

Negotiating course material to counter poor learner motivation

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Abstract

This paper details a teacher-implemented intervention, negotiating learner-generated materials, with the aim of improving low levels of learner motivation. This had resulted from the introduction of a problematic entry test policy acting as gatekeeper to an internationally-accredited diploma course in the learners' specialized technical subject. For the learners, successful completion of the diploma course would guarantee social and financial benefits including promotion, increased salary and prestige within the military institution. However, an order came from the commanding officer that learners would only be accepted onto the diploma course if they attained an IELTS test score of Band 5. This requirement was not attainable by the learners in the time available and represented a threat to their career aspirations, which would negatively affect them personally, economically and professionally. Consequently, there was a substantial drop in learner motivation. An intervention was constructed and conducted during the course over a two-week period to supplement students' course book in order to counter such poor levels of motivation. The study was set within the critical paradigm, using quantitative and qualitative data collecting methods to answer my research question: "To what extent does the intervention (asking learners to choose a topic, select original material, and suggest the type of tasks to be produced for the material) have a positive effect on learners' levels of motivation?" Key findings included an observed increase in learner engagement and a greater level of concentration than in recent classes together with reduced learner worry about the IELTS test. Several conclusions are offered as to the efficacy of conducting such an intervention and how it could impact on learner motivation.

Introduction

Educators know and understand the importance of learner motivation in terms of learner engagement and sustained learner success both in the classroom and the examinations room. When a top-down decision is made which is not only unjustified and without educational support but which also affects learner motivation in a negative way, educators need to be ready with strategies to counter such a detrimental influence to learners' approach to their English language learning. This paper presents such a situation and details a strategy used to counter such negativity by engaging learners through syllabus negotiation between learners and their teacher. The learning context is clearly outlined, as is the demotivating effect of a top-down decision. The strategy to address this scenario is detailed with reference to relevant literature and the methods of research used are clearly presented and justified. Key findings are discussed and conclusions are offered which are relevant to local contexts in both Arab countries and worldwide.

Context

This paper focuses on my work in the Omani military and how I attempted to address a problematic top-down decision in order to re-build learner motivation while preparing learners for an internationally-accredited technical diploma using English as the medium of delivery.

Many personnel are in the Omani military to do technical jobs such as avionics technicians and mechanical engineers. Many of these personnel apply a scientific approach to learning and find a humanities subject, such as learning English, a real challenge. English is often used as a requirement for personnel receiving technical training courses. Such technically-minded learners often have low

levels of motivation to learn because they struggle with the challenge of learning a second language. The requirement of attaining an IELTS Band 5 to attend the technical diploma course represented a further obstacle to learners fulfilling their professional aspirations. IELTS Band 5 is described as 'modest user - has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.' (IELTS Essentials, 2018) which equates to a general English level of Intermediate / Upper Intermediate. The learners were studying Headway Pre-Intermediate at the level of IELTS Band 2, 'intermittent user - no real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs. Has great difficulty understanding spoken and written English.' (ibid) or Band 3 'extremely limited user - conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.' (ibid). Combine these low levels of current ability in English with insufficient time being available to improve their level to Band 5 before taking the official test made the new testing policy unrealistic. Furthermore, the IELTS exam itself had no practical application relating to the process of preparation for the technical diploma course. This new requirement increased the negative affect on learner motivation, particularly as these learners knew few of them had any chance of attaining the required IELTS band within the limited time allotted for IELTS test preparation. This paper outlines how a classroom intervention, negotiating course materials with learners, was introduced to redress low motivation and how effective this intervention was. The process of negotiating learner-generated materials (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000) is detailed as is the research methodology to assess the effectiveness of such negotiation on learner motivation. Findings are presented, discussed and implications are offered on how such interventions can benefit both learners and teachers in learning contexts in the Gulf region and worldwide.

In my twenty-four years of experience working in the military, I have found that learning to communicate in English is particularly challenging for technical military personnel. Likewise, taking English language tests can be daunting. Low scores can negatively affect a learner's confidence and motivation to learn. Conversely, well-prepared learners who attain high scores usually gain confidence and motivation. In my first weeks with the class, the learners were well-motivated to learn English but their approach to the course changed upon being told of the new test policy. The learners discussed the new testing policy with me and realized they had no chance of reaching the level of English as represented by Band 5. They concluded that they would not be enrolled on the diploma course and their motivation to learn English declined considerably. This was the scenario I found myself in as the class's English teacher, having just taken up a new posting in the army unit. Within a few weeks, the training wing received an order from the commanding officer that this group of learners would only be enrolled in their prospective diploma course if they attained an IELTS level 5 test score within 4-6 months' time. As a former IELTS examiner, I was able to give them an informal IELTS test in the institution using an open-source practice test. The results confirmed my fears that the learners were highly unlikely to reach a band 5 in the time allotted. Most of the class attained a '2' denoting an intermittent user or a '3' denoting an extremely limited user, with only two achieving a '4' denoting limited user (IELTS, 2017).

