MA TESOL Collection   SIT Graduate Institute

Winter 12-12-2019

English Corner: a guide for teachers

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Independent Professional Project
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in TESOL degree
At SIT Graduate Institute,
Brattleboro Vermont

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December 11th, 2019

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Abstract

Throughout China, in both private and public schools, from kindergarten to university, there is a 'class' called 'English Corner.'   In some places, 'English Corner' is supposed to be an informal, loose environment for people to communicate in English. In other places, 'English Corner' is a monthly event with a stage show, singing, dancing, and even a speech competition.   'English Corner' can be held in parks, libraries, university campuses, bars, cafes, or even in private homes.   For many teachers in China, this ill-defined class can be their most dreaded lesson of the day, a class where at the worst of times, it can be a teacher surrounded by a mob of people yelling out questions; at the best of times a discussion where 2 or 3 out of a dozen students have a conversation with the teacher about mundane topics like if the teacher can use chopsticks or if they have a Chinese spouse.   In this paper, I will look into the history and rationale of 'English Corner' to understand this phenomena.   I will describe some of my past experiences facilitating English Corners.   I will also describe the English Corner classes that are offered in my context and the strategies I've used to optimize and overcome this often frustrating class format.

Keywords: english corner, scaffolding, informal learning, teaching approaches, curriculum design, informal learning spaces, communicative strategies, emergent language

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"Don't let your lesson plan be a straitjacket."
Professor Elka Todeva

Introduction

For most if not every new teacher, the question, 'What am I/ they (students)/we (all of us together) going to do in class?' is constantly in the back of their minds. In most contexts, that question is partially answered by a textbook that's used in class or a pre-made curriculum. If not, there are scores of websites like www.busyteacher.org or the British Council's www.teachingenglish.org.uk containing thousands of printable worksheets with activities teachers can use. But no matter what, whether using a textbook or some printed worksheets from a website, the materials being used need to be adapted in some way.

Textbook writers are writing books that cover particular grammar and vocabulary points that have been deemed important by their publishers. On sites like www.teachingenglish.org.uk, the materials are developed by professional materials developers for hypothetical classes, not ones they're actually teaching. Busyteacher.org has all homemade materials that are made for a particular class that a teacher was supposedly teaching, but this class the teacher was planning for is not the same class our hypothetical new teacher needs.

The problem of choosing materials gets compounded when the type of lesson being taught isn't well-defined. In the contexts I've worked in China, like a provincial university, and in some language training centers, teachers are given the freedom to choose and develop their own curriculum and materials. It often seems like as long as students get some kind of score at the end of the term it doesn't really matter where that score came from, what it's based on, or how it was calculated. For more experienced teachers, this can be OK. They've been around; they might have an idea of their 'style,' they know what works for them and their students. But for

people who are newer to the field, this kind of freedom can lead to anxiety and dread. With so many different resources out there, a newer teacher can spend hours pouring over handouts and textbooks looking for appropriate activities for their class, but if the class itself isn't well defined, how can a teacher know what is appropriate? Welcome to English Corner.

There are academic papers out there describing the phenomena of English Corner from the point of view of a student-particpant or an outside observer, but there are few that describe it from the point of view of a teacher-facilitator. On web forums such as Reddit and echinacities, there are questions about how a teacher should prepare for an English Corner; with this paper, I hope to fill that void in the research and provide an answer to these questions.

What is English Corner?

History
English Corner is a name given to a class format that's conducted all over China. Its history is clouded in legend.   David Kellaway speculated that English Corners may have been started up to 200 years ago by Christian missionaries in China in order to "develop the linguistic skills and cultural awareness of their congregations and future church leaders…" but he cited no sources for that information (Kellaway, 2013).

There is an apocryphal story about English Corner starting in Shenyang, the capital of Liaoning Province, over 25 years ago where one student noticed another reading from an English textbook while waiting for a light to change on a street corner.   They talked about their mutual interest in improving their English, so decided to meet there again the next week to practice together.   Each week more and more people showed up and so English Corner was born (MW, 2008). Another story

says it started at Renmin University in Beijing as a kind of cultural exchange for foreign students and teachers to interact with Chinese students.

A third apocryphal story is that it was started in 1978 in Shanghai's People's Park as an outgrowth of Deng Xiao Ping's Reform and Opening Up policy (Face of China, 2014). The article said that the first participants were people who had studied English in missionary schools before Mao Zedong assumed power in 1949, but again in this article, there are no sources cited, so it's impossible to determine the veracity of this possible origin.

Both Kellaway (Kellaway, 2013) and Face of China (Face of China, 2014) refer to Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park, London as a possible inspiration for English Corner, but again, this is speculation.

None of these origin stories hold much water in my mind. My reason for sharing these dubious histories is to show that English Corner is nebulous. Every student who studies English in China knows that English Corner exists, but when you ask what it is or where it comes from, one will receive as many answers as people they asked.

Features of English Corner

I think when discussing English Corner we should break them down into two broad categories: institutional English Corners and non-institutional English Corners. An institutional English Corner is organized by an institution such as a Linguistics Department in a university or a private language training school, while a non-institutional English Corner is organized by the participants in the English Corner. This paper will mostly focus on strategies for teachers conducting institutional English Corners, but both institutional and non-institutional English Corners share a lot of features.

