

Using *English Teaching Forum* in Teacher Development

When we were preparing this special issue on teacher training, we decided it would be important to include the perspective of trainers on how they use the magazine for pre-service and in-service teacher training. Here are suggestions from Poland, Peru, and Africa. The first article was originally published in the January 1997 issue. The other two were written especially for this issue.

KRZYSZTOF STRZEMESKI

This article explains how selections from the FORUM were incorporated into the author's methodology classes to form a successful 30-hour semester. The course, tried out with five groups of students studying methodology, concluded with a questionnaire which brought over 60 responses, a vast majority of which were enthusiastic.

The context of the project

Towards the end of the two-year methodology course at our teacher training college, students are required to submit a diploma project, consisting of a collection of lesson plans and with the students' own evaluation which is based on a theoretical discussion of some aspect of teaching. This is a two-semester introduction (two hours/week) to basic concepts, methods, and terminology. Typically, each group included a group of 15 student teachers.

Problem statement

The 1995/96 academic year was particularly difficult since the college accepted more students than usual and lost a methodology teacher, which resulted in an increased teaching load for the remain-

ing teachers. That year the working conditions were particularly frustrating due to the following factors:

1. There were only a few class sets of methodology books in the college; the majority was available only in one copy.
2. College library hours were inconvenient for the evening students.
3. Students complained of the unavailability of books, the high cost of xerox copies, and the lack of time for reading. They used these complaints as an excuse for doing little.
4. The above-mentioned attitude was reflected in the limited bibliographies of their Diploma Projects. Students always referred to the same well-known sources, making their projects boring for the reviewers. Due to the lack of access to the library, evening students tended to be passive during their classes.

Solution

The situation during the first semester made me think of ways to avoid repeating the same teacher centered course. How could I make my students partners in the methodology classes before they were really ready in terms of their competence and performance? How could I make students responsible for the presentation of some teaching ideas and avoid the usual discrepancy between the student performance and the instructor's expectations relating to the choice, content, length and modality of a presentation? My solution was a semester's worth of work using student presentations based on *English Teaching*

Forum articles. In our college the *Forum* is available in multiple copies, can be checked out, and is full of short articles written in accessible language with practical ideas. Why not encourage my students to present teaching ideas tried and described by experienced teachers and use them as stepping stones for students' own reflection and independent research?

Procedure

After the first semester of some more theoretical and teacher centered ground work, I moved to more specifics. In this case, they reflected the content of a practical methodology textbook explaining how to teach particular skills and their components. I used the following to explain the procedure:

1. Make a list of topics reflecting the content of your course.
2. Circulate a list with topics, dates, and slots for students' names and grades for students to complete; the dates of the course will be set, the general topics (e.g. vocabulary teaching) will be suggested by the teacher and the slots for grades will be reserved for the teacher; the choice when and what to present will belong to the students.
3. Announce the following rules:
 - a. Each student must choose three topics and prepare three fifteen-minute presentations.
 - b. Students must cooperate with one another to avoid selecting the same article.
 - c. Presentations are to be practical; after a short introduction (the source is

1. The questionnaire also showed that, in preparing for their presentations, most students had spent 1–2 hours looking for the appropriate article, and had browsed through 3–8 articles. Thus, they read an extra 2–3 articles, which I deem a great success especially considering the limitations described above.

given and some remarks are made) a student is to micro teach the idea from the article.

4. Show the students where and how to look in the *Forum* such as the index for appropriate articles.

Some do's

Obviously, not all your students will understand the procedure. Here are some thoughts to ensure the smooth development of the project:

1. Encourage students to consult with you before their presentations. Offer to copy teaching materials for them.

2. Precede and follow students' presentations with your comments, relate the material to the textbook information, and encourage discussion.

3. Give form and content feedback; give grades.

4. React early and decisively to the breaking of the rules unless, for the rest of the semester, you are prepared to put up with students preparing the very same articles, reading their presentations from notes, forgetting to prepare a practical illustration, or simply breaking the time limits.

Some don'ts

1. Never overschedule; to avoid student disappointment when a class is missed don't reschedule student presentations for more than eighty percent of the available classes. Do not schedule them for more than 3/4 of the available class time when a new topic is introduced, or 4/5 of the time when a topic is continued. The remainder of the time will be filled in by short delays such as students finding it difficult to meet the time limit by your comments or by discussion.

2. If students believe the course and examination will be based on the assigned textbook, they may feel insecure when the teacher uses the *Forum* as a basis of study in class. Therefore, use the textbook appropriately to give students security, particularly if your course ends with an exam.

3. Don't forget to have some time fillers handy in case there is more time than expected towards the end of a class due to the absence of a presenter.

The advantages

From the point of view of students, the format described above had several advantages:

1. It offers the audience a variety of topics, ideas, activities, voices, and stimuli.

2. It gives presenters the freedom of choice and the experience of appearing before a group.

3. It gives many students ideas for diploma projects and classroom teaching practice.

4. It forces students to read and become "experts" in an area and prepares them for more serious library research.

5. It increases student participation and teaches students professional terminology.

6. It is much more fun than a standard class.

For the teacher:

1. It offers a good opportunity for student observation, grading, and the learning of new ideas. (Before this, I never had a chance to see my students in action as I was not involved in practice teaching, and my grades were based solely on students' performance on tests.)