Clearly, as the learners' teacher, it was incumbent on me to use my professional and academic expertise to address the problematic levels of demotivation I now faced. Therefore, I focused my attention on using affective factors to enhance classroom motivation which might lead to improved language learning (Arnold, 1999). This improved learning would only flourish once the learners' attitude to their classes, their teacher and their learning (Allwright, 2001) had been improved.

I decided to initiate an intervention in an attempt to redress the poor learner motivation. The intervention sought to increase learner engagement with their learning by negotiating a small part of their syllabus (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). This involved tasking every learner to bring in digital content from the internet about a topic they found interesting and which other learners probably would too.

Once I had checked that the topics and texts were appropriate, I invited each learner to say what type of language learning components the materials should be made into: reading and vocabulary building tasks; tasks with a grammar focus; listening tasks; speaking activities; and writing consolidation work. Then, I produced texts and tasks based on their input which were suitable for the class and would form the basis of a lesson or possibly two lessons to cover each topic. By inserting these materials into the course, I hoped to reduce learner levels of anxiety related to the test policy and increase motivation by encouraging a more positive approach to learning which would hopefully result in greater learner self-esteem (Crandall, 1999) and to re-direct my learners' attitudes to positive areas of their English language learning.

Key considerations

Consequences of an imposed change in testing policy

The testing policy described above was legitimized on the basis of being a 'top-down managerial approach' (Troudi et al., 2009, p546) to the English language studies of my learners. As a demonstration of institutional power, when the senior officer can make a decision without taking advice from educational experts, the testing policy precluded the operationalization of informed professionalism (Luke et al., 2013) on the part of the educational expert, i.e.: myself. Moreover, at no time was the policy justified as being for the improvement of learning and heightened linguistic achievement (Shohamy, 2004). The IELTS test had suddenly made English not only the medium of instruction for the technical diploma, but a selection tool to a course which would lead learners to sought-after job positions, promotion and military career opportunities (Troudi, 2005) with no indication as to instructional objectives (Prabhu, 1990, p162) and with no reference to the English language expert in the training wing. Testing policy dictates language policy, which fulfills Shohamy's (2004) contention that 'language tests are often introduced in undemocratic and unethical ways [...] for carrying out the policy agendas of those in power' (p72).

From this policy, it is clear that 'the impact of (the test) on instruction' (ibid) is significant and negative in terms of the need to change the focus of the syllabus to IELTS test preparation without sound educational justification. Moreover, as an inappropriate testing tool, the IELTS test does not show whether candidates have the language knowledge required to begin the technical diploma nor will an IELTS preparation course add anything to what learners need to deal with the technical diploma course. Conversely, a general English test given at the end of Pre-Intermediate level would serve as a much more appropriate assessment tool to de-select extremely weak learners while allowing suitably-prepared learners to proceed to the diploma course, as had been the selection policy followed for the previous ten-plus years producing learners who were capable of understanding and using the technical input they received in English.

No consideration was given as to the IELTS test's relevance to my learners' necessities, lacks and wants (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987), which the syllabus and evaluation system had hitherto covered. Any semblance of Shohamy's (2001) fairness standards had therefore been revoked, in professional terms regarding the politics of gatekeeping (Norton and Toohey, 2004). As Shohamy (2001) concludes 'while test takers perceive tests as powerful, they see themselves as powerless' (p13).

My learners had no 'test-takers' voices (Troudi et al., 2009, p547) in the policy-making process. In addition, the policy reversed the perceived benefits which assessment tools can have of constituting an enriching assessment practice (Cheng, Rogers & Hu, 2004) with testing tools promoting valuable washback in terms of lesson time spent on essential aspects of English to prepare learners for the technical course such as receptive and study skills. What is more, 'these lower proficiency learners (had) become trapped in a self-perpetuating negative cycle of reduced self-confidence, demotivation and poor performance' (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p151) as demonstrated by what I observed as soon as the new test policy was announced: increased absenteeism; poor or no homework produced; little

or no self-study outside the classroom; a downward trend in progress-test achievement; poor retention of language; and time wasted in the classroom.

Critical pedagogy's call for the empowerment of learners (Johnson, 2003) seemed a distant goal in this learning scenario, with learners having no way to resist the top-down policy (Shohamy 2004). With no choice other than to fall back on van Dijk's (1993) notion of compliance and acceptance, my learners had to continue studying despite their hopes being threatened and with their motivation at very low levels.

