

Using Practice Posters To Address EFL Challenges

English as a foreign language (EFL) programs throughout the world face numerous challenges, not least of which are a lack of English proficient teachers, large classes, student passivity and apathy, over-reliance on traditional methodologies, and insufficient authentic materials to offer students. These and other problems add to the burden of students in EFL programs, most of whom already must contend with limited contact with native speakers and difficulties with pronunciation and structuring of English sentences.

In Mexico, where I work, such challenges and problems contribute to an increase in the use of L1 by both teachers and students in the EFL classroom. At the same time, learners in Mexico are prevented from making the progress they should in English because of the limited activities provided them, which may not go much beyond translation and practicing the verb *to be*. The literature suggests that these challenges and consequences are not specific to Mexico, but are also present in EFL classrooms in other parts of the

world (see, for example, Asato 2003; Zhao and Grimshaw 2004).

This situation is worrisome. Professionals from around the globe, both in and outside the EFL field have noted the high demand for proficient English speakers who can enable their respective countries to participate more fully in international communication and partnerships (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2003).

This article focuses on how one EFL institute in Mexico uses practice posters to respond to these challenges. Specifically, this author observed—after using practice posters in class and reflecting on their use—that the use of posters seems to counter in a modest but noticeable way the challenges and problems mentioned above. The article is divided into four sections: (1) a description of practice posters, (2) an explanation of how posters can be used, (3) the benefits of using posters, including how they help meet the challenges mentioned earlier, and (4) possible drawbacks to using posters.

1. What are posters?

Posters, as discussed in this article, are mounted pictures or photographs accompanied by textual cues or captions. The purpose of the posters is to encourage student participation and provide controlled practice in a given English structure or concept.

Each poster is created on 11x17-inch bond paper. The layout may be horizontal or vertical. To increase durability and make the poster firm, it is first adhered to a piece of polycarbonate of the same size, then covered with contact paper to protect the ten to twelve pictures or photographs that may accompany the textual cues.

The photographs or pictures can be from the teacher's personal stock or they can be downloaded from websites. The captions serve as cues to prompt student participation. In one poster, the captions consisted of a person's name, country of origin, and nationality, but obviously the captions (and photos) would differ depending upon the focus of the lesson and the level of the students. The back of a poster can show additional cues or, in the case of a difficult grammar point, a student-friendly grammar presentation.

2. How can posters be used?

Posters are tools that can be used in a variety of ways to overcome challenges and problems of the EFL classroom; the particular way they are used will depend on the teacher's experience and the students' needs.

The sample sequence below shows how one EFL institute used a poster to provide students with practice asking questions and giving affirmative and negative answers. The sequence required no more than ten minutes of class time and, based on a survey of the students, was well received. The poster had twelve photos of people from different countries and captions that named the person, said which country he or she was from, and listed the nationality; for example: "Mikhail Gorbachev, from Russia; Russian."

Sample sequence

1. The teacher asks students to chorally repeat cues on the poster, e.g., "China, France."

2. Individuals, small groups, or all students repeat the cues: "China, France," etc.
3. The teacher writes one affirmative sentence on the board—e.g., "Jacques Chirac is from France"—then has students chorally repeat it.
4. The teacher asks students to work in pairs taking turns saying sentences based on the cues. Student A says: "Vincent Fox and Marta Sahagún are from Mexico." Student B says: "Pope Benedict is from Germany."
5. The teacher writes the interrogative form above the affirmative sentence on the board and has students chorally repeat the question form—e.g., "Is Jacques Chirac from France?"
6. The teacher asks students to work in pairs and take turns asking one another questions. The partner answers affirmatively.
7. The teacher writes on the board the negative form of the sentence—e.g., "Jacques Chirac is not from Germany." Students repeat it chorally.
8. The teacher asks students to practice questions and affirmative and negative answers in pairs.

While this sequence initially seems long, it quickly becomes familiar to teachers and students. In the next class, the teacher can demonstrate or model the sequence and ask a student to imitate the modeling. In subsequent meetings the teacher can take two copies of the same poster, divide the class, and have students take turns cueing their half of the class.

Another option is for the teacher to include with the original poster three new ones, each containing different cues (e.g., forms of transportation, actions in progress, professions). After giving the students controlled practice with each of the new posters, the teacher can divide the class into three or four groups, give each group a different poster, and have members of each group take turns facilitating the use of the poster. After several minutes the posters can be rotated, allowing each group to practice with a different poster. The teacher monitors the groups, offering individual correction discreetly or noting and giving feedback to the entire class about common errors.

3. Meeting challenges: The benefits of posters

By using a cyclical process of observation, reading, reflection, and trial, I have concluded that posters respond in many ways to the challenges mentioned earlier.

Posters foster oral practice

Using posters at the beginning of class serves as a wake up call for students, telling them that it's time to switch to English. This is essential in an EFL context, where learners are immersed in the L1 in their daily lives. However, the key benefit of using posters is the significant opportunity for oral practice that they offer students.