2. It relieves the teacher of a lot of the burden of selection, preparation, and repetition of reading material.

3. It improves the pacing of a class (a change of activity every 15 minutes).

4. It helps avoid the standard dangers with student presentations (Students don't know where to look, how much to prepare, and how to present).

5. It is generally refreshing.

Criticism

Criticism obtained in a questionnaire¹ was limited and mostly came from a group of students preparing for graduation who were busy with their diploma projects and anxious to prepare for their exams. The students complained: "the system did not prepare us for the final exam," "I wasn't able to make notes," "You did not test us." Other criticism resulted from the breaking of some of the rules of do's and don'ts as spelled out above.

Conclusion

What was an experiment of an overworked and frustrated teacher struggling

with the constraints of the school and the passivity of the students, turned out to be a successful project. The most tangible results for the students were their improved grades and increased interest. For the teacher, it was the discovery of student talents. ✎

GAIL BROWN

How can EFL teachers share ideas with colleagues who live hundreds, even thousands, of miles away in the rest of the English teaching world? *English Teaching Forum* has long been that link for us at the Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano in Lima. Although we now have other means of exchanging ideas, such as the Internet and international conferences, the one that is available to all, the one that all can read and discuss at the same time is the *Forum*. *Forum* articles have been a vital instrument contributing to the ongoing professional development of our teachers.

For inservice training at ICPNA, former academic director Joseph Attea needed to focus the attention of the 380 teachers who work here on the same topic. The ideal way, he found, was to give the same copy of the *Forum* to all of them and then have them complete written assignments in study groups. This simple formula has become the springboard for numerous fascinating discussions: the teachers read the articles and reflect on the authors' ideas, accepting and incorporating some of those ideas in their own teaching, while perhaps disagreeing with other ideas. In some cases, our teachers come up with variations on the authors' suggestions that are more in keeping with our curriculum and student population.

We have used *Forum* articles in different ways. On some occasions, all teachers read the same article and discuss it in their study groups. Then at professional development sessions for the entire faculty, they share their reactions and opinions. On other occasions, each teacher in

a study group chooses a different article. Then they get together with teachers from other study groups who have read the same article and discuss it. Later they may form new groups in which each member has read a different article, and they compare topics and viewpoints. Almost always, the articles in the *Forum* spark our interest and send us to the Internet, other professional journals, research reports, and books to investigate the topic in a more profound way.

Our objective, as trainers and administrators, is to take advantage of the creativity of our teachers in applying some of the excellent ideas presented in the magazine to our classrooms at the Instituto. We often pinpoint articles that are linked with current projects and concerns. For example, before a visit of MaryAnn Christison to ICPNA in January 2003, all of the teachers read her article in the April 2002 issue, "Brain-based Research and Language Teaching." They discussed her ideas and compiled a list of questions to ask her, which she was able to read before she met our teachers. A project under way is to transform the grading process. To get teachers focused on this topic, they all read "Using Cooperative Learning to Facilitate Alternative Assessment" by Ghazi Ghaith in the July 2002 issue. They then prepared alternative assessment activities for our curriculum and presented them to their peers. It was a very enriching experience for everyone.

We eagerly look forward to each issue of the *Forum* and plan how we can benefit from the work of our colleagues worldwide to keep us informed of the most re-

cent developments in our ever-changing profession. ✎

MARIA SNARSKI

English Teaching Forum has been a valuable resource for ELT teacher development in many places where I have worked. I've used the *Forum* for inservice teacher workshops and would gladly choose it first as a workshop resource for several reasons. Not only does the magazine provide a wide range of topics in each issue, but it also gives perspectives from around the world on how recent ELT trends are being incorporated into various educational systems. In addition, the *Forum* is available on-line (with search capabilities), and such access to past issues makes it ideal for educators who have Internet access, but poorly stocked libraries. Finally, the articles are an excellent point of departure for workshop sessions and getting participants involved in the topics.

Recently, I incorporated various *Forum* issues into training sessions in Democratic Republic of Congo and Togo. Participants eagerly read the issues I had chosen. In Democratic Republic of Congo, teachers discussed how they could improve their teaching after reading the article "What Works in the ELT Classroom? Using Robust Reasoning to Find Out" by Lisa Harshbarger in the

October 2002 issue. This article proved to be a solid basis to have an active discussion on reflective teaching and classroom practices.

In Togo, I based much of my opening session (Trends in ELT) of a four-day workshop on information from recent *Forum* articles. The teachers were enthusiastic to get the full references and were thrilled to know that the *Forum* was available through the American Embassy in Togo as well as on-line. Despite limited access to the Internet, the teachers were excited about the possibility of reading or downloading the complete articles—an option not typically available for most academic publications.

Additional benefits of using the *Forum* magazine for teacher development activities are its portability, length of the articles, sections on American culture, and its recent publication date (compared to other ELT materials available to most of the teachers I worked with). The articles that participants read during the workshops in Congo and Togo encouraged them to reflect on the local educational contexts and to consider how their solutions to challenges might assist educators in other countries who face similar situations. In fact, the participants and other trainers expressed their eagerness to write articles to submit for publication in the *Forum*.

I believe such enthusiasm is a clear sign of the *Forum's* importance for teachers and their professional development. This impact is likely not only in Africa, but around the world. Cheers to *English Teaching Forum*! ✎