

Reading Aloud as a Strategy to uplift A1 Students' Motivation to Speak in English

Lectura en voz alta como estrategia para motivar a los alumnos de nivel A1 a hablar en inglés

María G. Flores-Herrera^a

Abstract:

The current Covid-19 contingency has redefined the teaching and learning process for everyone involved. Nonetheless, one of the aspects that has been severely affected is learners' motivation and resilience. As a result, teachers worldwide have had to look for alternatives and adapt their teaching strategies, so that this new, digital modality of work, became engaging and useful to meet learners' learning needs. The present paper describes the experience of how the implementation of theme-based sessions and reading aloud in the virtual classroom had a positive impact on learners' motivation and interest in participating in online sessions. Through the implementation of action research methodology, it was possible to gather learners' written records of opinions concerning the significance of the four themed sessions which were held. This record of responses highlighted the language learning areas on which a major impact was observed, through the implemented strategy. Results showed that (according to learners' perceptions) [learners] confidence to speak in English increased; that their anxiety to speak in English diminished; and that overall learning in areas such as vocabulary and pronunciation improved. Although this is a small-scale project, it could usefully be replicated and adapted to different contexts, from which results would be well worth sharing.

Keywords:

Action research, pronunciation, reading aloud, theme-based, vocabulary

Resumen:

La contingencia actual causada por la Covid-19 redefinió la enseñanza y el aprendizaje para todos los involucrados en el proceso. No obstante, los aspectos que se han visto severamente afectados son la motivación y resiliencia de los alumnos. Por lo tanto, los docentes a nivel mundial debieron buscar y adaptar sus estrategias de enseñanza para que esta nueva modalidad de trabajo digital se hiciera relevante y útil para el alumnado y sus necesidades de aprendizaje. La presente experiencia describe como el incorporar sesiones temáticas y la lectura en voz alta en el aula virtual impactó positivamente la motivación y el interés de los alumnos al participar en las sesiones. Mediante la metodología de la investigación acción fue posible obtener un registro escrito de las opiniones de los alumnos acerca de relevancia de las cuatro sesiones temáticas realizadas. Dicho registro, enfatizó las áreas que tuvieron un mayor impacto al implementar dicha estrategia. Los resultados demostraron que. De acuerdo a las percepciones de los alumnos, su confianza al hablar en inglés aumento; la ansiedad al hablar en inglés se redujo; y que, en general, las áreas de aprendizaje que mejoraron de manera significativa fueron la pronunciación y la adquisición de vocabulario. Aunque este proyecto se realizó pequeña escala, tiene posibilidades de ser replicado y de adaptarse a diferentes contextos, en los cuales, habrá diferentes resultados que valdrá la pena conocer.

Palabras Clave:

Investigación acción, lectura en voz alta, pronunciación, sesiones temáticas, vocabulario.

INTRODUCTION

Emergency virtual teaching has challenged teachers and learners worldwide. Overnight, issues that have been overlooked for a long time, such as the digital gap,

social-emotional aspects, and self-regulation have gained relevance and turned into central elements of the teaching and learning process, as a result. Notwithstanding, one of the aspects that has been severely diminished as a consequence of these factors is students' resilience. Dörnyei (2014) explains that

^a María Guadalupe Flores Herrera, Escuela Normal Estatal de Especialización México Ciudad Obregón, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1692-7666>, Email: lupitaleli27@gmail.com

learners tend to abandon their academic activities due to factors including the demands of life, difficult relationships and poor self-determination (p.571). As a matter of fact, the current Covid-19 contingency has not only amplified the importance of the above listed issues but also brought in additional ones, including difficult economic situations and states of health. Altogether, these complexities have had a profound impact on learners' motivation and resilience with regard to carrying on with their academic responsibilities. And, while it is true that motivation is an inherent component of the process of language learning; it is also true that teachers can impact learners' motivation through positive classroom experiences (Harmer, 2015; Hedge, 2000). Nevertheless, emergency language teaching challenged teachers to find the resources that could trigger learners' engagement in an environment where motivation and interest were diminished. Therefore, motivating learners through the implementation of well-planned and attractive classroom dynamics was necessary to create and maintain a positive learning environment.

Objective:

The objective of this proposal is to describe a positive virtual classroom experience where reading aloud was taken as a starting point to develop theme-based sessions in which A1 learners at the Escuela Normal Estatal de Especialización de Sonora became not only interested in online English sessions, but also felt encouraged to make their first attempts to produce brief comments in English.

