STUDENT – GENERATED EXERCISES IN EFL LEARNING

Nicoleta MINCĂ
Universitatea din Piteşti

Abstract: *The paper extends the idea of introducing student-generated exercises in the EFL classroom activity. Students are to be involved in creating the linguistic frame of the exercise from their individual resources and they can exploit all their knowledge of the foreign language to express their cognitive internalization of the rules*
As SGEs are used after the pre-teaching of a target structure but before the consolidation exercises have been done, they act as an immediate check, since by making up their own examples, students should be explicit about their understanding of the rules. By letting students create some of their own learning materials, teachers encourage them to grow up into independent and self-confident foreign language learners.

Keywords: *exercise, knowledge, independent, self-confident, learners*

Traditionally, learners have largely been mere respondents to teacher-produced worksheet exercises (TPEs). Typically, they have been required to add to, rearrange, or complete a section of one or more texts that have originated outside their own linguistic context. By contrast, student-generated exercises (SGEs) require the students to create the linguistic frame of the exercise from their individual resources, thereby requiring them to make explicit their current understanding of a particular target structure. In other words, students are actively involved in exploiting all their linguistic knowledge of the foreign language to express their cognitive internalization of the rules.

To illustrate how SGEs might operate in the classroom, here is a sample lesson plan for teaching the target structure *some/any* to preintermediate students:

Stage 1

1. Expose target structure (TS) – by listening a passage.
2. Teacher (T) elicits from the students (SS) whole examples of *some/any* from the text. T puts all the sentences on the board and asks SS in pairs to try to work out the rules of TS by applying the symbols + - ? to the examples.
3. T elicits the following paradigm from SS and writes it on the board:

   \+ I have got *some* money.
   \- I haven't got *any* money.
   ? Have you got *any* money?

4. T ask SS to think of a suitable context for the TS, e.g., shopping, and asks SS to role-play a mini-dialogue in pairs.

Stage 2

5. SS A and B each write five sentences of their own, leaving the TS blank.
6. Each partner tries to answer the other's exercise. SS negotiate meaning where anything is ambiguous, and correct local errors, e.g., spelling and punctuation. SS ask T to mediate in any disputes.

BDD-A5592 © 2007 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:00 UTC)

7. A and B receive back their own answered and corrected exercises. SS evaluate their own success.
8. SS write a second draft of the exercises and submit it to the teacher for approval.
9. SS circulate their final draft exercises to other SS in the class to answer.

We may use SGE_s as teaching/learning aids in four different areas:

Grammar

a. With beginner students to illustrate *this/that/these/those*. The students have to first agree on appropriate symbols, such as two hands with pointing fingers for *these*, which they draw on the blackboard. They subsequently had to devise an exercise that uses some symbols.

b. Again, SGE_s are used with beginners to practise *wh*-questions.

c. pronouns: *some/any, much/many*.

d. comparatives and superlatives.

e. to differentiate between various forms of the past and future tenses.

Vocabulary

Upper – intermediate students are asked to write a portrait of someone special to them. They give their partner a choice of adjectives with which to fill in the blanks.

Extended writing

Students write a paragraph about a news item of their choice. The infinitive was given in brackets and their partner has to fill in the blanks with the correct form of the verb.

Questionnaires

Intermediate and upper – intermediate students are asked to design their own questionnaires about why they are learning English and what they want from their course. They have to interview two other students and write down their replies.

Being active means that students cannot just be given information, rather they must have opportunities to internalize information in ways which are meaningful to them. SGEs are not merely artificial vehicles for structure in the way that many contrived teacher-produced exercises are.

Stevick distinguishes between two kinds of performance, the productive and reflective. In the former the student is required to start with something other than that provided by the teacher or textbook. This productive performance "comes from somewhere deeper within the student than reflective performance does. Other things being equal, the deeper the source of a sentence, the more lasting value it has for learning the language."

SGEs are productive both in form and content, as students can choose what they want to say as well as deciding on how best to express it. During extended writing of SGEs, such as the one where students have to write a news-item paragraph, they can write about news that really interested them.

Six general strategies that may contribute directly to language learning have been identified. SGEs utilize five of the cognitive learning strategies:

- Students must clarify and verify their understanding of the foreign language in an operational way.

BDD-A5592 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:00 UTC)

- Deductive reasoning is central to the approach, as students are consciously applying rules to produce the target language.
- Practice – that is, focusing on accuracy of usage – is fundamental to the method.
- Monitoring – which refers to strategies in which the learner notices errors and observes how the message is received and interpreted by the addressee. The peer-correction component obviously provides the feed-back.
- Inductive inferencing – which refers to strategies that use previously obtained linguistic or conceptual knowledge to derive explicit hypotheses about the linguistic form, semantic meaning or speaker's intention. This process is activated by both designing the frame and filling it in. In practice, this inductive inferencing was shown to be at work even with beginner students when they are asked to write and answer a series of *wh*-questions. Without having been taught explicitly the rules of inversion, the internalization of the structure was definitely stimulated, and all the students produced perfectly inverted questions without seeming to be aware of having done so.

Teacher-produced exercises are largely decoding exercises, and at lower levels students traditionally do very little free encoding. However, because of the interactive nature of peer correction and the resulting double focus on both structure and meaning, SGEs are both encoding and decoding exercises. They bridge the gap between acquiring the structural code of the target language and exploiting the semantic potential of the system.