In respect of Dörnyei's (2005) framework for L2 motivation, my learners needed increased instrumental motivation to continue learning English. The testing policy impinged on my learners' L2 learning experience (Dörnyei, 2005) with the IELTS test representing a threat to their futures as per Prabhu's (1990) identification of learner aspiration stemming from learning English. The detrimental consequences of the testing policy on affective factors of motivation, anxiety and attitude (Troudi, 2005) emerged not only in the physical evidence alluded to above but also manifested itself through other learner behaviours. My learners called for, but did not get, meetings with senior officers. They appealed for my help but also made constant pejorative comments about all English tests.

Simultaneously, the testing policy left myself, as class instructor, with no recall to question the order or select an option to avoid implementing the policy (Farah, 2007), with externally imposed criteria (ibid). These criteria dictated classroom focus on test preparation without sufficient time to cover what they required to be successful and instead of addressing learners' actual language needs. In response, I decided to 'investigate (my) situatedness' (Breunig, 2005, p116) as a critical educator to arrive at an informed set of actions to, hopefully, re-dress the demotivation brought on by the testing policy. By negotiating a small part of the English syllabus with my learners, I hoped to use the intervention to counter the negative effects of the imposed testing policy.

Negotiating classroom materials

First, I asked the learners to select one topic each was interested in and to download information about it, whilst out of the institution. Their chosen topics included: Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al-Said, the current ruler of the Sultanate of Oman; the Omani artillery regiment; local places of interest; Omani education; the Omani job market; football; a new car on the market; and a famous Hollywood film. In this way, learners connected their English classes with their related 'thematic universe(s)' (Freire, 1972, p. 77) and every learner was given a voice (McDevitt, 2004). This procedure of asking for learner input in course materials was in keeping with Breen and Littlejohn's (2000) notion of 'procedural negotiation in the classroom (which) comprises overt and shared decision-making [...] so that the teaching learning process within a class can be as effective as possible' (p. 9) albeit the intervention represented 'a selective focus for negotiation' (ibid, p. 282). Indeed, the intervention was not on any great scale, unlike Holec's (1981) project to make learners the managers of their own learning, but it did represent a tentative move towards permitting learner choice, as Kenny (1993) writes, 'a way of organizing what the learners want to do' (p. 440).

Next, I asked my learners which classroom tasks they had already experienced in their English language learning careers that they would like to have created to cover such areas as reading, listening, speaking, writing, and grammar-focused or vocabulary-building lessons. By doing this, I hoped to concretize Chomsky's (1988) declaration that '99 per cent of teaching is making the students feel interested in the materials' (p. 181) to encourage learners to communicate about personal interests connected with their lives outside of the classroom.

Involving learners in the decision-making process in this way enacts a viable approach to critical pedagogy as expressed by Giroux (2011) to take 'seriously those maps of meaning, affective investments, and sedimented desires that enable students to connect their own lives and everyday experiences to what they learn' (p. 106). It also makes the syllabus more inclusive (Breunig, 2005) and

gives the topic originators a 'feeling of making a useful contribution' (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011, p. 121) to their course. At the same time, Maslow's (1954) notion of self-actualization is encouraged to tap into the learners' inner selves through 'intensity of engagement, attention, effort, and persistence' (van Lier, 1996, p. 102) as exemplified by their enthusiasm and prompt action to submit their topic materials. This enthusiasm was not surprising given the local context of learners already having been through a national secondary education system where, according to Al-Toubi (1998), the nationally-prescribed textbooks fail to encourage or incorporate individuals' interests.

By selecting 'a pedagogy of inclusion' (Pennycook, 2001, p. 129) my aim was to enact a 'transformative pedagogy' (ibid, p. 7). Therefore, by affording my learners 'a student-directed classroom experience' (Breunig, 2005, p. 108), I sought to develop a scenario in which the learners' 'education should be co-intentional' (ibid, p. 115). I am aware that this is not normal practice in Oman (Al-Toubi, 1998) but is in tune with a Sudanese lecturer working in the Sultanate and quoted by Al-Issa (2011): 'I try to consult my students because teaching a language is a matter of integrating all skills [...] So, I say what do you need? What do you want to practice?' (p. 210). The intervention should also invoke Stevick's (1980) notion of the whole learner incorporating the learner's life both inside and outside of the learning institution.

Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) view that the influence which teachers and learners exert on a language course is a key element in the education process became a driving force underpinning the intervention, with the enthusiasm of the instructor, myself, as central to increased levels of motivation. Moreover, Tardy and Snyder's (2004) observed phenomenon of 'flow as occurring when students were engaged, [...] or taking responsibility, or authenticating/personalizing the classroom material' (p. 123) signals the importance of involving learners in their own learning and exemplifies the way the classroom context affects learner motivation (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011).

