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Language Learning and Teaching

Special Section: Teaching Ideas from OkiJALT

Technology

Special Section:
Lessons from OkiJALT

Where Should I Go?

Encouraging Learners to Put Their Place Into Learning

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Abstract: The inclusion of ideas of 'place' in education, not only Geography, is one way to connect learners with the world around them and more specifically the world with which they are most easily able to interact directly. Incorporating this concept as much as possible into day-to-day lessons was a motivating factor for adapting a more advanced lesson into, initially, a model lesson for junior high school students. "Where should I go?" is an activity to give students the opportunity to think about local places they could recommend to someone visiting their area. It incorporates a background slideshow to silently stimulate student participation with hints about places the students are likely to know, but which may not immediately come to mind within the time constraints of the lesson. Through this exercise, it is hoped that there will be some progress made in realizing the benefits of place-based education.

Introduction

If you were to ask a kindergartner where a good place to eat was, she would likely recommend somewhere not far away. Obviously a kindergartner has little information beyond the places she sees in her everyday life, hears her friends or family talking about, or visits from time to time. Without being aware of it, she has a keen sense of place with regard to her home area, as she probably knows little about other places. As we get older there seems to be a process whereby we are conditioned to think of our local places as being less important, unless we actually live in one of the centers of our society. There may not be a conscious effort to bring about this change in values, but it does seem to happen nonetheless. The situation may even be exacerbated in Japan by the fact that much of the television programming is Tokyo-centric, imbuing younger people in particular with the perception that 'important' things happen in places other than their own locale. Perkins and Thorns (2012) give an example of one interpretation where "sense of place relates particularly to the routines of everyday life set in particular local biophysical landscapes" (p.

15), which would suggest that the connections the kindergartner has established are truly components of an identity incorporating place as it is traditionally perceived in Geography. That this may be lost as time passes would also suggest some loss of identity was occurring.

Background

In Geography, the role of 'place' is a key concept whose significance, while generally acknowledged within the discipline, prompts a variety of interpretations and valuations from others. By way of introduction to his thesis, de Blij (2009) points out the expanding belief that the world is "flattening under the impress of globalization" and that "the idea that diversities of place continue to play a key role in shaping humanity's variegated mosaic tends to be dismissed by globalizers who see an increasingly homogenized and borderless world" (p. 3), suggesting that the traditional role of place in human experience is being relegated, as if some type of outgrown anachronism, to the dustbin of history. Though de Blij was countering this argument in the context of highlighting the disparities hidden behind assumptions of 'flattening,' we could just as readily question the desirability of such an outcome in the context of wishing to nurture a 'sense of place' as a means of strengthening connection to and therefore

valuing of one's 'home place' whether that be one's original or adopted home.

The assertion by the 17th century Czech educator Comenius that "Knowledge of the nearest things should be acquired first, then that of those farther and farther off" (as cited in Calkins, 1881, p. 49) expresses one of the central ideas of place-based education (Sobel, 2004, p. 4). Sobel goes on to emphasize the merit of the approach in a wide-ranging array of benefits:

> Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through the active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school. (Sobel, 2004, p. 7)

Elizabeth Templeton, in Baldwin, Block, Cooke, Crawford, Naqvi, Ratsoy et al (2013), sees a focus on place as a way "to resist what has sometimes seemed a troubling sense of fragmentation in time and place" that has ensued partly as a result of the digital revolution (p. 10). She cites Nicholson as observing that the revolution has resulted in a "scarcity of attention" and Menzies as linking "our increasing state of fragmentation to a changing sense of space-time continuum arising from our technological world" – the implications of which educators must contend with in their everyday work. Could it be that a revitalized sense of place might go some way toward recovering some of that attention? It is certainly a major challenge that is only likely to increase, so any positive leads should be followed up on.

Approach

In addition to endeavouring to inculcate a sense of place, the method of teaching also needs to be considered and, a generally constructivist approach is taken. In their book *Constructivist Strategies for Teaching Second Language Learners*, Reyes and Vallone (2008) note, "sheltered instruction and scaffolding are two modifications that can be used when teaching content in a second language" (p. 9). Although the activity in question is not directly part of a content course, the institution at which it is taught has content-based courses as an integral component of its curriculum, and the approach taken in those is often reflected generally throughout the curriculum. The depth of the activity does not entail any particular scaffolding, but rather a degree of sheltered instruction through the emphasis on having learners consider their local context and specifically places with which they are familiar. This is felt to be the case given that according to Lessow-Hurley sheltered instruction "uses comprehensible input and context-embedded instruction within a social, communicative context to provide access to both the core curriculum and to the English language" (as cited in Reyes and Vallone, 2008, p. 9).