As mentioned earlier, students, in writing their own exercises based on a target structure, are testing their internal hypotheses about the foreign language and its rules. Because of the constraints of the interlanguage of the two students involved in the peer correction, there is genuine hypothesis testing against the linguistic and cognitive framework of each partner. The imperfection of each of the two students' interlanguage systems is vital for this testing. When traditional TPEs are given in "perfect" foreign language, this element of interactive hypothesis testing is missing. Feedback from pair interaction is necessarily immediate and concerned with both accurate structure and the comprehensibility of content, whereas teacher feedback tends to be more concerned with accuracy than meaning.

Breen and Candlin in their *Applied Linguistics* see the role of the teacher as that of both a facilitator in the communication process and as a resource for the students, that is a consultant. This is certainly true in SGEs, where the teacher is a coordinator of activities and an arbiter in any student disputes rather than the provider of language examples. This is important for learner training because, as Rubin says, if students are dependent on teachers to shape language to suit them and to provide them with proper input, they can't begin to take charge of their own learning when the teacher is not there.

From the teacher's point of view, one of the most valuable aspects of SGE_s is as a diagnostic tool. Because students are actively tapping all their linguistic resources to produce examples, the teacher is given a continuous sampling of individual student competence at any stage of the course. SGEs, therefore, highlight a variety of problems that might otherwise have remained hidden and which can be dealt with as soon as they are revealed. As SGEs are used after the pre-teaching of a target structure but before any other consolidation exercises have been done, they act as an immediate check, since by

BDD-A5592 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:00 UTC)

making up their own examples, students are forced to be explicit about their understanding of the rules. One student, for example, was adamant that all English sentences must begin with *The*, although his partner disagreed. On other occasion the same student announced categorically that the Past Simple must always be preceded by *was* or *where*. It appeared that this pernicious "virus" had already started to infiltrate the minds of other, less self-confident members of the class when it was exposed in an SGE_s and disposed of rapidly by the teacher.

In practice, SGE_s combine the current cardinal pedagogical principles of:

Delegation: Teachers, as classroom managers, can and should transfer as much of the responsibility for learning as possible to the students.

Cost Effectiveness: In institutions where economy is a major concern, there is no expensive photocopying of TPEs involved, and textbooks themselves might be dispensed with altogether in minimally resourced Third World teaching situations. In other words, the technique is not confined to privileged settings. Moreover, there is a considerable saving of teacher time and energy to be utilized in more creative activities then the mundane production of worksheets.

Self Management: Many researchers deplore the tendency in pedagogy to infantilize learners and to maintain them in a state of intellectual and emotional dependency on teachers, course materials, tightly organized methods and gadgetry. By letting students create some of their own learning materials and subsequently criticize each other's, teachers are encouraging them from the very beginning to grow up into independent and self-confident foreign language learners.

From the theoretical perspective, there are three facets of SGEs. Students must:

1. discover meaning from within themselves – *heuristic*
2. test their own hypotheses against the schemata or cognitive framework of their partners – *interactive*
3. test their mutual hypotheses against the teacher's knowledge of the rules – *diagnostic*.

Moreover, at least three theoretical views of language explicitly or implicitly underlie all currently popular language-teaching methods-the structural, the functional (semantic) and the interactional. Because SGEs combine aspects of all three, they are theoretically neutral, and this should make them transferable to almost all teaching situations.

Clarke asks why materials adaptation in the EFL classroom needs to be done solely by the teacher when greater learner involvement in the process would considerably enhance its value. While remaining skeptical about the possibilities of a fully negotiated *syllabus* in most classroom contexts, he is convinced that learners can and should make a greater contribution to what happens in their classrooms. He suggests ways in which learners, as problem-solvers, can create their own tasks, such as by constructing their own substitution tables, by developing their own reading comprehension questions, or by producing their own data for a Call vocabulary exercise. In all these activities, pair or group-work is integral, and the role assigned to the teacher is that of both linguistic resource and activity coordinator. Working on this cooperative basis is important because "for learners to undertake tasks which other members of their class have devised is likely to result in a higher degree of commitment."

A teacher who observed SGEs in operation commented on the total involvement of the participants with none of the "slack" that sometimes occurs in, for example, teacher-given information-gap exercises. Richards warns that their usefulness

BDD-A5592 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:00 UTC)

should be verifiable formally as well as on an informal observation basis, and those data should be sought on the types of language and linguistic interaction that particular activities actually generate in the classroom. Even so, mental strategies cannot be equated with or necessarily inferred from external behavior although greater involvement is thought to result in increased learning.

We may believe that SGEs are valid in the classroom because a genuine task is being undertaken that helps students to bridge the gap between linguistic and communicative competence. Whatever their ultimate theoretical justification, from both the teacher's and the students' point of view, SGEs seem to work.

Bibliography

Allwright, R. *Language learning through communication practice*, Brumfit and Johnson, 1979.

Breen, M. P. Candlin, C., *The essentials of a communicative curriculum in language teaching*; *Applied Linguistics,* 1980.

Brumfit, C. J. and Johnson, K., *The communicative approach to language teaching*, Oxford University Press, 1979.

Clarke, D. F., Materials adaptation: Why leave it all to the teacher? *ELT Journal*, 1989.

Richards, J. C., The secret life of methods. *TESOL Quarterly*, 1984.

Stevick, E. W., The riddle of the "right method". *IATEFL Newsletter*, 1990.

Wenden, A. L. and Rubin, J., *Learner strategies in language learning*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall International, 1987.

BDD-A5592 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești

Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:00 UTC)