Theoretical framework

Content-based and theme-based instruction

Content-based instruction is considered to belong to the "strong" group of communicative approaches as it prioritizes communication over linguistic content. In other words, it aims at "teaching through communication rather than for it" (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011, p. 131). In order to achieve this communicative goal, it is of the utmost importance to present learners with interesting content. "Challenging topics (...) engage the curiosity and increase motivation of students as they grapple with an array of real-life issues ranging from simple to complex and also improve their linguistic skills across all four domains of listening, speaking, reading and writing" (Brown and Lee, 2015, p. 49). Therefore, for communication to take place in the language classroom it is also necessary to involve all of the four language skills as part of the teaching and learning process.

An integrated approach in the classroom

More often than not, when we carry out daily teaching/learning tasks, we involve the use of two or three skills at the same time. Therefore, learners should learn, from the early stages of language learning, that all skills are of equal importance in class. "In lessons, as in real life, skills are often integrated – with one activity leading on to another" (Gower, Philips and Walters, 2005, p. 86). Notwithstanding, attention must be paid to the fact that different skills may occupy a leading role in certain activities at specific moments: "it is usually impossible to complete a task successfully in one skill area without some other skill, too" (Harmer, 2015, p. 299).

In order to achieve an accurate balance of tasks involving different skills it is paramount to have a well-sequenced lesson where one task leads to another involving different skills. "Many effective learning sequences will offer both skill integration and also language study based around a topic or other thematic thread" (Harmer, 2015, p. 300). There are different proposals regarding how to integrate thematic content into a lesson. Here are two schemes that illustrate how a theme-based session may lead to a sequence of arranged tasks involving the four main language skills.

First, there is Harmer's (2015, p. 303) proposal which is divided into the following stages:

- **Lead in:** learners are engaged with the topic of the reading and we try to activate their schema (...) Then they predict what a text is likely to be about, and what they are going to see or hear.
- **Comprehension/response task:** a task is set up to enable learners to read or listen in a general way and to achieve a general understanding of the key content of the audio or written text.
- **Reading/listening:** learners read or listen to the text in order to complete the task that has been set.
- **Text-related task:** this refers to any kind of follow-up activity, and might be content or language focused.

Similarly, Scrivener (2011, p.267) suggests a more familiar name for each stage, yet the suggested sequence encompasses the same principles:

- **Pre-text:** introduction and lead in
- **Text:** tasks focus on fast reading, specific information, meanings or individual language items.
- **Post-text:** follow-on task and closing.

What is outstanding about each one of these lesson moments is that one skill leads to the use of two or more skills in the same or upcoming section. This is important to note, because receptive skills, such as listening and reading, ease the transition to productive activities including spoken or written production.

Reading aloud

Selecting reading aloud over silent reading aims to encourage learners to use the language, to practice pronunciation, and to acquire new vocabulary through a “safe medium”. “[Reading aloud] can be a way of increasing the confidence of weaker students by giving them a chance to get their mouths around a continuous flow of correctly-formed, meaningful English, which they are not yet so good at doing in spontaneous speaking” (Harmer, 2015, p. 318). Nonetheless, reading aloud must be carefully implemented in order for it to be useful for learners. Brown and Lee (2015) explain that while there are advantages to reading aloud such as an opportunity for pronunciation checking, and student participation, there are also some disadvantages, including: “lack of authenticity and attention as well as recitation rather than participation” (p. 408). And, while it is true that reading aloud in isolation will certainly confront these flaws, it is also true that, together with other language skills, reading aloud can prompt interesting learning outcomes.

Writing: transferring information or content

As stated above, reading aloud in isolation tends to be a rather monotonous and purposeless activity. In fact, Brown and Lee (2015) suggest that one of the weaknesses of reading aloud is being confused with communication when it actually is “mere recitation” (p.408). Notwithstanding, reading aloud can go beyond ‘recitation’ when we ask learners to write down their viewpoints on the subject discussed to later share them with the rest of the class in a spoken debate or forum. For this reason, it is of outstanding that learners are actively performing tasks when a classmate is reading a text aloud. Activities including completing charts or mind maps with relevant information; or looking up new vocabulary or pronunciation forms; are good ways to keep learners busy, interested and attentive to what is going on in the lesson, but, more importantly, to give them time to gather information that can serve them as preparation for a speaking activity. “One way of having the students demonstrate their understanding of texts is by asking them to transfer the information they see to other media (...) we can ask the students to complete graphs, pie charts (...) to show their understanding of the information they have read” (Harmer, 2015, p. 315).

