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My experience at the 55th IATEFL Conference 2022 in Belfast, North Ireland

Last May I had the chance to visit Belfast and attend the 55th IATEFL Conference. It was a fruitful experience, with a great many topics for all interests. Since I had to choose two presentations for this article, I decided to write firstly about the presentation of Professor Janice Bland from Nord University entitled “Refugee stories as visual narrative in English language education”. I believe that integrating refugees into a society and raising natives’ empathy for them is one of the most crucial current issues in western countries. My second choice is the presentation of Professor Samuel Lefevre (University of Iceland) entitled “Rubric use in ELT: impact on students learning”, where he explained one of his post-graduate student’s action research on how she developed students’ understanding of assignment aims and expectations. Although it was a long procedure, it helped the students have the experience of the development, execution and evaluation of an assignment, and understand the use of a rubric and how their assignments are evaluated. It also enabled the teacher to make herself more understandable.

Dr. Janice Bland’s presentation

In her presentation Professor Bland illustrated how refugee stories can encourage children and adolescents to contemplate ethical issues while empathizing with a relatable protagonist. While introducing three refugee stories, she showed how visual narratives can help students achieve multisensory language learning and thought-filled feelings. One of her points is that it has been observed that while reading in L2, people experience less distress than while reading in L1, hence the decreased distress can help students have clearer thoughts and develop both their critical thinking and their views on ethical matters. She also points out that EFL courses can and should contribute to the development of critical literacy and intercultural learning.

After creating a safe classroom environment, where culturally and linguistically diverse students feel safe to share ideas and feelings in an inclusive atmosphere, Dr. Bland selects refugee stories as visual narratives, seeking to extract emotions. These outcome emotions tend to endure at the end of a moving narrative, and they continue to influence readers in the future; they can also be used as perspective-taking, and lastly, they develop empathy.

As she explains ‘deep reading’ means transacting with and participating actively in the literary text. ‘Deep reading’ is building a mental model of the storyworld, experiencing empathy and perspective-taking. What is more, ‘deep reading’ encompasses critical deliberation on word choices, talking around texts, inferencing from evidence, filling gaps, negotiation of insights, and sharing of understandings. Last but not least, ‘deep

reading' entails reading critically and potentially against the text. (Bland, 2022). Based on 'her deep-reading framework' she proposes some in-class activities, some of which I have chosen to present below.

Dr. Bland asks her students to read the book "Whenever I go" and then asks them to *unpuzzle and explore the contrasts*. The students need to pick up and write in three columns the adjectives that show:

- i. how Abia's group of friends and family look,
- ii. how life in the refugee camp looks and
- iii. how the night-time flight from their village was.

After that, students explore the contrasts. Then, she tries to activate prior knowledge and investigate new information so her second activity requires students to share their first understanding and discuss the different roles of Abia (as Queen Abia, Queen of the Fields etc.), which change along with the setting and the activities of Abia. The students acquire new information about life in Africa, which expands their 'information literacy' in a safe and natural way.

Then, Dr. Bland, in order to *critically engage* the students in the story, she asks them to write their thoughts about the end of the story. The last step in the framework proposes students to *experiment with a creative response*. For example, they can compare this story with other stories they heard, or even write their own story. Here she notes that we must not forget that nowadays many of our students have been through this experience.

Dr. Samuel Lefevre's presentation

Dr. Lefevre presented the findings from an action research study which examined students' attitudes towards the use of assessment rubrics in English learning. The findings showed that rubric use had a positive impact on English teaching and learning. Rubric use helped students to understand assignment aims and expectations, as well as, set learning goals and take greater responsibility for their own learning.

Dr. Lefevre's post-graduate student Rebekka Arnatottir starts her research with the following questions on how rubric use affects learner autonomy and how student motivation impacts students' ability to recognize learning goals and assess their own learning. In particular, the researcher worked with 2 groups of students in English (32 in total) aged 14-15 (grade 9). For data collection she used a research journal, where she recorded reflections and personal feelings following each teaching session involving rubric use. She also used written questionnaires given to students following each activity involving rubric use, as well as focus group discussions, participation records and student self-assessment forms.

What strikes in this research is the stages of the development of assessment rubric. Five assignments were developed, which included:

Assn 1. *Research a topic related to Canada. Write a script and create a video.* It was created by the teacher, and it was presented at the beginning of the assignment.

Assn 2. *Create a puppet show following the theme, "Fantasy".* It was created in cooperation with the students at the beginning of the assignment.

Assn 3. *Short oral presentation on a youth culture topic.* Students created a list of assessment criteria pertinent to the assignment and used the rubric for self- and peer assessment.

Assn 4. *Research a topic related to Ireland, create a trifold brochure and present it in class.* Students created an extensive list of assessment criteria pertinent to the assignment.

Assn 5. *Write a soldier's letter to a loved one – process writing.* Students created a list of assessment criteria and set learning goals at the beginning. It was used for giving feedback during the writing process and upon completion.

The conclusions of the research are:

- Rubric use makes the interplay between competence criteria, assessment criteria and English teaching more transparent for both teacher and students.
- Rubrics can help students organize their studies and take more responsibility for their learning.
- Taking part in creating the rubrics and reflecting on competence criteria played a big part in helping students to understand what lies beneath language learning.
- Clearer focus on assessment and competence criteria simplified assessment and giving feedback.
- Rubric use gave the teacher greater confidence in her teaching and in her interaction with students.
- Not all students could utilize what rubric use has to offer. Students have diverse needs and may need more personalized support with their learning.

All in all, I really benefited by my attendance in the conference. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity to communicate with theorists, trainers, practising teachers, material writers and publishers from all over the world and learn about their inspiring work. I also want to thank Dr. Bland and Dr. Lefevre for providing the material for this article.

References

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