In the first ten minutes of class, the teacher can use posters to guide student pairs to practice several common English language structures and vocabulary. Even before the learning goal is presented, the students practice fifty or more affirmative, negative, and interrogative sentences in English. Cooperative learning advocates Abdullah and Jacobs (2004) have stressed the value of such small group interactions in EFL contexts because they allow for a significant increase in opportunities to create output.

Moreover, because posters enable students to experience language learning actively, rather than receptively, apathy is reduced and student interest grows. Oral practice using posters seems to breed confidence; students notice they become more effective in the L2 each time they revisit a particular poster.

Posters enhance traditional methodology by empowering students

The good habit formation often resulting from the repetition and substitution drilling described above were at the center of Richards and Rodgers (2001) Audiolingual Method (ALM). The difference with the use of posters, however, is that students are empowered: they cue, listen to, correct, and help one another. ALM classrooms, on the other hand, bred dependence because they were mostly teacher-fronted. Richard-Amato (2003) contextualized the value of controlled practice, suggesting that it is most effective during the pre-proficiency stage of learning. Paired drilling is not sufficient, in fact, to prepare creative, spontaneous speakers. Learners must also process linguistic elements in a creative,

meaningful way so those elements are available to learners when they attempt to speak freely. Posters help achieve this.

Posters encourage authentic communication

Posters can serve as a springboard to more authentic and creative language use. For example, by taking advantage of students' interest in well-known personalities, posters can be used to spur the students to identify, say, ten famous people from around the world. After some brainstorming, student pairs could create new exchanges based on the people they identified; for example:

Student 1: "Is Tom Cruise Canadian?"

Student 2: "No, he isn't."

At the intermediate level, students could use the same poster to practice tag questions; for example:

Student 1: "David Beckham is English, isn't he?"

Student 2: "Yes, he is."

Again employing students' interest in public figures, posters could be used to contribute to a pre-writing task. For example, after some brainstorming, the students could write a paragraph about why a person on the poster is famous; for example: "Antonio Banderas is Spanish, but he lives in California. He is 39 years old. He is famous because..."

Posters increase self-confidence

Effective teachers create safe environments as a way to encourage students to take risks. Thanasoulas (2002) and Dornyei (2001) have discussed a secure environment as fundamental to L2 learner motivation. Posters are non-threatening because teachers and students trust the cues. Learners know they can count on them to make grammatically correct sentences. Further, as learners use the posters for a second and third time, they become familiar with their use and value. Students' confidence grows and risk-taking is more likely to occur. Adolescents, in particular, need to believe they have a good chance of speaking correctly because it is all too common for peers to ridicule their errors.

Posters also enhance the confidence of teachers with limited background in English by giving them a structured way to promote student-speaking. Controlled practice, such as teachers use with posters, serves as scaffolding

(Yu 2004) to enable learners (and teachers) to move with confidence from their current level of development to a higher one.

Posters work with various learning styles

Consideration of learning styles is critical in today's classrooms, including the EFL classroom. Studies using the Keirsey Temperament Sorter suggest that 40 to 45 percent of people throughout the world are Sensory-Perceivers (Keirsey 1998). As learners, such people are visual and kinesthetic. They are keenly aware of and seek interaction with the physical environment. When students hold, pass, and flip the posters, they interact with the environment and are visually stimulated. This writer has observed that poster work helps teenagers, who can become easily distracted, stay on task. In contrast, EFL texts, useful as they are, require less movement on the part of learners, and often provide fewer visual cues than posters do. Posters also promote interaction that responds to another learner type: the extrovert. Such social interaction has been associated with L2 motivation as well (Dornyei 2001).

Posters foster learner autonomy

Students handling a poster take a greater role in their learning because they can make choices about which cues to use and even how to help their classmates. Further, teachers can say, "Select the cues that are most difficult for you," which gives learners the chance to self-evaluate and focus their practice accordingly. These actions are uncommon in a teacher-fronted class. Such control empowers learners and fosters their autonomy. Dornyei (2001) has associated increased autonomy with higher motivation, which in turn counters, to some extent, the student apathy that teachers in Mexico have reported for their students (Johnson 2000). An additional benefit of transferring control is that when learners are encouraged to make decisions, they show greater attention to and awareness of target structures and vocabulary (Schmidt, as cited in Al-Hejin 2004).

Posters are effective in large, heterogeneous groups

Heterogeneity is an inherent characteristic of large groups and can be a challenge for teachers of such classes. However, since posters are easily adaptable to small groups, they

can provide the teacher with the opportunity to differentiate instruction. If distributed thoughtfully, the posters can be matched to each group's level and capacity for challenge at any given time, thereby countering the problem of large group size, challenging learners with the right level of difficulty, and reducing apathy.

