

ETV: challenges, stumbling blocks, rewards

Clara Birnbaum

ETV is a course in flux but with a rationale and aim that remain constant. In the Rikkyo TEFL Seminar of September, 2001, I focused on the goals of the ETV course, and the degree to which these goals have been met until now. I also looked at anticipated changes for the future.

Briefly, ETV is a “content” course whose core teaching materials have been short news documentaries made in the United States on issues of social concern to the world at large. The course’s underlying assumption is that using content that is socially-relevant and meaningful to the students with video as the main medium, is a stimulating and purposeful way to encourage critical examination of issues and to improve ability in all the language skills.

A very real problem in content courses is that the most intellectually-inspiring subject matter and most appropriate for presenting social issues . . . not merely as chunks of English for language instruction, but as real life concerns that touch our lives . . . is often too difficult linguistically for our students. In principle, it is possible to use English material that is several notches above the students’ level of language competence but it is necessary in such a case to make it accessible through careful language support and the use of supplementary materials that facilitate use of the core materials at every stage of the lesson.

In my view, judging from student response to surveys specifically about the units we covered, and from their homework and final essays, ETV succeeded in stimulating and inspiring students to explore issues seriously. It can be assumed that the effort it took to convey their thoughts and discoveries in their reports, contributed to their continuing language learning.

However, there are indications, including student response regarding the linguistic difficulty of the core materials, and comments of other ETV teachers, that suggest that the ETV course has not met the pedagogical challenges of a content course. The main rea-

son is that the materials till now, have been more difficult than is reasonable. Trying to remedy the situation with supplementary materials and language support, often amounted to placing the secondary materials in a position of greater importance than the core materials, which is clearly absurd. The task was made even more difficult by the fact that the course meets only once a week in the spring term, which is not enough time.

A project has begun to create original video materials specifically for Rikkyo students . . . materials that respect the basic rationale of the present course, but that are much more accessible to first year students, and more conducive generally to student-centred, communicative learning. The project will remain “in house” rather than seek an outside publisher, to allow for flexibility, experimentation and possible updating of materials. This project is ambitious, requiring a lot of time and thought, but one that offers a rich and dynamic opportunity for creativity. While participants in the project are working hard, it is too early to say how long it will take. In the interim, a new set of commercial materials have been chosen that are much simpler linguistically than the present materials, and these will be implemented in the spring of 2002.

Although there does not seem to be any plan at present to alter the ETV course structurally, if I may take the liberty of imagining how it could be done, I would suggest the IWE model of “concentric circles” , with an ETV 1 / ETV 2 course in the spring, and an ETV 2 / ETV 3 course in the fall, all courses meeting twice a week. As with the IWE series, the ETV courses, would guide the students gradually toward a deeper and more critical understanding of world issues, and a greater awareness of their place in the larger world context. The strong focus on content even at the ETV 1 level, and the central use of current video materials, would clearly distinguish IWE from ETV. Such a course series would solve some of the present problems, mainly through more frequent meetings of the class and therefore the chance for a more natural buildup of skills, but would maintain the aim of bringing a lively spirit of exploration and discovery to the classroom.

The ETV course is indeed in flux, and while this in some ways does not offer the same feeling of security that other more fixed and established courses might, it does add a dynamic dimension that allows for creativity and flexibility in our teaching, if we are willing to meet the challenge.