By including the learners in a small part of syllabus design and materials production, I have instituted the concept of investment (Norton Peirce, 1995) in an attempt to foster increased levels of motivation in keeping with Palmer's (1993) assertion that 'the greater the investment in a new idea, the greater the commitment' (1993, p. 171). This holds true not only for instructors but also for adult learners. As Breunig (2005) succinctly comments 'involving students in the creation of goals, objectives, and expectations of the course [...] offset(s) some of the power imbalance' (p. 115) caused by the testing policy and its disregard for educationally informed decision-making. The choosing of their own materials should also activate Littlewood's (1999) notion of proactive autonomy to maximize learners' potential, albeit within the confines of my short-term intervention. Moreover, the intervention would hopefully allow intrinsic motivation to flourish and deeper learning to occur 'by providing choice and meaningful rationales for learning activities acknowledging students' feelings about those topics, and minimizing pressure and control' (Niemic & Ryan, 2009, p. 140) arising from the testing policy.

In this way, I had tentatively begun to establish a learner-centred (Auerbach, 2000) community putting the responsibility for topic and task selection onto my learners. This should ensure that 'students are active and equally important participants in the teacher-student relation' (Johnson, 2003, p. 23). However, whilst the intervention was seeking to enhance learning-centred activities, the learning scenario did not encourage 'self-actualization of individual empowerment' (ibid) since the military does not promote 'individualism (or) the practice of democracy' (ibid). Including my learners in a small aspect of curriculum development should not erode the deeply embedded notion of rank and respect in the military. I hold a civilian officer rank higher than all my learners' ranks and it is myself, the officer instructor, who oversees the material and task production as per Breen and Littlejohn's (2000) suggestion that 'decision-making needs to be based on *informed* choice' (p. 282). In other words, the educational expert, not the learners themselves, should assume the editorial role in materials production.

With the instructor acting as editor of the raw materials, successful learning scenarios (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011) should be arranged, as long as the editing process ensures learner- and learning-friendly activities in terms of the language, tasks and concepts inherent in the finished materials. This is the point at which the instructor's professional judgement is crucial to ensure learner success.

Choosing topics of their own should also invoke my learners' 'transportable identities' (Richards, 2006), making connections between the learners' experiences in the classroom with their lives in the outside world. These identities, constructed during classroom activities by the inclusive nature of materials and tasks, should mean that my learners' training-wing identities are reinforced by instructional practices (Kubota, 2004, p. 44). These identities should be strengthened by the formation of a cooperative classroom structure (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011) to maximize learner collaboration to achieve shared goals and enact autonomy theory providing learners with the self-motivation to take charge of the affective dimension of the learning process (ibid). Including learners in the decision-making process also satisfies the 'assumption of worthwhileness' (Johnson, 2003, p. 29) inherent in the process of learner choice of topics and tasks. Learners should consider what they do in class is both worthwhile and meaningful (Brophy, 2004) if motivation is to be positively affected.

Learners can be included in task selection, in line with Kumaravadivelu's (2006) concept of pedagogy which is grounded in the local context as long as the objectives of the syllabus will be met. Learner-input can therefore ameliorate the relevance of course content related to the realities of learners' lives at the same time as engaging learner knowledge (ibid). By introducing the intervention, I focus on practical theory (Burns, 2010) leading to personal practical knowledge (Golombek, 2009) in the form of enhanced understanding of the motivational power of inclusivity and learner-specific materials and tasks. Increased levels of motivation should then ensure the following positive outcomes: increased attendance; more effective use of class time; enhanced retention of language; greater learner success; improved standards of homework produced; augmented effort and time spent on self-study outside the classroom; and an upward trend in test achievement.

The classroom intervention

I received learner-selected materials from the internet on learners' USBs, for ease of transfer to my laptop, together with the types of classroom tasks each individual learner wanted used with their material. This adhered to the notion that 'authenticity of (learners') learning experiences could be enhanced by bringing tasks closer [...] with the mental and social worlds that they inhabit both inside and outside the classroom' (McIntyre et al., 2007, p. 154) thereby 'fostering a stronger sense of agency and ownership' (ibid). Scrutinizing this raw material, I found I needed to re-format and edit it for length and complexity of language to better suit the language level of my learners. I was also careful to edit out or re-write any content which might cause offence, for example a historical text about the country's ruler which did not correspond with how local history has been depicted in the country. Visuals were used, adapted, removed or replaced for convenience of use and appropriacy. Then the materials were collated into a bound collection with a contents page containing the topic and the originator's name, and with each page of material having the name of the originator. Student's and teacher's books were bound separately. By acting as editor and ELT writer in this way, I hoped to ensure pedagogically sound lessons.

