

Student-led Seminars in an ESL Classroom: An Experiment

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ABSTRACT

A large majority of students who complete postgraduate programs in English, ELT, or English literature, go on to become teachers/ trainers. Yet very few courses taught on these programs help students gather the pedagogic experience required to make a successful transition from 'student' to 'teacher' so that they become comfortable in the classroom (Atkinson, 2001) and deliver effective classes (Young and Bippus, 2008). This paper evaluates the efficacy of student-led seminars as an instructional method to help student-teachers acquire content knowledge and gain pedagogic competence. The paper reports how the 'Training-to-train' course delivered to semester III students on the MA program at EFLU, Hyderabad, was redesigned to introduce student-led seminars to encourage students who lacked teaching experience engage better with course contents. This paper discusses in detail the different parts of a modified version of student-led seminars that can be implemented by ESL teachers to facilitate students' acquisition of complex concepts through experience and reflection.

Keywords: Student-led seminars; pedagogic competence; collaborative learning; peer-teaching; critical thinking.

Introduction

Most postgraduate programs in English, ELT, or English literature use a variety of teaching methods and techniques such as group discussions, presentations, whole-class lectures, tutorials, seminars, etc. to teach a wide range of courses in literature, language education, and linguistics. The fact is, a large majority of those who graduate from these programs go on to become teachers/ trainers and yet very few courses taught help students gather pedagogic experience and form insights into teaching practices while acquiring content knowledge. Both educationists and researchers argue that it is essential for students to be readied early on in their academic career to make a successful

transition from 'student' to 'teacher' so that they become comfortable in the classroom (Atkinson, 2001) and deliver effective classes (Young and Bippus, 2008). Bullock (2011) reports that most student-teachers find it difficult to apply theory learned in class in actual teaching contexts and argues why students need to be given multiple opportunities to construct professional knowledge of teaching.

Rationale and background

In addition to reading literature, analyzing theories, and critiquing prose and poems, we have to make the students ready to opt for a career in teaching English (which includes teaching English literature, linguistics, and/or

English language teaching). That is, we need to help the students gain pedagogical competence. Teaching courses (for instance, courses like *Principles of English Language Teaching, Developing oral communication skills, Designing instruction materials, etc.*) that help students understand classroom communication and practice, and pedagogic competence will not suffice. Due to a total lack of, or deficits in, work experience, students find it challenging to understand multidisciplinary and complex concepts such as student-centred learning, multiple intelligences, and learner autonomy, that form the crux of most pedagogic competency building courses. This paper proposes that content expertise and teaching experience should be treated as mutually inclusive – developing teaching experience can facilitate a better understanding of content in novice students. And high levels of awareness of core concepts can in turn help students deliver effective teaching. Both are essential for making our students ready for the teaching profession.

Besides, the paper describes how students can acquire highly-specialized knowledge and skills required to deliver high-impact teaching through the student-led seminar method. The paper reports in detail how a *Training-to-train* course delivered to the semester III students on the MA English program at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, was redesigned to introduce student-led seminars to help students who lacked work experience engage more meaningfully with course contents. It was observed that, by the end of the course, students demonstrated a better understanding of the use of language for

effective communication and deploying techniques to match teaching objectives and learner needs.

What are student-led seminars?

Student-led seminars (SLS) follow different formats. However, the basic component of all SLS formats is students making a presentation to peers on a given topic followed by a whole-class discussion. SLS works loosely around the *peer-led team learning* approach proposed by Gosser et al. (2000) where students teach other students in small groups.

When students make a presentation to teach a concept to their peers, they,

- I explain the concept in their own words,
- I identify and use examples to illustrate the concept,
- I relate it to familiar concepts,
- I describe its application in real-life contexts, and
- I indicate its relevance to personal interest.

In addition to facilitating an understanding of pedagogy, student-led seminars illustrate the Feynman learning technique – if you want to learn a concept try teaching it to someone. Teaching a concept to someone who lacks knowledge of that concept helps one understand that concept better (Maurer, 1999). [Richard Feynman (1918–1988) was a Nobel prize-winning physicist.]

Student-led seminars (SLS) are thus different from presentations where students read out carefully written reports in front of a class based on a topic chosen by the teacher. Such presentations are passive and do not expect

or permit peer interaction.

Phases of a student-led seminar

The SLS method described in this paper has five parts:

1. Pre-SLS

Model seminars demonstrated by the teacher: In the first month of the *Training-to-train* course (where SLS, as reported in this paper, were used) the course instructor modelled six seminars. A few core concepts were taught during these seminars to ensure students' foundation-level knowledge. The instructor-led seminars demonstrated the structure of SLS and helped students gain familiarity with the seminar format.

At the end of the month, the students were asked to form groups of three. Presentations can also be individual or in large groups. An advantage of group presentation is that the ensuing discussion has more direction, participation and purpose because there are more people to lead. They were then given a list of topics for seminars and each group was asked to choose topics that appealed to them. Topics can also be teacher-assigned. An advantage of teacher-determined topics is that the discussion can further students' critical thinking skills since they may be called on to present or defend a topic that they do not fully support.

2. Preparing for SLS

Students locate resources and start intra-group reading: Three weeks of the second month were assigned for this stage. In addition to the books and references given by the course instructors to understand seminar topics, students were encouraged to

locate and share within-group additional resources to learn more about the topics. All students read the various sources, prepared notes, interpreted, and reflected on topics as a group.