In the few academic papers I've found describing English Corners, they've defined it as an informal learning event.   Gao Xuesong described a non-institutional English Corner held in a cafe in an unnamed Chinese coastal city (Gao, 2008).   This English Corner met twice a week where participants were required to buy a discounted drink at the cafe, and then they would all chat with each other about a topic that was agreed upon in their online discussion forum before the meeting.   The topic would be posted in their forum and also written on a whiteboard in the cafe. This English Corner seemed to be more of a socializing activity as opposed to an explicit learning environment.   The organizers usually didn't bring any materials and the impetus was on the participants to converse with each other.   The cafe was simply a forum for participants to meet and chat in English.   Whether or not they stuck to the topic of the day didn't seem to matter.   Self-improvement and making/ maintaining friendships were the key motivations of the participants in that particular group.   Key to this English Corner is that it is free of charge.   Participants are asked to purchase a drink at the cafe as a courtesy for using that space, but they don't pay any fees or monthly dues.   The other key feature is that anyone can join regardless of their age, income level, or English proficiency.   Most of the participants in this English Corner were young professionals.

Wu Jun and Su Tiping as well as Face of China describe an institutional English Corner held at Renmin University in Beijing (Wu & Su, 2009) (Face of China, 2014). This English Corner differs from the previous English Corner in the sense that it is held outside in a public space within the campus of Renmin University on Friday evenings at 7pm.   There are many more participants than in Gao Xuesong's English Corner, possibly in the hundreds (Face of China, 2014).   Also, the English Corner at Renmin University often has foreign students, foreign teachers, and visiting foreign

professors as well as local, Chinese participants (Wu & Su, 2008). The Face of China (Face of China 2014) paints a colorful portrait of the English Corner in Renmin University describing it as a bastion of free speech where many politically sensitive topics like the 'Three T's' (Taiwan, Tibet, and Tiananmen) can be discussed semi-openly.   Although it was suggested that there are undercover, plain-clothed state security officers monitoring the discourse.   The only restriction the author from the Face of China described was a ban on evangelizing, although there were some participants at that English Corner who were preaching.   According to the author at The Face of China there were some signs around the space where the Renmin University English Corner is held that say:

> *Please keep your voice levels down.*
>
> *Please maintain a clean environment.*
>
> *No religious activities allowed.* (Face of China, 2014)

Although most of the participants at the Renmin University English corner were university students (Wu & Su, 2008), there were also professionals, retirees, as well as children and teenagers with their parents or guardians (Face of China, 2014). Motivations for going to the Renmin University English Corner ranged from improving one's English, to making new friends outside their normal social groups, to curiosity about and wanting to see or hear foreigners (Wu & Su, 2008), to finding a mate (Face of China, 2014).   Again a key feature is that the English Corner at Renmin University is free and open to the public.   Another key feature is that there is no agreed upon topic at the Renmin University English Corner.   Participants organize themselves into groups to talk about whatever they want or to listen to others talking with a foreigner.   Participants are free to float between groups.

My Early Experiences with English Corner

English Corner at a vocational college

My first teaching position in China was at a vocational college in the Fall of 2006. On my second night in the country, I was told I had a class called 'English Corner'.

"What's English Corner?" I asked my handler.

"It's really fun.   All you have to do is get the students to talk.   It's easy."

I was taken to a large lecture hall, where I was put in front of over 100 students. I had absolutely no idea what to do, so I told them they could ask me questions.   For an hour, the students asked me questions like:

"Where are you from?"

"Do you like Chinese food?"

"Can you speak Chinese?"

"Do you like Chinese girls?"

"Do you eat ice cream in the winter?"

"How many bottles of beer can you drink?"

I had taken a four-week TESOL course a few months prior, I was trained in 'Communicative Methodology' so a couple of days later, I split them up into groups and gave them topics, but their English proficiency level wasn't very high and this was a mandatory activity for them.   It pretty much became a Chinese Corner where students chatted about whatever they wanted.   When I approached a group, they'd ask me the prior stock questions, or would mimic speaking English using some phrases they'd learned such as:

"Oh, REALLY?"

"OH MY GOD!"

"Shut up! No speak Chinese!"

Because I was tasked with getting them to speak English, I felt like I had to police them.   I'd mingle with groups saying something along the lines of, "Hey, remember, this is ENGLISH Corner, see if you can speak some English."   Each group member would smile.   They'd give me the thumbs up sign, and then be quiet until I moved on. Other times, I brought a guitar thinking we could sing some songs together, but it quickly turned into me giving a performance with my subpar guitar and singing skills. Soon after that, the college found someone else to run the English Corner.

The key features of this particular English Corner differ from the previous two I described.   In this case, it was an institutional English Corner where participation was mandatory.   Most students were not self-motivated; they were required to be there. Even though they were required to be there, there were no expectations put on them besides them having to be in that lecture hall.   There was no exam about English Corner.   There were no awards for attending.   Most were studying in the Hospitality and Tourism department, but were not seeking jobs where English would be necessary.   Looking back at the experience, I can understand why there wasn't very much L2 production in those classes.   If a foreigner came to my friends and me when we were 18 years old and told us to speak a foreign language together, we'd scoff at him.   We might jokingly ask a few silly questions like, "Where's the library?" or "Do you have a pen?" but I don't think the conversation would go much further than that.   We'd have no reason to use L2 other than 'for practice.'   We might even feel resentful towards the foreigner and the institution for wasting our time by forcing us to come to this activity.

English Corner in a public library

In 2010, I was tasked with facilitating an English Corner at the Heilongjiang Provincial Library which was organized by a language training school that I worked for at the time.   It was a long-term promotional activity where our school would send a foreign teacher to the library to represent the school and hopefully drum up business. This English Corner was on Saturday afternoons from 3 to 4:30.   The participants were mostly professional adults and retirees who wanted to practice English as a hobby, although occasionally someone would bring in a small child to expose him/her to English.   Participants' ages ranged from their late teens to their eighties.   We'd meet in a large conference room on the top floor of the library.   Generally there were around 15 to 20 people there, but out of those people, only about 4 or 5 were particularly active speakers.   I facilitated this English Corner for about a year.

