacher's work load increase greatly nor does its implementation result in classroom chaos. And finally, this procedure has been used successfully to teach a large variety of specific and general communicative points to a wide range of nationalities (homogeneous groups in Japan, Niger, and Greece, as well as a class composed of students from Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil).

As for the procedure itself, which has been termed the *Student-Invested Material* (SIM) procedure, it involves, in brief, the following four steps:

1. Students use teacher-prepared material in a speaking activity.
2. Students, in small groups, collaborate in preparing their own material, based in structure and focus on that prepared by the teacher.
3. The teacher checks the students' material.
4. Students organize themselves in new groups and use their material in a speaking activity.

3. Activities Using SIM

To clarify the procedure's steps and their respective rationales, two specific activities incorporating SIM, will be described here. The first, *Rejoinders,* is typical of a relatively structured lesson in that it focuses on a specific communicative strategy. The second will be *News Articles,* a discussion which is not nearly as tightly structured. It is hoped that, by juxtaposing two activities so diverse in structure and scope, the versatility of the SIM format will become evident.

3.1. Rejoinders

The purpose of this activity is to introduce rejoinders and to furnish an opportunity for students to use them orally. Students are first given a chart listing some common ones, although how these prepared expressions might

be introduced (or reviewed) will not be dealt with here, but rather will be left to the discretion of the teacher.

Rejoinders

Happy	*Sad*
— That's great!	— That's too bad.
— That's fantastic!	— I'm sorry to hear that.
— Wonderful!	— Oh, no!
Surprised	*Interested*
— You're joking!	— I see.
— Really!	— Oh yeah?
— I can't believe it!	— Is that right?

Students (in pairs/groups) are then given separate lists of sentences designed to elicit these various rejoinders. They take turns reading the sentences to their partners, who then respond with rejoinders.

Student A	Student B
1. I don't feel well today.	2. I heard there is no class tomorrow.
3. Two days ago I bought a pencil.	4. In high school I got straight A's.
5. ...	6. ...

An example of how students could interact using this exercise would be the following:

A: I don't feel well today.
B: I'm sorry to hear that. I heard there is no class tomorrow.
A: That's fantastic!
etc.

Students with perhaps more imagination and/or ability could be encouraged to extend the exercise:

A: I don't feel well today.
B: I'm sorry to hear that. What's the matter?
A: I have a headache. I think I've been studying too hard.
B: So have I. We've had a lot of tests recently.
A: That's right.
B: I heard there's no class tomorrow.
A: That's great! I think I'll go to the beach.
B: Really! Do you like to swim?
etc.

Step 1: Using Teacher-Prepared Material

Students practice rejoinders by using the teacher-prepared material described above. The teacher-prepared material provides students with a clear example of the type of material they will be asked to prepare in groups.

Step 2: Collaboration

Students in pairs or small groups combine efforts in writing sentences suitable for the elicitation of rejoinders. Students are usually better than the teacher at finding topics of interest to the others in the class. By way of example, Japanese students have written, "My parents want me to have an arranged marriage." Greek students once wrote, "Our teachers are planning to strike next week," and "Maradona won't be playing in the football match this weekend" was written by South American students. When subsequently used as a basis for oral practice in Step 4, statements such as these provoked unexpected (by the teacher) rejoinders and discussions. In all three cases, the teacher would not have included these sentences in the teacher-prepared material, either through lack of knowledge or through hesitation to broach potentially sensitive subjects.

Individual students feel less pressure to be creative. While it may be difficult for a student, working alone, to produce suitable material, with the help of other group members, "writer's block" seems to diminish or disappear. Students tend to inspire each other. Indeed, students seem to have confidence in the quality of material that has the approval of more than one student.

The teacher's paper-work load is reduced according to the number of collaborating groups. For example, if the class size is 30, and students are collaborating in groups of three, there will be only ten papers to check rather than 30. Furthermore, as the material has been written and (in theory) "proof-read" by at least two students, there should be fewer mistakes; thus, the checking is relatively quick for the teacher.

Step 3: Teacher's Check

Each pair/group submits a copy of its material to the teacher for correction. The teacher has several options in regard to checking the material. If the class is either relatively advanced, or familiar with this type of process, the check may merely involve a few seconds' perusal by the teacher; in such cases, it may be possible for the teacher to check, the groups to correct, and each student to write a personal copy within one class period without students having to waste time waiting for other groups to finish the

step. However, another option would be to have the groups spend the last 10-20 minutes of a class period writing as much material as possible and then submit it before class is adjourned to the teacher, who would check the material after class and return it another day, at which time each student would make a personal copy of his/her group's material.