Speaking

“For many learners, their ‘passive’ knowledge is much larger than their ‘active’ language” (Scrivener, 2011, p.213). For this reason, it is fundamental to provide learners with sufficient time and information to organize their ideas before speaking. This perspective comes from Krashen’s Input hypothesis where a period of ‘silence’ allows individuals to process input until, they are ready to produce it (Krashen, 1982; Brown, 2014;). Closely to this stance, Scrivener (2011) states that providing learners with enough quiet time, allows them to structure their thoughts, to look for unknown vocabulary and to make notes that ease the process to express their ideas (p. 214).

Taking notes is important for learners as they can rely on the content that they have written as a form of backup to guide their speech. The most important aspect to remember is that it is essential to provide learners with a safe space to share their ideas. Therefore, reading aloud their notes or written comments on a given topic will keep learners focused on sharing content rather than on the speech act. “You are likely to want to create activities in which learners feel less worried about speaking, less under pressure, less nervous about trying things” (Scrivener, 2011, p. 213).

What is more, giving learners the opportunity to read aloud their ideas enables us as teachers to monitor the vocabulary employed by learners, as well as the pronunciation of different sounds. “Reading aloud is useful (...) as it allows us to monitor how well students are learning the sounds of separate letters” (Ur, 2012, p. 137). Consequently, as teachers we must implement the necessary strategies and provide the resources to create “‘safe’ situations where they are inspired and encouraged to use the language they store” (Scrivener, 2011, p. 213).

The role of the teacher

One of the imperative responsibilities of teachers is motivating learners to read so they can, later on, be encouraged to speak. The best way to do so is through the selection of ‘appropriate’ texts that promote critical reading and the practice of it as part of language classes (Hedge, 2000, p. 205).

Authentic material

Authentic material can be used with low-level students as long as the content and activities within are comprehensible for the learner. Stephen Krashen (1984 as cited in Harmer 2015, p. 304) suggested that “comprehensible input aids language acquisition (...) while ‘incomprehensible’ input will not”. Therefore, in order to facilitate the assimilation of content it is essential

to carefully select printed material. According to Gower, et.al. (2005) texts used in class should be suitable for students' level, they must be interesting as well as challenging but manageable (p.95). Similarly, Ur, (2012) states "the more interesting the topic and the clearer the purpose of the interaction, the more motivated participants will be" (p. 119). Altogether, once the teacher has assessed the suitability of the text material for learners' level and interests, it is possible to incorporate printed material as the central component of a lesson sequence.

Methodology

The project reported in here was designed according to principles of reflective practice and action research. On the one hand, according to Bailey, (2014), reflective teaching pursues four central purposes: to expand understanding of the teaching and learning process, to expand our repertoire of options as teachers, to take ownership of our teaching practices and to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities that we provide (p. 614). In fact, one of the most distinctive and valuable characteristics of reflective practice is that is carried out as part of teachers' real professional practice. 'Reflection in the wild' as Mann and Walsh (2017) define it, refers to the idea of teachers embedding reflection in their daily professional lives (p. 101).

Nevertheless, reflecting on our own practices and carrying out action research are two activities considered daunting by many teachers, as they considerably increase teacher workload. Regardless of such assumptions, the truth is that action research and reflective practice, do have an impact on our teaching practice and on our students' learning. In order to carry out this reflective research activity, it was necessary to follow the essential process of an action research project: "planning, action, observation and reflection" (Burns, 2010, p. 8).

Planning

In order to approach the issue of lack of motivation and interest experienced by second semester learners, on the BA in Inclusive Education, at the Escuela Normal Estatal de Especialización (Specialized State Teacher Training College) during online classes, it was essential to implement a teaching strategy that stimulated learners to become engaged in the class contents and, at the same time, to practice using the English language. Therefore, implementing content sessions as part of the regular classes seemed to be an appropriate option to get and keep learners engaged and, at the same time, to help them learn the language in a more authentic form.