At first I'd go there with some pre-made worksheets I'd downloaded off the internet or a newspaper article that I'd printed up to give us something to talk about. Sometimes those would work, but often not because the English proficiency level of the participants varied so greatly.   Sometimes I'd bring in a grammar point that we could look at, but that also often fell flat because it was either too easy or too hard or, most importantly, not relevant.   As I got to know the regular participants, I would open the floor for them to discuss what they wanted.   It would often turn into a roundtable type group discussion with turn taking, each person having their say.   But with turn-taking, only one person at a time is speaking, so it could be quite boring for the other people there.

Sometimes these English Corners would be exciting, especially when old-timers told stories about old Harbin or growing up in small villages, but a lot of the time I felt uncomfortable because I felt like I was expected to be some kind of performer or

a living anthropological exhibit.   When participants would ask me a bunch of questions about foreigners and their attitudes towards things, I'd feel frustrated because I couldn't speak for the five and a half billion people on Earth who aren't Chinese.   I remember often saying that I wasn't there to practice my English, but that I wanted to help them practice theirs.

After a year of facilitating these English Corners, I recall feeling burnt out.   I didn't have much more of an idea about how to do them than I did on the first day. There were no clear objectives, other than to try to get customers, but whenever I 'd bring up the fact that I was there to find customers, people would say that the school I represented was too expensive, or they didn't have time to take classes there.   Out of the 15 to 20 people that would show up each week, only a few were 'regulars'.   So it was difficult to build rapport with everyone over time.   Although there were some bright spots, the experience overall was lackluster.   My only objective was to rope in students to come to our school, which I failed at.   On the bright side, five or six years after I stopped facilitating that English Corner, I ran into one of the participants at the supermarket.   We stopped and chatted, she told me about her husband, who I had met, and their new child.   She asked about my life and said although she didn't go to that English Corner anymore, she missed me and the time we spent together.   In one of the English Corners, I had recommended a book of short stories by Raymond Carver which she ended up reading and enjoying quite a bit, so she thanked me for the recommendation.   After that reunion, my attitude towards that English Corner brightened a bit, but not much.

The key features of the Heilongjiang Library English Corner were that it was free and open to the public, but it differs from the other two in that it was facilitated by a foreign teacher.   The participants' motivations were similar to the English Corners

previously discussed.   Most participants wanted to improve their English and make friends.   Some were curious about what was going on in the conference room.   It had large windows so people could look in to see what was going on.   Whenever I noticed people watching through the window, I'd beckon them to come in.   As I said earlier, for most of the regulars, it was just a hobby for them.   They didn't use English at work.   No one, to my knowledge, was preparing for some kind of standardized English exam.   No one was planning to travel, study, or live abroad. These mixed motivations among the participants in the Heilongjiang Provincial Library English Corner made it quite difficult to plan for.   Also, I had not pursued very much professional development, so my tool bag was pretty light at that time.

After that year of facilitating the library English Corner, on top of my earlier experience at the technical college, I vowed to myself that I wouldn't agree to run another one ever again.   I made good on that vow for six years.

My Context

In July of 2017, I signed a three-year contract to work at my current context. One of the stipulations on my contract was that I was required to teach classes called English Corner whenever they were on my schedule.   I tried to negotiate myself out of teaching English Corner classes, but it was impossible.   It was time to confront the class format that had frustrated me so much in the past.

A short description of my context

I work in a language training center.   It is a small, local chain in my city with five branches.   My branch occupies the second floor of a skyscraper which is centrally located in my city.   The vast majority of the students who study at my center are preparing to take a standardized English exam such as IELTS or TOEFL.

Most of them are also planning on studying abroad in an Anglophone country.   They range in ages from around sixteen to twenty-four years old.   Most of the students come from relatively well-off families.   My branch specializes in one-to-one test prep classes.   We also offer small group classes with two to ten students as well as two English Corners per day.

English Corners in my context

At noon, we have IELTS English Corner.   At five o'clock, we have General English Corner.   Both are fifty minutes long.   At the beginning of each month, the daily topics for IELTS English Corner are determined by the Foreign Director of Studies for all branches.   The topic for General English Corner is determined by the teacher assigned to teach that class that day.   Both English Corners are free to all paying students and are also voluntary.   The class sizes for English Corners are generally limited to fifteen students at the most, although in the busy seasons during the winter and summer school holidays, the class sizes can get up to around twenty students.   Students' English proficiency levels tend to be between CEFR A2 to B2. Occasionally we'll have a C1 student, but at that level, they are usually finished with us.   The only rule is that students must sign up for the English Corners the day before.   Teachers of English Corners have absolute freedom regarding the content and activities they plan to do in English Corner classes.   When prospective students visit our branch to see what we do, they are often invited into an English Corner as a free sample.   English Corners are also used by the marketing department as a showcase for foreign teachers so students can get to know the foreign teachers before they buy 1 to1 lessons with a particular foreign teacher.   The voluntary aspect of the English Corners offered in my context fall in line with three out of four of the English Corners I discussed earlier.

Problematizing IELTS English Corner

I will use Graves's definition of *problematization* where I use what I know about my context to imagine what challenges I need to deal with now or may need to deal with in the future when planning a course (Graves, 2000).   I hesitate to call English Corner a course because it lacks what many courses have, mainly: a set curriculum, a set group of learners, a syllabus, and formal assessment tools.   Below I will identify what I know/ what I think/ and what I don't know about the context and the learners in the class.