As students will eventually present their material in new groups, it is important that it be free of mistakes, which would cause confusion and frustration in the new groups.

Leaders, in presenting their material to new groups, and participants, in responding to it, exhibit more confidence in material that they know to be correct.

Step 4: Lead/Participate

Students arrange themselves in new pairs/groups. These new groups may be composed of anyone not in the students' collaboration (material-making) groups in Steps 2 and 3. They take turns presenting their material (i.e. in this activity, saying their sentences to elicit the various rejoinders) and responding (i.e. in this case, giving rejoinders in response to others' sentences). Students seem interested in what has been produced by the others; to reiterate, these materials often have greater relevance to students than materials which the teacher might have brought in. In the case of the *Rejoinder* activity, students even appeared more willing to experiment with intonation, and in general, seemed to demonstrate a sharper command of the rejoinders when responding to other students' sentences. (For example, when one student said, "I have a date tonight," rather than the anticipated, "That's great!", the partner responded with an incredulous, "I can't BELIEVE it!")

3.2   News Articles

A second example of an activity incorporating SIM is *News Articles*, which, as was mentioned, would be considered less structured than the *Rejoinder* activity.

Step 1:   Using Teacher-Prepared Material

The purpose here is to offer students experience of participating in and leading a discussion on current events. The students first read a news article in English (chosen by the teacher) about, for example, sex stereotyping and discrimination in elementary schools. Students then divide into pairs/groups of three, and each member of a pair/group is given a list of two different types

of questions: comprehension questions (which pertain directly to the article) and "your opinion/experience" questions (which relate to it only indirectly). As with *Rejoinders,* each group member has a different list of questions.

Examples of comprehension questions

> According to the article:
> 1. What percent of the girls take Home Economics?
> 2. Are sports budgets mostly for girls or boys?
> 3. Why do some people think higher education is a waste of time for girls?

Examples of "Your opinion/experience" questions

> 1. Did you notice sex discrimination in your *own* elementary school?
> 2. Did you have any women teachers whom you admired?
> 3. In general, do you think males have more ability than females?

In their groups, students discuss the article by asking and responding to the given questions.

Step 2: Collaboration

In a class composed of students sharing the same mother tongue, each student brings to class one or two articles from a newspaper or magazine (preferably in their native language) which they think would lead to an interesting discussion. In groups, the students then choose one of the articles, prepare a summary (in English) of its main points, and write lists consisting of the two types of questions mentioned above. In a class composed of mixed nationalities, the students could be asked to bring an article from an English source.
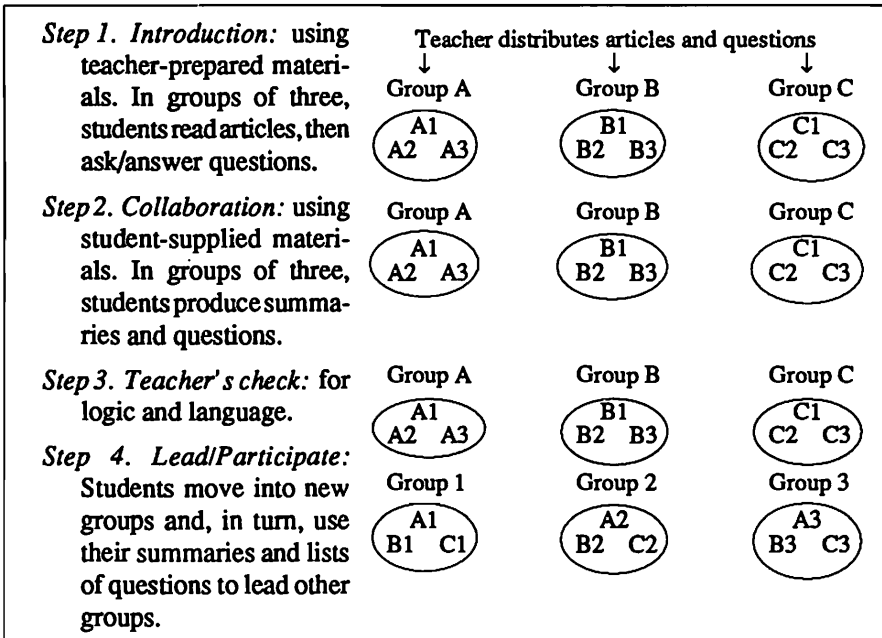
Step 3: Teacher's Check

Each group submits a copy of its summary and questions to the teacher for correction. As was the case in Step 3 of *Rejoinders,* the teacher's main concern here is to assure that the student-prepared material will not cause undue confusion when it is used in Step 4. After the teacher has checked the summaries and questions, each group member makes a personal copy of these (either handwritten or photocopied) to use in Step 4.