Action

The following sections will present the development of the sessions held as well as their organization and resources used. To begin with, it was necessary to consider the time available. Due to online emergency teaching learners were attending two weekly virtual sessions of one hour each. Therefore, after careful consideration, there were four spaces available to implement theme-based sessions. First, in order to make learners informed and to familiarize them with the activity, it was explained the purpose and organization of the sessions. The themes selected were based on current events in agreement with the learners. Involving learners in the decision-making process of selecting the themes to be discussed in class, enabled the teacher/researcher to select themes that sparked learners' interest to actively participate in class. Altogether, after discussing potential themes to include, it was agreed that four theme-based sessions would be held in a period of four months. The themes selected were:

- International Women's Day
- World Down Syndrome Day
- Autism Day
- International Book and Copyright Day.

Once the themes were selected, it was necessary to find accurate materials to use during the sessions. In order to provide a source of input that helped learners' understanding of the themes to be discussed, a careful selection of texts was considered. All in all, due to their language accuracy, adaptability to different levels, and availability of recorded and printed material the texts were taken from the web page ESL Holiday lessons (<https://eslholidaylessons.com/>). All texts were pre-read, by the teacher, in order to check their relevance and appropriateness for learners' level. After themes and materials have been selected it was time to structure the stages for each session. In order to implement an innovation in the lesson, it was necessary to follow a structured procedure. This procedure was based on the principles suggested by Harmer (2015):

1. Speaking as preparation and stimulus: discuss a topic as a way to activate schemata or engaging learners in a topic that they are going to read about.
2. Text as preparation and stimulus: use written and spoken texts to stimulate our students into some other kind of work.
3. Integrated tasks: when students are involved in some kind of collaborative task they will be speaking, listening, writing and reading almost simultaneously. (p. 299).

The first element of the session would be an introductory 20 minutes presentation provided by the teacher which had two central goals: engaging learners' attention to the topic and introducing them to key information and vocabulary. In this stage, the teacher socialized and provided clarification on the information presented through comprehension questions. In the meantime, learners were asked to fill in K-W-L charts with important information.

The second part of the session was the reading aloud section (20 minutes). At this point, learners were presented with a text related to the theme of the session. During this stage all learners were required to take turns to read a section of the passage aloud. In order to keep passive learners active during the reading aloud moments they were asked to look up for the meaning of any new vocabulary they encountered and to continue to complete their K-W-L charts in preparation for the integrated tasks section. The reading aloud stage was followed by a comprehension stage. The comprehension stage (10 minutes) aimed to check learners understanding of the information read by asking comprehension questions. This stage not only encouraged learners to share new vocabulary meanings, but also to discover the pronunciation of certain words. Once the comprehension stage was completed, learners were introduced to the planning stage. During planning stage (10 minutes), learners were given time to organize the information gathered in their K-W-L charts during the session so they could construct informed comments on the theme discussed. Finally, the sharing stage began. At this point, learners had around 20 to 30 minutes to read aloud their constructed comments on the contents learned in a class forum or debate which was moderated by the teacher.

Figure 1 illustrates the lesson process:

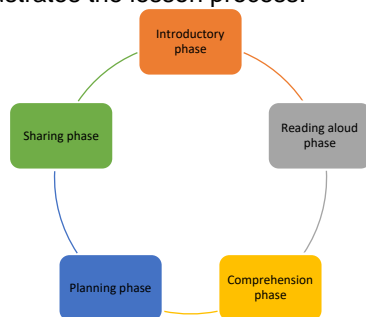


Figure 1.

Observation

During the first sessions there were some observable drawbacks. For instance, learners were shy and were not clear about the structure of the lesson. Therefore, there was some mindreading about the activities to

perform at each stage of the session. To overcome learners' shyness and reluctance to participate it was imperative to remind them that the goal of these sessions was to help them to start using the language. This sensitizing stage highlighted the fact that these sessions were a safe space to practice, to ask questions and to make mistakes. They were encouraged to actively participate and to make comments apart from their reading aloud interactions. It was also explained to the students reading aloud that they could ask for assistance from the teacher in case they found a word or expression difficult to understand and/or to pronounce.

All in all, after a period of adaptation to the lesson's sequence and tasks (especially during International Women's Day Session) learners became more open to participate. Three major improvements were observed on the sessions' recordings:

Firstly, during reading aloud, learners were volunteering more to participate and they showed willingness to work on appropriate pronunciation by directly asking the teacher to provide or correct the pronunciation of difficult words. Secondly, after reading aloud participations, learners were more open to interact with each other by asking and responding to questions about new vocabulary.