I know:
- The class is fifty minutes long.
- I have access to a whiteboard, as well as many pens to write on the board.
- I have access to a printer and copier if I want to print up handouts.
- I have access to multimedia resources if I choose to use them.
- I can move chairs or group students however I want or however they want.
- Most learners are preparing for the IELTS examination.
- Most learners are familiar with the structure of the IELTS speaking examination.
- Most learners take 1 to 1 intensive exam preparation courses.
- Most learners are aiming to earn a six or higher overall on their IELTS exam.
- Most learners are preparing to study abroad.

I think:
- Most learners are motivated to learn.
- I can use emergent language (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009) to create affordances (Van Lier, 2000) that can be exploited.
- Learners can use this class to apply their learnings from other classes.
- Most learners are willing to participate in most classroom activities *if they make sense*.
- Most learners have had some exposure to foreign teachers.
- Most learners will be able to arrive when the class begins and stay for its duration.

I don't know:
- Every learner's English proficiency level.
- How many learners will come to class day by day.
- What days I will teach this lesson until Sunday night at the beginning of the week.
- If the class will be canceled because no learners signed up for it that day.
- If students are sick of practicing for the IELTS exam.   Many learners may have IELTS exam fatigue, meaning they're sick of getting hammered with explicit IELTS related information.

The IELTS EC template

Using what I knew and what I thought, I put together a worksheet that I turned into a template for teaching the class.   Below (figure 1) is a worksheet for an IELTS EC class I taught using this template.   I will describe each stage of the lesson and discuss the rationale based on what I know, think, and don't know.

TV IELTS EC   **developed by TOM FAY**

Part A: Talk to your partners

- What kinds of TV programs do you like to watch?
- How do you watch TV these days?
- Does your family watch TV together or does each family member watch their own shows alone?

Part B: TV Genres
Work together with your partners to write a list of the different kinds of TV programs that you/ family watch. (example- local news)   Write your list below.

Part C: Telling a story.

Get into groups of 2.   There will be a Speaker and a Listener.   The Speaker will talk while the Listener takes notes.   The Listener should listen to what the Speaker is talking about and take notes about what he/she heard.   After the Speaker is done speaking, the Listener will report back what the Listener heard.   The Listener should also ask at least 3 follow-up questions.

The Speaker will have 1 minute to prepare an answer and 2 minutes to speak.

When you are finished, change roles.

Here is your question:

Talk about the last TV program you saw.
You can say:
What genre was it?
When did you see it?
How did you watch it?
What did you think about it?

Use the back of this paper to write your notes.

Listener Notes

Part D: Discussion Questions.   Switch partners and discuss.

- How are TV watching habits different between older people and younger people?
- What kinds of TV shows are especially popular these days?
- Do you think TV programs are getting better or are they getting worse these days?

Explain your opinion with at least 2 examples.

Part E: Reflection.   Share with the group.

-Thinking about this lesson, what were at least two new things you learned or two things you think you know more about?   What's a question you still have?

(Figure 1: IELTS EC lesson template)

Analysis of the template

For IELTS EC, I decided to base the structure of the class around the structure of the IELTS speaking exam. It seemed like the right thing to do based on the name of class.   In the first five or ten minutes of class, I check in with the students.   If there are less than ten students, we'll go around the circle to see what's up with everyone. This is a kind of freetalk exercise where students can say whatever they want about what's going on in their lives.   This is also a time for me to create ***affordances*** (Van Lier, 2000) to focus on *emergent language* (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009).   An *affordance* in this case is a teachable moment.   A chance where I can pick out

something from a student's utterance to draw attention to it whether because the

student made a common error that many others make, or the student made a

breakthrough that others could learn from. When I say *emergent language* I'm talking

about the grammar structures students are using at the moment as well as any lexical

issues they may be tackling. Maybe there is a word a student is dancing around or

perhaps a student is directly translating a concept from their L1 into their L2. Here's

an example of an interaction (names have been changed):

Tom (teacher)-	*Hey Leo! What's up?*
Leo (learner)-	*Hey Tom. Things are good except one thing is bad.*
Tom-	*Would you like to share what's bad?*
Leo-	*Yeah. I can't read very well. I don't know what the important words are. It's frustrating because I speak well.*
Tom-	*I think everyone here has dealt with this problem. Maybe y'all can give Leo some advice.*
Helen (student)-	*He should find the important words and circle them.*
Richard (student)-	*He don't know the important words.*
Leo-	*Yeah, that's my problem.*
Helen-	*Oh. Ha ha ha.*
Richard-	*I think he… you should read more.*
Leo-	*How can that help if I don't know what I'm reading?*
Rick-	*Maybe you can read the first sentence in the paragraph and then the last sentence to see if the same words are there. That's what my reading teacher told me.*
Leo-	*Oh. That's a good idea. I can try that.*

In this interaction, I found an affordance (Van Lier, 2000), a teachable

opportunity.   I was able to open the floor for students to practice the functional

language for giving advice.   Also, while giving advice, students were able to apply

what they had learned in other classes to help each other.

The opening five to ten minutes of free talk can be a rich opportunity for ***noticing***.

