

A Whole-Class Approach to Creating Collaborative Materials with Students

by Betty Aderman, Segundo Garcia, and John Pititto

What could a materials-making procedure using visual thinking, a classic literacy development technique, and digital technology contribute to adult ESL practice? That was the question we asked through a classroom study to explore the value of making a collaborative PowerPoint visual with high-intermediate adult ESL students to introduce personal essay writing.

Background

The Collaborative PowerPoint process combines visual thinking ideas and practices with the Language Experience Approach (LEA). Theoretically and in educational practice, visual thinking is gaining prominence in language teaching and learning (Britsch, 2009, 2010, 2012). In the Collaborative PowerPoint process, text structure is created by having the class determine, select, group, and sequence visuals. (See McPhee, 2013, for the source of this spatial-visual technique.)

LEA is a classic literacy building technique that uses transcription of students' oral communication to make text for reading and writing instruction. It is an interesting and useful method for lower literate adults to use in integrating prior knowledge with new information (Aderman, 1988; Aderman, Nitzke, Pingree, & Voichick, 1987).

Steps in the Collaborative PowerPoint Process

- ***Introduce the theme, text type, and vocabulary to help students think and communicate.*** Introduce and talk about the theme, type of text, and materials you want to make with the students: cards, stories, essays, response to reading. Provide language to assist students in thinking and speaking about the visuals and text they are producing.
- ***Ask students to select or create visuals to relate to the theme and content.*** Although we have used only original photographs taken by the students and teacher, it should also be possible to use student drawings or Internet images. The point is for each student to create or select relevant visuals even if they can't always explain how and why they are related to the textual assignment.
- ***Help students notice that visuals play an important part in realizing content.*** Selecting the visual is a main entry point into the theme. The more students contribute visuals, the more the students can learn from talking about them with each other.
- ***Guide the students in organizing the visuals by connecting them to each other, the type of text, and the content theme.*** Display the visuals randomly. Start organizing the visuals by having students select the needed number of visuals from the collected display. Grow the structure from the middle. Ask students to select a visual and other visuals that go with it. Ask in what way the pictures go together.
- ***Guide students in integrating visuals and language by creating a text that you transcribe as they speak.*** Begin with the first visual by asking the students what they want to say about it. Ask who else wants to add something. If you see there is an opportunity to say more or present another possibility, give a prompt or make a suggestion. If the student takes your suggestion, ask the student to use the input in the statement he or she is making so you can transcribe it.
- ***Tweak the product and use the material.*** Have the class re-read and review as you proceed through the text and pictures. Edit for clarity. Use the material for instruction in your class and have the students share with others.

The Classroom Study

To assess how use of the Collaborative PowerPoint process compared with a Traditional approach (as designed by the teacher), the same teacher gave 12 hours of instruction to two different classes. The goal in both classes was to provide instruction for writing a personal essay on the theme Going Back to School. In both classes, computer and SmartBoard technology was used. In the Traditional class, each student used a computer for class activities. In the PowerPoint class, students used smartphones to take photographs, but they were limited to only one photo-taking assignment because the PowerPoint class met for 2.5 (five-hour) sessions compared to 4 (three-hour) sessions in the traditional class.

To introduce vocabulary and structural features, the teacher used the same questions with both classes:

- What does going back to school mean to you?
- What images do you see in your mind when thinking about going back to school?
- How would you describe going back to school?
- How is going back to school a community or cultural event?
- What does going back to school remind you of?

In the Traditional class, students read, processed, and recalled information from three model passages on the topic, two from published texts and one written by the teacher. In addition, students were asked to unscramble a dialog written by the teacher; students also were asked to interview each other. They read an interview summary written by the teacher, after which they wrote their own.

In the Collaborating PowerPoint class, to introduce the project, the teacher showed a Collaborative PowerPoint visual made with a previous class on a different theme. The class discussed possible photos they could take, e-mailed several photos, selected 10-12 photos from the 25 that were sent in, and grouped the photos. Then the class used the sequence of photos to prepare the text. For each slide, several students contributed one or two statements. The class discussed the ideas in the text and how they conveyed their thoughts and feelings. They talked about how the parts of the text (main idea, details) and structure (beginning, middle, end) contributed to the meaning. The teacher guided revision and did several edits. Finally, the class displayed the PowerPoint they had made and each student wrote their own personal essays.

Results

We used two assessment instruments to compare effects of instruction: a written personal essay and a transcribed across-group dialog. We ranked the essays on fluency, register, voice, and tone, and found the Traditional class essays to be academic and repetitive. When we read two or three, they were impressive. When we read 15, they all sounded similar. The collaborative PowerPoint class produced essays that were more personal, unpredictable, and written at a lower register. In the cross-group dialog, two students selected from each class described and commented on their instructional experience.

Top-rated Traditional essay introduction

Top-rated Collaborative PowerPoint essay introduction

For me going back to school means that I will have the opportunity to learn new things. I can improve my English skills so I can have a better job and go to college and maybe have a Master's degrees.

Going back to school means to me a lot. It is a second chance. It has been a long time since I was in school and now I'm very motivated.

In the cross-group dialog, two students selected from each class described and commented on their instructional experience.

Traditional class top-rated essay writer

With all the lessons that we practice a lot of writing, so that was really interesting because we know we can write more better and also, like, it was kind of little boring because we had to write, we had to read, and it's kind like all it was the same.

Collaborative PowerPoint class top-rated essay writer

The other group were writing a lot which we weren't. We were more talking, interacting with each other, and we came to the conclusion, the whole group, which pictures we liked. Also, on the descriptions which I think were the feelings of most of the class, so I liked it a lot It was more us talking and getting into the ideas.

Conclusion

The Traditional instruction helped students process new language chunks, while the Collaborative PowerPoint instruction encouraged personal expression. Doing this study helped us think about how to improve instructional outcomes for the Collaborative PowerPoint approach without losing its engaging qualities for adult students. As teachers, we need to provide more content and idea language for students to integrate into planning and composing. We need to highlight shared language and visual properties by making better use of photos students take and talk about. This and other visual-verbal activities can help students become aware of compositional elements, perceive metaphorically, use imagery, notice precisely and holistically, and gain in experience to create and create.

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