Thirdly, learners got used to note-taking during the introductory and reading aloud stages. Organizing information into K-W-L charts allowed learners to produce two main kind of comments at the end of the class. Some learners preferred to share small comments about specific points of the information learned and some other preferred to structure larger comments that summarized all the key points or relevant information for them.

Once the four sessions concluded, learners were asked to complete the following activity to provide feedback on the activity and to reflect on their own learning experience. The activity was simple and true to the essence of action research, where "teaching lends itself naturally to data collection. For example, surveys conducted by your students about their views on various aspects of language learning can provide you with good sources of information" (Burns, 2010, p. 54). The fifty-four learners who took part in the sessions were required to complete a 3-2-1 chart where they had to include:

- 3 things they learned from the sessions.
- 2 things they found interesting.
- 1 general comment about the class.

Here are some examples of representative opinions:

"My comment about this class is that I find it very interesting that while we learn English we also learn about relevant topics".

"I lost the fear to speak in English and that others listen to me".

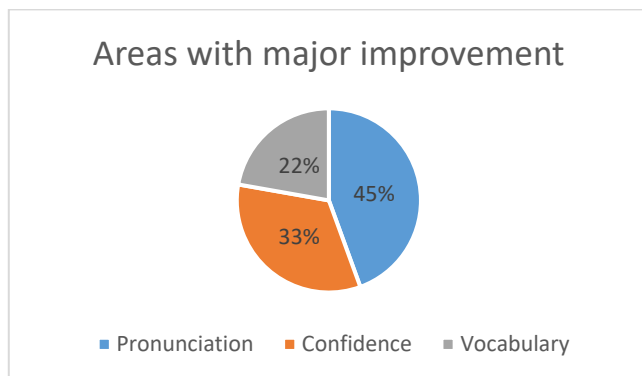
"I learned to pronounce words that were complicated to me".

"I really liked that we worked on pronunciation and learned the meaning of new words".

"I like the way the sessions are held as well as participating and giving our opinions".

"I do not consider myself good at English but I feel that I have learned".

In general, the 54 learners had positive comments on the activity being the areas with major improvement according to learners' perception the following:



Reflection

The implementation of theme-based sessions as part of online classes allowed learners to practice using the English language through the discussion of current events themes. This demonstrated that simple communicative tasks can have a positive impact on basic level learners' first attempts to use the language. "Communicative tasks are designed so that students have a reason or purpose for speaking (...) Not only are these activities motivating in the classroom, but they offer a challenge which mirrors real-life interaction" (Gower, et.al. 2005, p. 102). However, there were other salient aspects that emerged from this experience and that are worth sharing and exploring as a form of reflection.

Some of the essential activities that were constantly enforced as part of the online theme-sessions, and that had a positive impact on learners learning, were:

- Building on students' previous experience.
- Rapport and scaffolding.
- Pronunciation mini lessons.
- Top-down and bottom-up reading.
- Error correction.

Students' experiences

One of the central reasons for basing most of the sessions on learners' experience obeys the need to get them involved with the themes discussed. In other words, reassuring low-level adult learners' confidence in sharing their experiences and expertise in hands-on learning activities helps to keep learning concrete (Lazaraton, 2014, p. 111). By the same token, Brown and Lee suggest that "The reader brings information, knowledge, emotion, experience, and culture -that is, schemata (plural)- to the printed world" (Brown and Lee, 2015, p. 391). What was observed in the lessons' recording and teacher's notes was that once learners understood the structure of the lesson and became familiar with tasks, such as completing K-W-L, they were able to understand and organize the information presented in class which facilitated the construction of their final comments. This final task integration that allowed learners to turn written information into spoken comments motivated them to share their ideas and understanding of the themes with their peers.

Rapport and scaffolding

Notwithstanding, motivation and willingness to speak are not sparked by themselves; as a matter of fact, one of the primary things done before implementing the sessions was to hold a conversation with learners explaining the purpose of the activity as well as the importance of taking this space to interact. Informing learners and raising awareness on the importance of participation allowed the teacher to create a safe environment for learners to participate and to assure them that what they had to say was worth sharing and that they were heard.