Throughout the fifty minute class, I have a notebook that I scribble in.   I always

write the date and time of the lesson as well as the worksheet that I used and the

names of the students in the class.   During the five to ten minute freetalk stage, I

write notes about what each student is saying.   Sometimes newer students ask me

what I'm writing, and I'll deflect the question to an older student who knows and can explain that I'm taking notes on what they say.   The notebook helps me notice each student.   I have some biographical information about each student as well as a record of some of their language issues or things that are happening in their lives (Figure 2). I can use what they tell me in future classes.   If a student said they were going to Beijing for week, I'll write it down.   Next time I have class with that student, when they're back from Beijing, I can ask them about it and then open up the floor for other students to give their opinions or ask questions.   Not only is the notebook good for noticing linguistic issues, but it's also good for building trust and rapport with students.   When I open the floor, we can create real, authentic communication. Sometimes in a General English Corner, we never get to the worksheet because of all the affordances (Van Lier, 2000) that come up in freetalk.
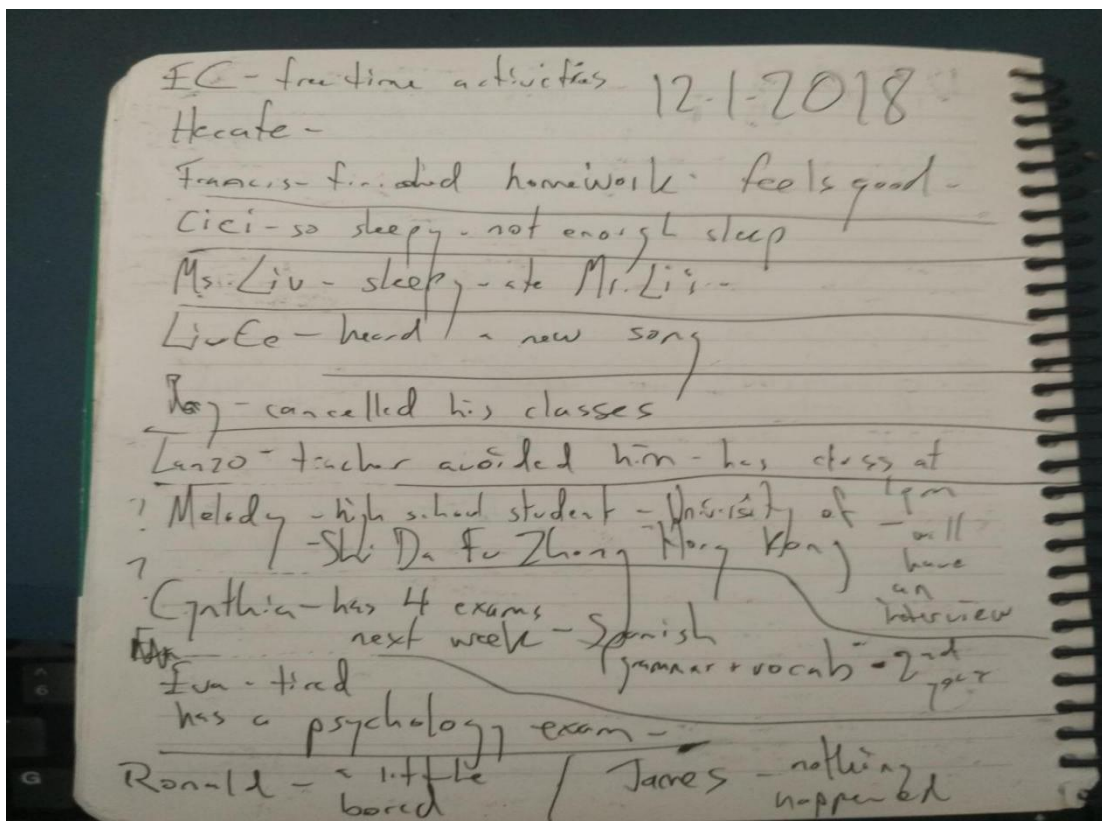
(figure 2: a page from my notebook documenting students' lives)

But let's imagine that freetalk lasted five to ten minutes or that there was no time for freetalk because a lot of students came to English Corner that day.   So we dive directly into the worksheet.

Let's examine Part A in Figure 1.   Part A is based on part 1 questions in the IELTS speaking exam.   Generally in an IELTS speaking exam, part 1 is unrelated to parts 2 and 3.   Also, in part 1, the examiner may ask the examinee questions about 2 or 3 different topics, but for my purposes, I keep my Part A questions related to Parts C and D in order to maintain topical consistency and also to activate their prior knowledge or *schema* related to the topic.

Before we begin Part A, I like to break the class up into groups of two.   Also, I ask students to spread out in the classroom, if it's possible, so that they aren't distracted by other groups.   With their partners, students will ask and answer the questions in Part 1 while I circulate through the class taking notes on what I'm noticing.

One thing I pay attention to is 'Are the learners sticking to the grammar as it's used in the question?'   In this case, the first question on my worksheet is a 'Do you like…' question.   Are students answering it with 'I like…' or are they saying 'I prefer…'?   If it's the latter, than we have found a teachable moment where we can decide what the difference is between a like and a preference.   The third question is an 'or' question.   Are students answering it by making a choice?   Depending on the issues that come up in Part 1, if each group is making the same kinds of errors or if each group has different issues, I can choose to give feedback to the whole class or to people individually.

Part B of my template is a chance for students to generate vocabulary.   In my context students are given word lists to memorize as if their minds were accounts that

knowledge can be deposited into and withdrawn from (Friere, 1970). Rather than

eliciting from orally or giving my learners a list of TV genres, which I know they

already know in their L1, this space allows them to either write the English word for

the genre or describe the genre using the English they already know. While they

construct their lists, I ask that they try to use the words they already know rather than

looking them up on their phones because by using the words they know, they can help

each other better and I can help them too. Once each group has a list of around 5 or

6 items, I give each group a marker and ask them to put their lists up on the board.

Once the lists are boarded, we can go over the items together as a class. Here's an example:
- *Talking Show*
- *Entertainment Show*
- *Singing Show*
- *Comedy*
- *Sitcom*
- *TV Drama*
- *Document Show*

Without speaking, I'll circle the 'ing' in the first item, put a question mark next to

the second and third, connect the third to the fourth with an arrow, put a check next to

the fourth, put a question mark next to the fifth, and add a line to the end of

'document'. Through silence and the use of symbols, I hope to draw students'

attention to possible issues without dictating what is right or wrong. My marks on the

white board are a code for the students to solve. I want learners to notice. I want to

raise their awareness. That way, students can self-correct. 'Talk Show' rather than

'Talking'. The question mark next to 'Entertainment Show' asks for more

information because one can argue that all television is supposed to be entertaining.