Methods

The study is grounded in the critical paradigm in the context of educational injustice imposed on the learners and their instructor by the testing policy. As Breunig (2005) states, 'engaging in a more purposeful classroom praxis that acts on the theoretical underpinnings of experiential education and critical pedagogy can be one means of working toward a vision of a more socially just world' (p. 120). Methodologically, the study employed action research in the form of a classroom intervention and principally an interpretative approach, although both quantitative and qualitative methods of data

collection were used. These methods included questionnaires, lesson observation notes, and interviews with learners to enable me to embark on critical scrutiny (Rich and Troudi, 2006) to answer my research question: to what extent does the intervention, asking learners to choose a topic, select original material, and suggest the type of tasks to be produced for the material, have a positive effect on learners' levels of motivation?

I then used these learner-generated materials over a two-week period and completed a lesson observation form during each lesson. The topics were incorporated into the syllabus on a daily basis during the short period of the intervention, to avoid further attrition (Creswell, 2009) of class numbers, having already lost three learners since my arrival in the institution. Topics and tasks were chosen for insertion depending on the daily mix of class activities in order to avoid repetition of similar task-types on the same day.

The pre- and post-intervention questionnaires sought to gauge any effects the intervention had on my learners' motivation by plotting changes in their motivational approach to facets of their English studies as revealed by the quantitative data to compliment and triangulate the main qualitative thrust of the study. These questionnaires were designed to give the researcher a snap shot of learner impressions and actions with questionnaires carefully written as 'every questionnaire survey requires the development of its own unique assessment tool that is appropriate for the particular environment and sample' (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011, p. 214). The seven pre-intervention likert-scale questions focused on aspects of the course book and supplementary materials provided by the class teacher as standard practice. Post-intervention questions focused on comparing all three types of materials as presented in Table 1 below:

| | Stage: | Question: |
|---|-------------------|---|
| 1 | Pre-intervention | How do you feel about the English course book? |
| | Post-intervention | How do you feel about using materials prepared from materials selected by you and your classmates? |
| 2 | Pre-intervention | How interesting are the topics you study in your course book? |
| | Post-intervention | How interesting were the topics selected by you and your classmates? |
| 3 | Pre-intervention | What would you like to read about in class? |
| | Post-intervention | What would you like to read about in class having used one or more topics selected by you and your classmates? |
| 4 | Pre-intervention | What would you like your listening tasks to be about? |
| | Post-intervention | What would you like your listening tasks to be about having used one or more topics selected by you and your classmates? |
| 5 | Pre-intervention | What would you like to write about in class? |
| | Post-intervention | What would you like to write about in class having used one or more topics selected by you and your classmates? |
| 6 | Pre-intervention | What would you like your speaking tasks in class to be about? |
| | Post-intervention | What would you like your speaking tasks in class to be about having used one or more topics selected by you and your classmates? |
| 7 | Pre-intervention | How do you feel about your learning and the material you use in the class? |
| | Post-intervention | How do you feel about your learning and the material you use in the class including the topics selected by you and your classmates? |

Table 1: Pre- and post-intervention questions for learners

The responses from these questionnaires were then analyzed to arrive at numerical results for each question as presented in Tables 3-6 in the findings section.

The data collected by the questionnaires outlined above were then supplemented by lesson observation notes made by the researcher during all lessons using intervention materials. The lesson observation sheets allowed for any type of observation to be noted down. As the teacher/researcher, I made notes during each lesson and then immediately sat and completed the sheets themselves. Then, these observations were coded as exemplified in Table 2 below to construct themes. The code titles emerged from studying the qualitative data and represent a variety of relevant data regarding how the materials affected learner motivation in the classroom. This coding process and subsequent construction of themes was subjective in nature as I was the only English language teacher in the military institute and had no colleagues who were sufficiently qualified and experienced at ELT or research to add objectivity to the study.

| Lesson topic: Statistics about the Xxx labour market (p18-19 of the learner-generated student book) | | |
|--|---|---|
| Stage of the lesson | Observations | Coding |
| Saying and reading large numbers | This review proved instrumental in preparing the learners for the listening material with the focus on a lot of numbers, big and small. | Pre-listening focus supported listening performance |
| Listening 1: Table completion | The first listening task requiring information about annual salaries was completed successfully by the majority of the class, who were surprised that the figures were the actual, up-to-date information for Xxx. | Surprise at actual up-to-date data Learner success |
| Listening 2: New table and pie chart completion | The second listening task with a focus on two elements – a table and a pie chart were completed successfully by the majority of the class | Learner success |
| General | Large numbers can prove problematic for Xxx learners so the pre-listening task was effective and scaffolded the subsequent listening tasks. Listening is not Xxx learners' strongest skill so providing practice within the sphere of their own experience proved both useful and motivating. Certainly, some of the learners engaged with the originator about the results from the listening task. | Useful language practice Useful listening practice Motivating Engagement with the originator |