Inter-group sharing of resources and discussion: Even though a chronological schedule for seminars was in place, all groups were required to do their preparatory reading at the same time. This was to facilitate discussions among groups. In week four of the second month, each group was asked to discuss their topic with other groups. These inter-group discussions helped students learn about other topics, draw links with multiple concepts from other topics, and reflect on their topics in greater depth. It was observed that the nature and extent of collaboration increased over time and many groups succeeded in incorporating elaborate additions from other groups' topics.

Building the seminar outlines: During the same week, groups were asked to structure their seminars using the following template:

- a. Pre-seminar materials (reading, videos, audio, or print tasks) to be given to peers before the seminar.
- b. Content for a two-hour seminar accompanied by a single PowerPoint presentation for all three presenters. Content to be chunked into three segments of 15–20 minutes.
- c. Three interactive breaks at the end of every chunk for while-seminar activities like debate, quiz, discussion, role play, problem-solving activity, case study analysis, and task design.
- d. A post-seminar consolidation activity.

- e. A handout listing important points to be given to all students at the end of the seminar.
- f. Exit slips for immediate classroom assessment of students' understanding of the material. (Evaluation of exit slips was done by the course instructors.) [Exit slips are informal assessments to gauge student understanding of the topic taught. They are collected as written responses from students at the end of a seminar. Questions can range from factual, reflective, evaluative, or application-oriented. Read more at: https://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/exit_slips]

Once each group was ready with all six items listed above, the next stage was consulting the course instructors.

3. Pre-seminar discussion

A pre-seminar discussion with the course instructors is crucial to ensure that students have comprehended the topic and its various concepts rightly. This step is also important to guide students with designing seminar tasks and/or vetting the activities they create. These discussions also functioned as seminar rehearsals since they helped students plan the better organization of classroom space and fine tune their teaching techniques.

However, the most beneficial use of pre-seminar conversations with the course instructors was that the students gained access to a lot of *rich teacher talk* (Hakuta, 2016). Content competence alone does not guarantee effective delivery of what is learned; teaching effectively requires a different kind of language. It was the pre-seminar consultation with the course instructors that gave the

students the metalanguage required to deliver their seminar topics. Teacher talk also provided students the real-world examples to describe cognitively challenging concepts (Roskos, Christie and Richgels, 2003). It was observed that these examples got reused during seminars as well as during post-seminar whole-class discussions. It was also noticed that the richer the pre-seminar teacher talks were, the lesser was students' performance anxiety.

4. The actual seminar: each group delivered their SLS at this point.

5. Post-seminar assessment

Assessment of each SLS was performed in two ways: (a) course instructors evaluated whole-class understanding of content taught by each group using exit slips [see point (f) above], and (b) course instructors gave feedback to each group regarding the seminars delivered.

Teacher assessment of whole-class using exit slips was introduced to bring about a change in student perception that the SLS is only a means for assessing presenters' performance. Teacher assessment of content learned motivated the listeners to pay close attention and participate actively; it also made the presenters feel responsible and ensure peer learning.

Post-seminar feedback to each SLS group was structured using the observed learning outcomes (SOLO) framework (Biggs and Collis, 1982). Holistic assessment of seminar structured around the following five levels of SOLO was imparted to each group:

1. Pre-structural – the seminar covered only the basics of the topic in a simple, linear fashion.

2. Uni-structural – the seminar did not adequately discuss all concepts of the topic; it focused only on one concept of the topic.
3. Multi-structural – students were able to present multiple aspects of the topic but these were presented independently/separately; the seminar was unable to present the interrelation among different concepts of the topic.
4. Relational – students were able to present the complexity and *integrativeness* of the topic coherently and lucidly; all seminar activities together led to creating an adequate understanding of the topic in peers.
5. Extended abstract – students were able to move their peers beyond a *relational* understanding of the topic and develop in them a deep understanding of the concepts related to the topic.

Course instructors need to ensure that post-seminar feedback is given within a week of the seminar.

Findings and conclusion

The student-led seminar method as reported in this paper led to content gain and delivery-based accomplishments. Responses to a questionnaire given at the end of the course showed that all students agreed that SLS allowed intense and personally meaningful engagement with various topics. 92% of students reported that they gained in-depth knowledge through the seminars, while 87% of students agreed that seminars increased their self-esteem, reduced performance anxiety, and improved their communication skills.

By giving students the responsibility to prepare and organize their learning, student-led seminars promote learner autonomy, collaborative learning, and critical thinking (Kurczek and Johnson, 2014). By giving students the additional responsibility of imparting their learning to their peers, student-led seminars impart pedagogical competence (Worth, 2013). The SLS model described in this paper explains how the traditional format of student-led seminars can be broadened to encourage the active participation of students by introducing inter-group sharing of content knowledge and whole-class assessment by the teacher.

This paper proposes that incorporating student-led seminars as an instruction method in ESL classes can facilitate a better acquisition of knowledge through pedagogic experience and reflection. The writer suggests that SLS has the potential to help students master difficult concepts. The more our students teach, the deeper their understanding of concepts. The paper also makes a case for using SLS to provide teaching experience for novice students who might be interested in a teaching career.

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