Similarly with the third item, is it a competition or music videos? Comedy and

sitcom generally go together unless we're talking about stand-up comedy. TV

Drama is a bit vague, are we talking about soap operas or serials? The line after

'document' shows they're missing a few letters. This is an important aspect of Gatteno's *Silent Way* because it draws attention to issues a student may have that need to be clarified.   Rather than the instructor coming in and correcting everything, the student has a chance examine the issue, possibly debate it with other students, then finally self-correct (Gattegno, 1996). These learners will not always have an instructor with them in real-life communication situations, so it's important for them to get a feeling for the language on their own.

Both Part A and Part B *scaffold* the learners into part C (McLeod, 2019).   Part C of my lesson template is a simulation of part 2 of the IELTS speaking exam.   In this case, the Speaker is the examinee and the Listener is the examiner.   This activity is designed to engage learners on multiple levels.   The Listener needs to take notes and report back what they heard.   They're engaging in Active Listening (Rogers & Farson, 1957) which is a skill that can not only help them when they take their IELTS exam, but can also help them in their lives.   They're also writing and reading what they wrote.   When the Listener reports back what they heard, the Speaker can provide feedback about whether what the Listener heard was accurate or not.   Also the Listener is providing feedback to the Speaker by telling what they heard.   The Speaker can get a better idea about what kinds of issues are facilitating or impeding communication.

In an earlier iteration of this template, in Part C, I asked students to listen for at least two English errors, but I found that in many cases students either couldn't hear the errors their partner made or they only listened for errors and didn't pay attention to the story their partner told them.   I decided get rid of that aspect and change it to asking follow-up questions which I think works much better for multiple reasons: First, it helps to focus the Listener on the story they hear, and to find gaps in

information that they can fill.   Also, question formation can be a major issue for

many students, so this gives them an opportunity to practice that skill. (Cowan, 2008)

On top of that, the follow up questions the Listener asks can be a form of feedback for

the Speaker because the Speaker knows what information they communicated

effectively and what information wasn't communicated so effectively.   Finally, if the

Speaker had already given the information the Listener asks for in a follow-up

question, it can be a form of feedback on the Listener's listening skills.

     While the students are engaged with Part C of the template, the teacher can

monitor groups.   I generally make sure students are following the directions,

especially newer students.   If there is an odd number of students, I'll do the activity

with a newer student or lower level student so that in the future, when they have this

class with me again, they'll understand what is expected of them.   If there is an even

number of students, I'll pair the newer students or lower level students with an older

or higher level student who can guide them through the activity.   In this particular

lesson, Part C is talking about the past tense.   So I'll pay attention to whether or not

students are using the past simple.   Also the question asks about 'the last TV show' a

student saw, so I'll pay attention to whether or not groups are talking about something

that happened in the last few days or if they're talking about something that happened

years ago.   To draw students' attention to the form and meaning of the question, I

may write on the board:

        PAST/ PRESENT/ FUTURE....?

        'the LAST TV show'= _____

in order to elicit 'PAST' which I'll circle and 'the most recent' which I'll fill in.

     Usually, by the time the learners have completed Part C of the template, there

isn't much time left in the class, maybe 10 minutes at the most.   If some groups are

moving faster than others, I'll invite them to discuss Part D together.   If it's a smaller class of 5 students or less, we'll look over Part D together.

Part D is a simulation of the types of more general questions that come up in part 3 of the IELTS exam.   In this template, I always include compare/ contrast questions, or questions, and more open-ended opinion type questions.   In my context, we push a system for answering these types of questions which is called the A.R.E.A. method. I learned this method from a site called www.ielts-master.com (https://www.ielts-master.com/the-area-technique-how-to-improve-your-ielts-speakin g-part-3-score/).   The acronym A.R.E.A. stands for

A: Short answer

R: Reason for the answer

E: Explanation or example for the reason

A: Give an alternative (this is optional)

Occasionally I'll dive into this structure for answering part 3 questions, but generally there isn't enough time for it.   We devote much more time to this question answering structure in our intensive one to one classes.

No matter how much or how little time we have, I think it's important to reflect on learning.   In Part E, students have a chance to reinforce their learning from the lesson.   It also gives me a chance to do a little mini-quiz, so for example if a students says, "Today I learned some new words." I have a chance to ask, "Like what?" Then the student can give a few new words they learned plus a short definition.   If they're inaccurate in either pronunciation or meaning, another student can jump in to provide assistance.   Similarly, if a student said, "Today I learned what 'the last time' means." I can toss a quick concept check question like, "When was the last time you ate something?" Also, this reflection time helps me gauge what students perceived as

important in this lesson.   In the low-residency MATESOL program at S.I.T., a professor will visit one's teaching context to observe classes and provide insight as to how we can improve our lessons. When Professor Todeva came out to observe my lessons, in the reflection period, she noticed that my students were reflecting more on the process of the lesson and what they did as opposed to language points they learned. This kind of reflection is good feedback for me so that when I plan new lessons in the future, I can make the language points more explicit and not hide them in fun, engaging activities.   Professor Todeva introduced me to Adrian Underhill and Jim Scrivener's idea of Demand High which they outline on their blog: Demand High ELT https://demandhighelt.wordpress.com/ (which they seem to have abandoned as of April 2019).   Scrivener and Underhill challenge teachers to 'demand more' from their students and to give them the 'nudges' they need to be better (https://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/oct/16/demand-high-teaching-challenge-students).   They reject 'knee-jerk' praise, but instead give targeted feedback to help students improve no matter what level the students are. Nothing is ever 'perfect'. There's always room for improvement when learning a new language.