Table 2: Example of lesson observation notes completed and coded

Data collected from questionnaires and lesson observation notes were supported and expanded upon by post-intervention interviews with the learners. The opportunity to comment on the intervention was offered to the class with the intent of interviewing a small number of learners. However, seven out of the ten class members were keen to be involved. Interviews were conducted on the first few study days subsequent to the intervention, using open-ended questions. Interviews were conducted with individuals in the researcher's office, in total privacy, in a relaxed but business-like atmosphere and were digitally recorded in full view of the interviewees and in line with ethical considerations regarding data collection and participant protection. Open-ended questions asked were as listed in Figure 1 with learners given the opportunity to add anything else they wanted to with question 7:

- Q1: What do you think about the Headway course?
- Q2: What do you think is NOT good about the Headway course?
- Q3: How did you feel while you were using the student-generated materials?
- Q4: In what ways did the student-generated materials help your English studies?
- Q5: What disadvantages, if any, were there when using the student-generated materials?
- Q6: What changes, if any, would you like to have to your English course in the future?
- Q7: Is there anything else you would like to say about your English studies?

Figure 1: Post-intervention interview questions for learners

Conducting interviews was essential as highlighted by Burns (2010) to ‘discuss with students their reactions to new materials compared with previous materials’ (p. 55), the better to assess the effectiveness of the intervention. Questions (Q1 and Q2) asking about the Headway course book, and Qs 6-7 asking for possible changes and other comments, did not yield much data relevant to the intervention, whereas Qs 3-4-5 proved highly productive.

Collating data collected using the questionnaires, observation notes and interviews ensured triangulation in respect of Burns’ (2010) pertinent quote that ‘you are aiming to see things as they really are and not just through a personal, subjective or intuitive lens’ (p. 57) to collect data from a variety of sources to ensure reliability.

Limitations of the design and method

In keeping with Edge’s (1996) call for self-critical honesty, I will now review the efficacy of my data collection procedures. Because this was essentially a case study, the pre- and post-questionnaires did not generate numerical data sufficient for inferential statistical analysis. I would include a written element to the same questionnaires in future or even replace them with a wholly qualitative tool to ensure a ‘rich, thick description’ (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). Unfortunately, I was the sole English teacher, and the sole researcher in the military institution where I undertook this study. If I had had access to one, I would have used another teacher or researcher to conduct the lesson observations, thereby addressing Cohen, Manion and Morrison’s (1990) concerns about reliability and validity where the researcher is also the teacher and observer. Likewise, I would have used another researcher to conduct interviews to give more objectivity and heighten triangulation (Wellington, 2000) between data collected. Any bias on my part is unintentional, with every effort made to be objective, given that this study represents action research in the classroom conducted by a teacher-researcher as outlined above.

Findings

The findings presented here are mostly qualitative in nature and exemplify the experiences of the learners and the teacher/researcher in keeping with Gibbs’ (2007) assertion that ‘a key commitment of qualitative research is to see things through the eyes of respondents and participants [...] Our analyses are themselves interpretations and thus constructions of the world’ (p. 7). As stated earlier, the numerical data from the questionnaires did not allow for in-depth analysis. Qualitative data collected is presented including numerous quotes from learners and from the lesson observation notes.

Learners questionnaires

The results from Question 2 in Table 3 below show learners were not very enthusiastic about course book topics with only four finding them of interest whereas they were much more positive about their own and their classmates' topics with six choosing the 'interesting' or 'very interesting' options.

| Q2 | Pre- intervention | Not interesting at all. | Not very interesting. | They're ok. | Interesting. | Very interesting. |
|----|--|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------------|
| | How interesting are the topics you study in your course book? | - 0 | ✓✓✓ 3 | ✓✓✓ 3 | ✓✓✓ 3 | ✓ 1 |
| Q2 | Post- intervention | Not interesting at all. | Not very interesting. | They're ok. | Interesting. | Very interesting. |
| | How interesting were the topics selected by you and your classmates? | - 0 | ✓ 1 | ✓✓✓ 3 | ✓✓ 2 | ✓✓✓✓ 4 |

Table 3: Pre- and post- intervention question 2 results from learners

The question 3's, in Table 4, covered three approaches to reading text selection from only using the course book texts to those selected by the teacher, myself, and those selected by the learners themselves. The first two options had been in operation until the intervention, as is usual for teaching a Western-centric course book such as *Headway*. Clearly, the status quo was favoured by the majority until learner-selected reading texts became an option, at which point the class split five to five with learners preferring to have their teacher engaged in the selection process with none of the learners favouring the idea of them selecting texts on their own, which echoes the spoken results of having teacher input in the selection stage in the process.

| Q3 | Pre- intervention | Only the course book texts | Course book texts and others selected by our teacher | Only texts selected by our teacher | Texts selected by us and our teacher | Only texts selected by us |
|----|--|----------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| | What would you like to read about in class? | - 0 | ✓✓✓✓✓ 6 | ✓ 1 | ✓✓✓ 3 | - 0 |
| Q3 | Post- intervention | Only the course book texts | Course book texts and others selected by our teacher | Only texts selected by our teacher | Texts selected by us and our teacher | Only texts selected by us |
| | What would you like to read about in class having used one or more topics selected by you and your classmates? | - 0 | ✓✓✓✓✓ 5 | - 0 | ✓✓✓✓✓ 5 | - 0 |

