

## Scott Thornbury: Making the most of learner-generated content



Learner-generated content is the language – either spoken or written – that learners produce, naturally and often spontaneously, during the course of a lesson, and which constitutes authentic communication. This distinguishes it from the language that is produced in order to answer comprehension questions and display questions (like “What is the past of *take*?”), or to do grammar exercises, or to perform role plays, or to write summaries, and so on.

### Why use it?

Using learner output as lesson input is one way of involving learners more directly in the learning-teaching process. And research suggests that when learners have some control of the topic agenda and of the management of classroom talk, the lesson is more likely to match their particular learning needs, as well as being both more meaningful and more memorable.

### When?

Learner-generated content can emerge at any stage of the lesson, and is often a by-product of some other activity, such as reading or listening. It can be deliberately prompted by personalisation tasks – that is, tasks that require students to use a pre-taught language item to talk about themselves – or by opinion-seeking tasks, such as when preparing learners to read a text, or by questions eliciting their response to the text they have just read. It can occur in the chat that opens a lesson. It can also be prompted when learners report on group-discussions, or on something they have read or heard prior to the lesson. Asking the learners to come prepared to every lesson with an item of interesting news is one way of formalising this procedure. But learners are more likely to generate original content if the classroom dynamic is conducive to informal, personalised talk, and if initiating such talk is welcomed by the teacher.

### How do you make the most of it?

First of all, treat the personalisation stage – not as a test of pre-taught items – but as a potential launch pad for classroom talk. Let’s say an individual learner has offered an opinion, or given some personal information, or referred to something going on in the world outside the classroom, and that you feel that this is a comment of general interest, and exploitable for the language ‘affordances’ (i.e. learning opportunities) that it offers. Use questions to encourage the learner to elaborate. Try to do this in as natural and conversational way as possible. If the learner is stuck for words, supply them. Avoid correcting errors if this might inhibit the speaker. Instead, reformulate what the speaker is saying in a way that makes it more target-like. Draw other learners into the conversation. When the topic seems to have run its course, ask the learners, working in pairs or groups to write a summary of what was talked about, as if writing to an absent classmate. Collect the texts and use these as the basis for a subsequent lesson, e.g. error correction. This could take the form of extracting a mixture of (unattributed) correct and incorrect sentences and asking the learners first to sort them, and then to correct the incorrect ones.

Set up writing activities that replicate on-line social networking interactions. Learners can ‘chat’ to one another in small groups using pen and paper. This conversation can then form the basis of a group ‘blog’; these blogs are then passed around the class – or posted on the classroom wall – and commented on, before being returned to their original writers. This material is then available to the teacher for subsequent analysis and development.

Finally, exploit the texts and the topics in your course book as stimuli for learner comment and opinion. Learners may not always respond to the content of a text – but they *never* will if they are not invited to!

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