        After Professor Todeva's insight I redesigned my reflection questions so that they focus more on what language points students learned.   So at the end of a lesson, I'll ask, "What are some new things you learned, or things you feel like you know more about?" if the student talks about the activity we did, I might ask a more pointed question, "Were there some new words or grammar structures you learned?"   If a student is just reading a list of words or grammar structures off their notes, I might pick one and ask if the student could give a short explanation of that word or structure.

That's how I run an IELTS EC class in my context. The lesson plan is clear and easily modifiable. Each stage can take as long or as short as the students need it to. There's a lot of room for improvisation on the part of the teacher. Much of the vocabulary that's used is emergent (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009) in the sense that students are generating their own vocabulary lists or grammar structures and comparing them with other students' lists, which makes it relevant.
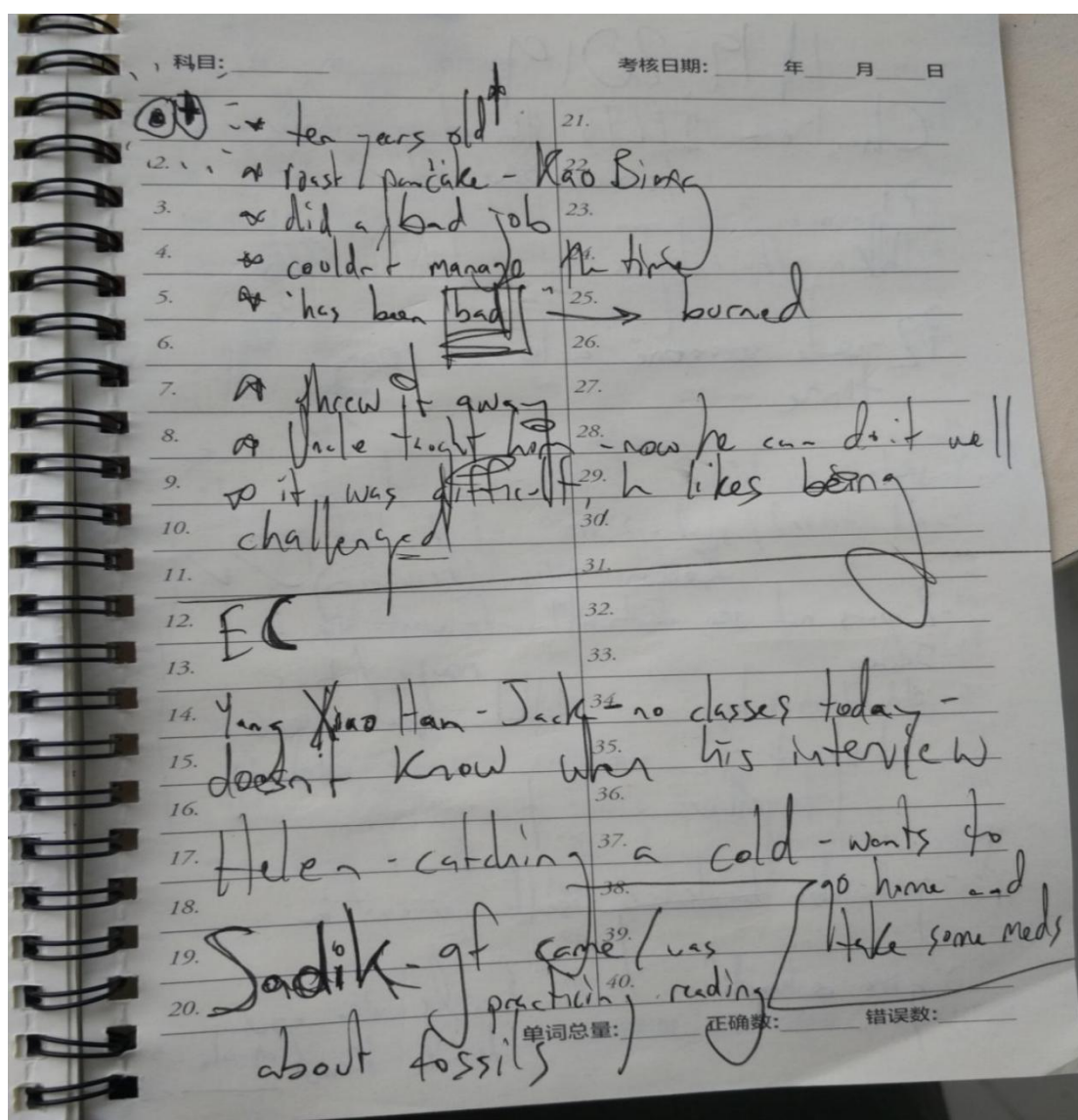
(Figure 3: A page from my in-class notebook documenting a story a student shared with some issues that need to be addressed as well as some information documenting students' lives.)

General English Corner

Earlier I described my solution to IELTS English Corner.   I gave structure to

something that before was disembodied entity tangentially related to IELTS.   What

about the General English Corner?   Here we have a class at the end of the working

day that has no foundation in any kind of reality.   How can anyone plan for this kind

of nothingness that was my white whale for so many years?   First we begin by

problematizing (Graves, 2000).

Problematizing General English Corner

I know:
- The class is fifty minutes long.
- I have access to a whiteboard, as well as many pens to write on the board.
- I have access to a printer and copier if I want to print up handouts.
- I have access to multimedia resources if I choose to use them.
- I can move chairs or group students however I want or however they want.
- There will be more of a mix of students with different motivations.