Table 4: Pre- and post- intervention question 3 results from learners

The results from question 6's reveal a clear move towards selecting tasks together with the teacher rather than doing the prescribed tasks in the course book or have speaking tasks selected and given out by their teacher. This may be explained by the lack of relevant and motivating speaking task topics covered by the course book (Gray, 2010) or the fact that they found their own and each other's speaking topics more relevant to their own lives.

| Q6 | Pre- intervention | Only tasks selected by us | Tasks selected by us and our teacher | Only tasks selected by our teacher | Course book tasks and others selected by our teacher | Only course book tasks |
|----|--|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|------------------------|
| | What would you like your speaking tasks in class to be about? | - 0 | ✓✓✓ 3 | ✓✓ 2 | ✓✓✓✓✓ 5 | - 0 |
| Q6 | Post- intervention | Only tasks selected by us | Tasks selected by us and our teacher | Only tasks selected by our teacher | Course book tasks and others selected by our teacher | Only course book tasks |
| | What would you like your speaking tasks in class to be about having used one or more topics selected by you and your classmates? | ✓ 1 | ✓✓✓✓✓✓ 6 | - 0 | ✓✓ 2 | ✓ 1 |

Table 5: Pre- and post- intervention question 6 results from learners

The results from question 7's below present a positive outcome to the intervention in terms of attitude and hopefully increased levels of motivation although the swing towards increased feelings of satisfaction does not show a significant change in attitude to their learning. This is somewhat surprising since it does not match the increased levels of engagement, ownership and motivation witnessed during the actual lessons.

| Q7 | Pre- intervention | Not very happy | Quite happy | Happy | Very happy | Totally happy |
|----|---|----------------|-------------|------------|------------|---------------|
| | How do you feel about your learning and the material you use in the class? | - 0 | ✓✓ 2 | ✓✓✓✓ 4 | ✓✓✓ 3 | ✓ 1 |
| Q7 | Post- intervention | Not very happy | Quite happy | Happy | Very happy | Totally happy |
| | How do you feel about your learning and the material you use in the class including the topics selected by you and your classmates? | - 0 | - 0 | ✓✓✓✓✓ 5 | ✓✓✓✓ 4 | ✓ 1 |

Table 6: Pre- and post- intervention question 7 results from learners

Lesson observation notes

The lesson observation notes showed mainly positive effects of the learner-generated materials. Positive notations highlighted a range of areas related to the intervention. Learner approaches to materials and tasks changed for 'using a topic about which they already had considerable knowledge [...] offset their apprehension [...] towards listening tasks'. This, in turn, had a positive effect on task performance: 'they listened intently [...] noted down the vast majority of relevant information'. Learners appreciated having current content as opposed to out-of-date course book content: '[...] were surprised that the figures were the actual, up-to-date information for Oman. Being able to interact with the originators of the materials also proved motivating: 'some of the learners engaged with the originator about the results from the listening task'.

It is therefore evident that the intervention materials often promoted 'talk-rich' (Barnes, 1976, quoted in Wright, 2005, p. 103) classes which echoed the notion of discourse villages (Wright, 2005) as my learners engaged with each other, in English, about topics related to their lives outside of the training wing.

In contrast, I only made a few negative comments. In particular, whilst learner motivation increased, learner performance was not affected hence the comments: 'vocal activity a signal of motivation to do the tasks but often in L1' and 'participation high but performance mixed according to lang. ability'.

Interviews with learners

Learners were keen to give feedback on the learner-generated materials and lessons. 'Knowing the topic and learning more about it' was a common comment from many of the interviewees. Comments such as 'my materials [...] and I am looking for and collect from may where so I study it many times' (Learner E) showed the increased level of engagement learners had with their own, and their peers' material whilst the notion of increased knowledge is clearly seen from the following 'better than before [...] it's good, excellent it's my material and he know all the words [...] most of the word [...] idea, he know about his subject and search on the internet' (Learner F). Several interviewees expressed appreciation for the materials presenting new information they found interesting with such phrases as 'something I don't know I am Omani but the information about Muttrah I don't know ... for that I think it is good' (Learner G). The interviews also supported the notion of the learner-generated materials being easier to understand than imported course book material. Learner A suggested 'that topics we used are easier than *Headway* [...] perhaps we know the topics and if you answer any question in grammar and by little thinking I can answer the questions'.