Furthermore, many of the items on a list of "recommended activities for engaging second language learners in constructivist language arts and content area instruction" provided by Reyes and Vallone (2008) on page 62, are present, or may be depending on the examples chosen and overall approach taken. This activity can be considered to include aspects of the following items from that list:

- contextualize instruction to promote language acquisition
- maximize the social context of language acquisition
- teach language through content
- use humor to motivate language acquisition (if examples that amuse the students are included)
- embed instruction in real life experiences; facilitate context-embedded learning
- use cooperative group work
- have students work in pairs
- choose curricular topics of inherent interest to students
- utilize community resources
- encourage students to ask their own

questions and find their own answers

- use silence as a learning tool (in that the examples are provided via images without a spoken commentary)
- maximize the social context of learning.
(Reyes & Vallone, 2008, p. 62)

It is possible that others on the list may also be utilized, though it is equally true that the depth of utilization is certain to vary depending on the approach taken.

Rebecca Alber (2014) advocated having the students "share their own experiences, hunches, and ideas about the content or concept of study and have them relate and connect it to their own lives," (¶8) with teachers providing scaffolding in the form of hints and ideas, which the students will pick up on and incorporate into their learning. She also recognized the efficacy of visual aids in these processes.

Activity and Procedure

The activity itself originated as a sample lesson for about 12 JHS students that was to be loosely based on our college's lessons, in which "students will be actively engaged in conversation for more than half the class time" (45-minute class).

The original activity was pairwork and would generally involve individual students preparing on their own in advance of tackling the activity. Its inspiration was an activity to "suggest and compare interesting local places" from *English Firsthand 2* (Helgesen Brown, Kahny, Mandeville, & Wiltshier, 2010, p. 6). The concept seemed appropriate for the students, who were likely familiar with their home area.

As the class to be undertaken for the original lesson was a demonstration and the students were unknown to me, I needed to utilize as many shortcuts as I could to stay within the overall 50-minute timeframe. Thus I had the students prepare in groups to accommodate less confident or motivated learners.

A slideshow, consisting of images of about 10 local places which could fit the role of place types expected to be discussed in the lesson, was prepared and set-up to play when the computer was idle for a set period of time. The slideshow provided hints by silently

projecting the selected places while students were engaged in the task. No commentary would be necessary. The computer was being used to show a standard PowerPoint as part of the usual lesson content, or a description of the school when it was part of a demonstration, as in the initial instance.

Actual implementation of the activity is very straightforward. First, preparation includes the following steps:

Find, or take, a selection of photographs of local points of interest. These should be places that would be of more interest to someone who was intending to spend an extended amount of time in the area, rather than someone visiting as a tourist. As with the original lesson from English Firsthand 2, the idea is for learners to recommend places that they would actually visit themselves.

If using a Mac, the photographs should be installed in one folder, which would then be selected as the source for the screensaver's slideshow. Presumably the process would be somewhat similar for other operating systems. There are likely to be other acceptable approaches to displaying the images to the group.

It is useful to have the computer up and running before actually having the slideshow run to ensure that connections are working and that the images are displaying correctly on the screen via the projector. Using 'hot corners' is a useful way to allow you to begin the slideshow at the moment of your choosing.

Using the Activity

Learners were introduced to the idea of thinking about places by first answering on their own some simple questions about foods that they like, things they like to do, and kinds of music they like. This could also be performed as pair work.

Secondly, they ask and answer questions with a partner about experiences, particularly relating to food, places, music, etc.

The third part is where the slideshow can be used, and involves learners in groups brainstorming places to eat, play and watch sports, enjoy live music, and shop. The final aspect is breaking up into pairs (or forming new groups) composed of members of

different groups, and sharing their ideas by again asking and answering questions.

Conclusion

A focus on place can be incorporated into a wide variety of lesson approaches and may produce a variety of benefits for learners, including a renewed sense of pride in their home area and hopefully motivation to share that area with others via the vehicle of a second language. That other language speakers may actually be interested in one's home area is perhaps a motivational key, which may be manipulated in the quest to encourage a learner to feel a greater sense of ownership of their studies.

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