Posters help minimize incorrect language

Errors and incorrect language are limited with poster use because most posters focus on a single concept (e.g., professions, actions in progress), and the English structure to be practiced is shown on the board and orally demonstrated prior to practicing. The narrow range of structures being practiced at one particular time reduces the possibility of confusing linguistic elements; hence, fewer errors occur. Further, peers with a higher level of language development are more likely to detect an error and correct their classmates accordingly.

Posters' visual cues reduce reversion to L1

The over reliance on their native language by EFL students is a discouraging characteristic of classrooms in Mexico (Johnson 2000). This is especially true of the large groups in public middle and high schools. However, using posters can mitigate the problem of reversion to L1 because learners benefit from the English caption that accompanies a photograph or other visual. Viewing such cues helps students know what to say in English and reduces the need to revert to their native language.

Posters allow teachers to monitor student speech

Many activities included in current EFL texts require teachers to set up tasks, provide examples, cue students, indicate who is to participate, and ask for volunteers. In contrast, pair work using posters gets students talking immediately in class and enables teachers to monitor student speech. Teachers can discreetly make on-the-spot corrections with specific students or make anonymous corrections afterward. Monitoring time also provides teachers with an opportunity to reflect on what is occurring in the classroom. Teachers need this chance to think, not just to perform in class. It makes their role more meaningful and allows them to make better decisions about how to promote learning.

Poster practice improves pronunciation

Posters that list words that are difficult to pronounce allow the students to learn them directly and efficiently. The words to practice can be generated by experienced teachers who know which words tend to be distorted in their region or country. Although there is controversy regarding the extent to which correct pronunciation should be emphasized (Fraser 1999), in my nearly 20 years of EFL teaching, I have observed that it makes sense to attend to difficult sounds and words early, before fossilization occurs.

Posters permit integration of material

Posters can provide a useful and efficient method for integrating material and structures. They can include, for example, common verbs (e.g., *cook, skate*) as well as examples of sequences that use *can, do/does, did, going to*, etc. An example of a sequence is:

Student 1: "Can your brother speak English?"

Student 2: "No, he can't."

Student 1: "What can he do?"

Student 2: "He can swim well."

Student 1: "When does he like to swim?"

By using the poster as a catalyst, in a mere five minutes, pairs of students can practice twenty to thirty sentences with various auxiliaries, verbs, time expressions, and vocabulary.

Students are motivated when they realize that they can integrate tenses in this way, particularly when the teacher informs them that being able to do so freely without the poster is evidence that they are developing into intermediate level learners. When teachers use posters, as with everything else in teaching, it is important to help students understand the learning goal (here, integrating tenses) and believe that it is reachable. Doing so motivates students and undermines much of the apathy teachers observe in classrooms.

Poster use reduces discipline problems

Language learners, particularly adolescents, have academic needs that, when met, increase academic achievement and decrease inappropriate behavior (Reilly 2001). Those needs include understanding the learning goal, being actively engaged in a meaningful task, and receiving feedback regularly. Working with posters responds to these needs.

Because posters focus on particular language tasks, students can easily understand the goal of the lesson. Using posters, students actively participate in small groups and receive feedback from the teacher and classmates. Therefore, students are less likely to seek attention inappropriately; hence discipline problems may be reduced.

Poster use is flexible

Johnson (2000) found that only twenty of ninety-eight teachers surveyed view the curriculum they use as "flexible and...easily modified." But language teachers willing and able to incorporate posters into the curriculum will find them inherently flexible. Posters allow the teacher to facilitate practice of a target structure quite efficiently. They can be used, for example, to focus on particular grammatical problems students may be having, such as omission of the "s" when expressing something in the third person or repeated use of *do* in place of *does*. It has been this teacher's experience that revisiting a troublesome structure through use of a poster helps learners overcome the problem.

4. Are there drawbacks to using posters?

Possible impediments to using posters are the cost of materials and the time involved in creating them. But once posters are constructed, teachers and institutions are likely to consider them well worth the effort, particularly when they discover, as I did, that the controlled practice they enable works well to supplement speaking activities that may be included in the texts being used.

A general limitation with posters is that they tend to facilitate only controlled practice, and language is naturally a creative, open-ended activity. One goal of any EFL program is to develop proficient speakers. Working with posters contributes to that end because learners can practice in a controlled manner essential elements, such as pronunciation, modals, tenses, and vocabulary. However, this is not sufficient to achieve the ultimate goal of EFL study.

Conclusion

The use of practice posters responds to certain problems facing teachers and students in EFL settings, including a lack of English proficient teachers, too few English speaking

opportunities for learners, large classes, and student apathy. Most importantly, working with posters allows teachers to increase the amount of English spoken by students without making teachers who are not highly proficient English speakers uneasy. At the same time, posters are more inviting than a textbook because they visually stimulate learners, encourage participation, and grant students more control and autonomy in class. It is wise to add that in no way does this writer consider practice posters to be a perfect solution to the challenges facing EFL teachers. Posters are simply one more tool that an effective teacher can use to counter classroom challenges.

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