This sense of enhanced achievement was in complete contrast to the previous sense of doom and despondency, which the intervention was intended to counter. Another comment clearly exemplified increased levels of linguistic confidence 'I can understand the subject [...] very well I am happy about this I can understand [...]' (Learner B) with one learner referring to his level of confidence in using the internet in relation to collecting information about his military job. Learner E stated 'from my unit from my job I use it in my unit so it is very easy for me so if I need to change the subject looking from the internet or anywhere'.

Some interviewees also expressed the notion of ownership of the materials and hence of their learning. One comment identified the process of thinking about language 'because the topics we used and choosed perhaps we know the topics and if you answer any question in grammar and by little thinking I can answer the questions' (Learner A) which had not been a learner priority during the IELTS-imposition in the classroom. Yet another learner offered a positive reaction to finding materials as 'it's good, excellent it's my material and he know all the words [...] most of the word [...] idea, he know about his subject and search on the internet' (Learner F).

How the material helped the learners' English also provided significant data. In particular, one interviewee stated that, 'Yes, of course help you make more exercise – writing, listening, reading that's

okay' (Learner C). whilst another compared the efficacy of the learner-generated materials as opposed to the, *less helpful*, (my italics) Headway materials:

More, [...] help all my idea I didn't know something but when I got in the material I know it. because maybe different idea in life comparing when I speak in my life I didn't use the same idea about Headway (Learner F).

There was however, also evidence of negative attitudes (Richards, 2003) in the form of concerns expressed, particularly about the choice of topics. Learner C suggested 'some students bring the topics from the internet but he don't know about it [...] so much I think it not good her should bring topic about what he know to give information for other students'; and Learner D commented that 'some of the topics we are taking they have difficult meaning, too much vocab the students cannot understand'. These comments point to the importance of the instructor's role as editor to serve as a positive influence on the raw materials offered by learners to ensure successful learning.

Conclusions

Utilizing learner-generated materials can involve considerable work for the teacher to ensure usable classroom materials. It is important teachers are clear of relevant learner outcome(s) before undertaking the additional hours of editing required for 'developing our own curriculum, and becoming aware, autonomous, and authentic professionals' (van Lier, 1996, p. 225). It is clear that learners who have offered materials for classroom use feel a greater sense of ownership. They also enjoy a significant increase in motivation while using their own and their peers' materials. In this sense, the intervention proved to be a valuable vehicle to counteract the detrimental influence of the testing policy imposed from above. This fulfils Troudi's (2009) contention that 'our role as educators is not only to serve a curriculum but also to evaluate it, challenge it, play an active role, and even redesign it' (p. 13) and 'offer educational alternatives that suit the students' real educational needs' (ibid, p. 14). Subsequent to the intervention, the learners exhibited a more positive approach to their English course and were more amenable to engaging with new types of tasks, using the library for self-study and completing extensive written practice as preparation for the requirements of the diploma course.

If the intervention is to make a significant difference to learner confidence, motivation, ownership and engagement, then the materials should be of a bespoke nature and only used at lower levels when learners struggle to understand or master globally-relevant material, in contrast to the intervention's focus on learner-related topics. Indeed, it would be wise to bear in mind Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2011) suggestion that if 'any pedagogical recommendations deriving from empirical research are not directly generalizable to all classroom situations [...] (they) need to be adapted in ways that are appropriate to the local learning context' (p. 104).

Therefore, although the overwhelmingly positive reaction of my learners, as evidenced by their responses in the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires and interviews and by my observation notes, indicate the efficacy of this type of intervention at Pre-Intermediate level, it is yet to be established if such an approach to classroom activities at other levels will be equally successful in terms of enhanced levels of motivation and engagement. This is an area for future study.

As course designer, syllabus writer, materials producer and classroom instructor, I now intend to increase the curricular input my learners have in the generation of classroom materials and tasks so as to maintain and enhance learner participation in line with van Lier's (1996) ecological view of 'social interaction [...] constructed locally' (p. 200). As McKernan (2008) asserts 'the development of [...]. practical wisdom and critical disposition, garnered through classroom inquiry, is a responsibility and a task for each educator' (p. 217). This is a task I take very seriously which requires constant attention to curriculum design, classroom pedagogy and testing policy. Although the concept of teachers and learners negotiating the syllabus and using learner-generated materials has been repeatedly

advocated in various sub-disciplines of ELT academic literature such as classroom pedagogy (Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Holliday, 1994; van Lier, 1996; Wenger, 1998), materials development (McGrath, 2013; Tomlinson, 2011), teacher education (Wright, 2005), and in testing (Shohamy, 2001, 2004), there is a gap in the academic literature concerning the practicalities of such materials production. This pedagogically-important area requires further study, in particular, action research to better inform educationalists in the Gulf, dealing with various local contexts, and around the world in a myriad of local contexts. Using learner-generated materials can increase learner ownership, engagement and motivation but educationalists need to initiate such interventions with care and with clear aims to ensure learner success.

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