Brainstorm Input You Need

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Focus: brainstorming can give you access to things you don't know that your students are thinking

Dokkyo University runs a course named Comprehensive English 1 for first-year students. I do not use a textbook but instead have students provide all the input for all lessons (e.g., they show the class and myself what they are thinking for a topic and task during a brainstorming session on the board); they are the textbook! My teaching adjusts to what they tell me whether it be advice on what is acceptable in a conversation or mistake/error correction. It is a very dynamic and unpredictable technique that involves students socially co-constructing their own English conversations with other students and the teacher.

In the beginning

When I first started teaching English in Japan, I was very comfortable with textbooks because they save on preparation time and have ready-to-go materials with exercises. However, I started to realize that I was subscribing to someone else's educational beliefs and sacrificing my input on what was being taught. I also noticed negative student reactions when I mentioned the word "textbook", which made me think…what would it be like ditching textbooks?

But why ditch textbooks?

I had to justify my reasoning. In my experience, textbooks are limited in tapping into human thoughts and feed the mind rather than open a window to it. Therefore, I wanted to change my teaching and focus on student input in my lessons. Essentially, I wanted my students to replace textbooks.

But how could I ditch textbooks?

I started my journey into a world without textbooks by experimenting with the brainstorm concept, which is often used for new and creative ideas. However, I started experimenting with it from a different angle; as a window to see what my students were thinking in preparation for conversations and using their brainstorming input to inspire and drive practice conversations.

Thinking about thinking

This got me thinking about thinking and the philosophical proposition, "I think, therefore I am." Rene Decartes, a French philosopher, proposed doubting one's own existence serves as proof of the reality of one's own mind (Cogito ergo sum, n.d.) but I used a simpler interpretation for brainstorming:

- I think therefore I am engaged.
- I think therefore I am sharing my thoughts and beliefs with others.
- I think therefore I am being valued.

So what did all this mean?

It meant that I had to convince my students that thinking for themselves was allowed, expected and valued. Fortunately, by this stage, I was teaching conversational courses that met twice a week and I was able to establish a brainstorming routine made up of homework preparation, which was to write three facts, opinions and questions about a topic (e.g., Love & Money) and three language ideas to achieve a task (e.g., Giving opinions); a total of 12 ideas. At the beginning of the first lesson of each week, students shared their homework with a partner and then each student wrote ONE fact or opinion or question or language idea to achieve the task on the blackboard; about 23 in total. This brainstorming session opened a window to what the class was generally thinking. My job was then to be a linguistic filter that checked content and grammar and gave advice on how realistic the student ideas were for an effective conversation at their level. This student input helped direct practice conversations before assessment, which was demonstrating task-competence in front of the class.

In addition

I have also used brainstorming in public speaking courses to find out what my students already knew about speeches and presentations. For example:

- Who gives a speech/presentation?

- What is a speech/presentation?

- When do we see or give a speech/presentation?

- Where can we see or give a speech/presentation?

- Why see or give a speech/presentation?

- How can we give a speech/presentation?

This kind of brainstorming probed for a connection with real world applications and I found it to be quite successful too.

Finally

In conclusion, I believe that through brainstorming my students took a degree of ownership and control of their own learning by thinking for themselves and by using their OWN input in preparation for conversations and public speaking rather than being overly dependent on me and overly dependent on textbooks. And this is as far as my story goes, so far.

Reference

Cogito ergo sum. (n.d.). Wikipedia. Retrieved 10.31.2015 from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cogito_ergo_sum>.

Bio: Darren Van Veelen (M.ED TESOL) has been teaching English in Japan for 12 years. His areas of interest are developing speaking strategies, critical thinking skills, motivation, and keeping it real in the classroom.