

Getting students more involved in the tasks

Štěpánka Bilová *Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic*

The paper presents four activities which enhance students' efforts when preparing for their English for Specific Purposes classes. Their homework includes pre-session activities in which the students ought to obtain necessary knowledge for the topics explored in the lessons, and post-session tasks in which the students show the understanding of the topic taught. Originally, I employed variations of traditional comprehension exercises, e.g. “read the text and answer the questions”, “write a summary of the topic from the lesson”. It often happened that the students produced a piece of work which showed they had misunderstood the instructions or the theme, or which included simple “copy and paste”. I started to modify the tasks in order to increase the students’ achievement by encouraging their critical thinking and supporting their creativity.

In the first activity the students are asked to prepare slides for a presentation. The source text remains the same, nevertheless, the outcome takes a significantly different form. The students are instructed on the principles of preparing successful slides, and they submit them before the class. The teacher can easily identify problematic areas and provide feedback at the beginning of the lesson. The slides are then a basis for group minipresentations.

Another option for preparing a presentation or a discussion is to set a piece of audio homework. The students learn about the features of written and spoken texts and about the rules for transforming a written piece into an oral delivery. Then they are to transform a short formal text into a presentation and to submit the task as an audio recording. It is advisable to set a time limit (e.g. 2 – 3 minutes). The students can use their mobile devices for recording, or there are various online resources or software available on the Internet.

The following two activities employ discussion forums. The students can show their understanding of a topic or a text by answering a question in a discussion forum. This task was inspired by web pages in which people ask questions and receive answers from others who are willing to share opinions, facts and experience. The teacher starts a fictitious discussion open only to their students. The following fabricated post comes from legal English classes, the aim is to understand the work of barristers and solicitors: “Hi, I’m Bob and I’d like to become a solicitor, but my brother says that a barrister would be better. What’s

the difference between them?” The teacher can also supply a sample answer which can encourage discussion by e.g. including false or partial information.

The fictitious discussion forum can be set as an online professional web site providing expert advice. In our case “London Lawyers Online”. The teacher prepares clients' questions which the students (as “lawyers”) react to. They can also comment on their peers' answers, correct or complete them. The following example of a “client’s” post concerns revising different types of business: “I'm thinking about starting a restaurant with two friends of mine as business partners. Could you tell me what to be careful about? Thank you very much. Jonathan Miles”.

The aspects which brought the greatest differences in the new activities compared to the original ones are twofold from my point of view. The first concerns the audience. No longer is the teacher the only reader, he or she is to a great extent substituted by the peers (and “pretended” virtual readers). The students realize that they do not just submit “something” to the teacher, it is obvious from the very beginning that their piece becomes a source for further work in which all students participate. The second aspect involves wider possibilities of feedback. The teacher and students can analyze not only the context and the language, but also the register and impact on the audience.

I cannot claim that, with the new tasks, all students submit perfect pieces of work, however, it is evident that the students engage themselves more in the tasks and, moreover, during each activity there are more opportunities for the students to comprehend the topic and the language. The slides and audio tasks can lead to a group presentation or discussion. In the discussion forums the students produce a lot of material which requires their critical reading and, at the same time, is open for their creativity. In general, the new tasks become more personalized, engaging and enjoyable, and the students acquire more practice.

bilova@law.muni.cz