Step 4: Lead/Participate

The teacher chooses one of the collaborating groups (e.g. Group A) to be the first leaders of a discussion; in other words, new groups are formed, each

of which contains one member from Group A, who acts as a leader. Each leader summarizes the news article for the benefit of the other members of his/her newly-assembled group (Group 1), who, needless to say, would be unfamiliar with the content of Group A's news article. Then each leader conducts a discussion based upon the questions prepared by Group A. Because the leaders summarize the article orally, only the leaders should have a copy of the summary.

Figure 1. The Four Steps in the SIM Procedure
Activity: News Articles

Step 1. Introduction: using teacher-prepared materials. In groups of three, students read articles, then ask/answer questions.

Teacher distributes articles and questions
↓ ↓ ↓
Group A — A1 A2 A3
Group B — B1 B2 B3
Group C — C1 C2 C3

Step 2. Collaboration: using student-supplied materials. In groups of three, students produce summaries and questions.

Group A — A1 A2 A3
Group B — B1 B2 B3
Group C — C1 C2 C3

Step 3. Teacher's check: for logic and language.

Group A — A1 A2 A3
Group B — B1 B2 B3
Group C — C1 C2 C3

Step 4. Lead/Participate: Students move into new groups and, in turn, use their summaries and lists of questions to lead other groups.

Group 1 — A1 B1 C1
Group 2 — A2 B2 C2
Group 3 — A3 B3 C3

4. Further Applications for SIM

As mentioned above, this procedure has been effective in working with a variety of communicative points. In addition to *Rejoinders* and *News Articles*, some other activities are:

Probability — To focus on expressions such as "I definitely will," "I probably will," "I'm not sure," "I doubt it," students write sentences which would evoke these expressions (e.g. Do you think you will travel abroad this year? / Do you think you'll go to a concert soon?).

Agree and Disagree   To practice expressions such as "I agree," "That's a good point," "I disagree," "I'm not sure I agree," students write statements to elicit these expressions (e.g. In my opinion, Europe is the best place to take a vacation. / I feel our school cafeteria is too expensive.).

Find the Strange Word   As a variation of this commonly used language activity (which is a practice in categorization), students make lists of words which include three that are similar and one that is incongruous (e.g. German, Japan, French, American / August, Monday, October, November). In Step 4, after hearing the list, the partner has to tell which word was strange and explain why it was strange.

Discussion Topics   To practice leading a discussion, students choose a topic that they feel their classmates will find interesting to discuss (e.g. sports, travel, future plans) and write discussion questions about it.

With these four activities, as in *Rejoinders* and *News Articles,* before students created their own material, they practiced using teacher-prepared material. Similarly, after this student-prepared material was checked by the teacher, everyone was paired or grouped with students not in their material-making group when using this student-prepared material.

5.   Conclusion

It is hoped that the SIM procedure might prove a useful format for those who feel, as Swan (1985) does, that:

> Each individual in a class already possesses a vast private store of knowledge, opinions, and experiences. ... If student X can be persuaded to communicate some of these things to student Y ... then we have a basis for genuinely rich and productive language practice. In many contemporary language courses, communication of this "personal" kind seems to be seriously under-exploited. (p. 84)

This under-exploitation is likely to be due to a teacher's preoccupation with the form of the language. However, this is not to say that form (e.g. grammar) is irrelevant. On the contrary, it is, in fact, the teacher who knows the full spectrum of the subject, and thus must decide "what students are supposed to be doing" (Stevick, 1980, p. 17). The SIM procedure does allow

for the "communication of a personal kind" that Swan spoke of as well as for "the teacher's necessary contribution" required by Stevick (1980, p. 18).

Although in Step 1, students do interact in English and follow through using the teacher-prepared material, it is in Step 4, where they use their own material (as a basis for a speaking activity) that the noise level rises, and they lean toward one another to understand and to be understood; it is as if, at last, the language has become merely the means, and self-expression, the end!

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