"Our job as teachers is to provide the kind of warm, embracing climate that encourages students to speak, however halting or tentative their attempts may be" (Brown and Lee, 2015, p. 348). Being patient and paying attention to what students have to contribute to the class is key in order to make learners feel heard. Nevertheless, rapport does not only create a safe environment for learners it also improves the relationships between all participants. "You should aim to create a comfortable atmosphere where students are

not afraid to speak and enjoy communicating with you and their fellow students” (Gower, et.al. 2005, p. 101).

In order to make learners confident enough to speak it is vital to let them know that the classroom is a safe environment to make mistakes, to question everything and to learn. These were the basic principles which learners were reminded of, every single class. Nonetheless, encouraging learners to participate is not enough; if learners are asked to share something it is our obligation, as teachers, to be attentive to what they say beyond the accuracy of the language they use. Equally important to correcting learners’ mistakes, it is to demonstrate that we pay attention to what they say and to let them know that the information they provide is relevant. Harmer, (2015) states that the use of facial expressions, repeating or commenting on what they said as well as asking follow-up questions are useful strategies to show learners that we are engaged with what they say. (pp. 115-155).

Pronunciation: mini lessons

One of the most meaningful insights of this experience is that reading aloud lead to short, but engaging pronunciation mini lessons. This demonstrates that teaching pronunciation does not necessarily imply teaching the entire phonetic alphabet, nor specific sections of it, in every session. As Goodwin (2014) explains “a top-down approach in which the sound system is addressed as it naturally occurs -in the stream of speech” (p. 136). In this virtual environment, reading aloud accomplished two objectives: it provided learners with the necessary input to carry out class activities and helped them to learn new vocabulary and to practice the pronunciation of a variety of words.

Top-down and bottom-up reading

All in all, integrating reading aloud as a vehicle to boost learners’ confidence to speak in English is a strategy worth implementing as part of the virtual language classroom. As results demonstrated, in addition to building up their confidence to speak in English, learners improve sub-skills such as pronunciation and vocabulary in a ‘natural’ form. “lower-level students need to concentrate on word and sound recognition and the connections between sounds and spelling (...) As students move beyond simple word and sound recognition” (Harmer, 2015, p. 302).

Error correction

Finally, a prominent aspect that was involved throughout the process of all theme-based sessions was error correction. As expected, learners made multiple mistakes with regard to pronunciation; these were especially noticeable, as they were required to read

aloud texts and comment on the texts, too. The challenge with error correction is that the teacher must make multiple decisions on the spot. Decisions such as when and how it is appropriate to correct learners’ speech may affect the reading flow and comprehension of information.

Although, these decisions may be difficult, the experience facilitated this aspect as learners asked to be corrected or asked questions with regard to the proper pronunciation of new vocabulary. The feedback was entirely provided by the teacher through the implementation of different techniques such as: recast, elicitation, explicit correction and repetition (Ur, 2012, pp. 94-95). However, there were some moments in which, if the learners did not ask for any correction form, but some flaws were noticed, the teacher gave a brief explanation or made a comment on certain mistakes at the end of the learner’s intervention. Altogether, issues regarding error correction can be figured out during the lesson and can be adapted to each individual learner and their willingness to be corrected. All in all, the important thing is to learn how to correct sensitively, efficiently and effectively while maintaining a co-operative learning environment (Gower, et.al., 2005, p. 165).

Conclusion

All things considered, it is possible to observe how reflecting on our teaching practices can lead to the implementation of minor innovations that can have a positive impact on our teaching practices, but, more importantly, on our learners’ learning. Turning the language into a vehicle to motivate learners to share their thoughts about current events and topics that are relevant for them changes the classroom dynamic and makes classes entertaining and useful for learners. The difficult moment in history, caused by the Covid-19 contingency has modified classroom practices for everyone. Therefore, the alternative of using reading aloud as a resource to instruct learners accomplished two central objectives: it helped them to reflect on social and cultural events occurring around them; and it also, made them see that speaking in English does not have to be a demanding or stressful experience. On the contrary, by enabling learners to read, assimilate, and write down their thoughts they were able to notice how it is possible for them to make solid contributions to the class that reflect their personal insight and knowledge gained from the issues discussed. To sum up, this experience demonstrates that “Even quite controlled activities can be made communicative if the students are talking about real events and opinions” (Gower, et.al. 2005, p. 102).

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