I think:
- Most learners are motivated to learn.
- I can use emergent language (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009) to create affordances (Van Lier, 2000) that can be exploited.
- Most learners are willing to participate in most classroom activities *if they make sense*.
- It's the end of the day, so we can do more 'fun' activities.   Learners might feel tired.
- Most learners have had some exposure to foreign teachers.
- Most learners will be able to arrive when the class begins and stay for its duration.
- Most learners view this class as more informal and 'relaxed'.

I don't know:
- Every learner's English proficiency level.
- How many learners will come to class day by day.
- What days I will teach this lesson until Sunday night at the beginning of the week.
- If the class will be canceled because no learners signed up for it that day.

When problematizing General English Corner the first thing that strikes me is that

there are fewer knowns.   Because this English Corner is not tied to anything like

IELTS, it's a lot more open and free.   For most of my career, this kind of openness

and freedom terrified me as I stated before.   But after my first 3-week residency at

SIT Graduate Institute in Vermont, I realized that I could use this class as an

Approaches workshop.   When I say 'Approaches', I'm referring to Professor

Anderson's course entitled 'Approaches' that explored a myriad of teaching

approaches such as Silent Way, Dogme, Participatory Approach, Task-Based

Language Teaching, and many others as outlined in our coursebook (Larsen-Freeman

& Anderson, 2011).   Fortunately teachers in my context are encouraged to

experiment in the General English Corner.

General English Corner strategies
When new teachers arrive in my context, the first piece of advice for them is to

bring a notebook into the General English Corner.   It is a great tool for building

rapport (writing down student mini-biographies) and writing down little reminders.

It can also come into play if the whiteboard markers are out of ink.   Beyond that I

think it's important for teachers to ask themselves, 'What kind of environment do I

want to create this evening?' Do we want a rowdy, raucous good time, or a more quiet

self-reflective lesson? What's going on in students' lives? Are they currently under a

lot of pressure or they in a relatively relaxed point in their studies?   Based on what I

think, I like to create a relaxed, fun environment.   Usually I'll bring in a few

different board games or card games which I adapt.   Here are some examples:

Bananagrams: *Bananagrams* is a pouch of letters similar to *Scrabble* letters,

except there isn't a point value attached to each letter.   There are many variants to

the game, the official rules state that it's a word race where everyone is competing to

create the largest word grids (like a crossword) until all the tiles run out.   When I use

this activity, I make it more of a cooperative process where everyone has their own

grid, but they can build off other people's grids.   At the beginning, the tiles are

scattered on the table face down.   Each participant takes seven tiles (like *Scrabble*). One must always have seven letters that they're working with. Don't worry about word length or how complicated or simple the words are, just create as many as one can alone or with the group. If someone is stuck, they are encouraged to trade letters with other people, but they can't give letters away for free. (This discourages lower level students from giving all their letters to higher level students.) There isn't a winner, we all work together until the letters are gone.   After that, I ask the learners to examine each word grid to see if there are any words they aren't familiar with. Then, if there's time, we'll play with the words we generated by telling stories using them.   This activity is useful in a lot of ways.

By making words out of a pile of random letters, the learners' attention can be drawn to the basics of word formation.   A lot of students are familiar with the idea of consonants and vowels, but with *Bananagrams*, learners can play with how consonants and vowels interact with each other.   For example, if they can find A-T-E, there are a bunch of words that they can make by just adding a consonant like FATE, GATE, MATE, or LATE.   But then, you can drop the E to see how the vowel sound changes.   This activity can show the logic behind the spelling system in English.

My variant of *Bananagrams* works well because there's a lot of interaction. People can practice functional language like making requests, "Does anyone have an 'L'?" negotiation, "I'll give you an 'E' for an 'L'?" counteroffers, "I don't need an 'E', how about a different vowel?"   During the process of word creation, other topics come up, just like when people play board games in real life.   People who aren't so excited about making words can chat while people who aren't so excited about chatting can make words.   There's something for everyone.
(https://bananagrams.com/games/bananagrams)

Coup: *Coup* is a card game where bluffing is encouraged.   I don't adapt it much. This is an activity for two to ten people, but I think six to eight is a good number.   In this activity, each participant has two character cards which have abilities and can interact with other character cards in various ways such as, assassinating another character card, stealing coins from another participant, or collecting more coins per turn.   It's played in a circle where all the unused cards are scattered across the table face down.   Participants take turns saying what they will do because of who they there, eg: 'I'm the Duke, so I will take three coins from the bank.' or 'I'm the Captain so I will steal two coins from Leslie.'   If a participant doesn't believe another is who they say they are, they can say, 'I don't believe you! Show me!' If the participant has the card who they say they are, the challenger must lose a card.   If the participant doesn't have the card they said they have, the participant must lose a card.   The 'winner' is the person who still has a card at the end.

This activity isn't so open for interpretation like *Bananagrams*, but the process is exciting.   Where else can learners be encouraged to lie?   Learners can also role-play their character cards.   Dukes can use a more royal tone of voice. Assassins can be cold-hearted.   Ambassadors can be diplomatic and unassuming. Captains can be tough. When the activity is over, in the reflection period, I like to ask learners about the times they lied and how it felt.   For people who were caught in lies, how they might change their strategy in the future in order to get away with their lies next time. To order this activity or learn more about it, visit (http://www.indieboardsandcards.com/index.php/games/coup/#1480827397290-ef6c7 5e8-3bb700e9-c875)

Teach the Teacher: With *Teach the Teacher* I bring in a standard fifty-two card deck of playing cards and ask the learners to show us how to play a game.   This is best done with intermediate to higher level learners.   Hopefully more than one already knows how to play the game, so they can work together to explain the rules.

I think this kind of activity is good because it flips the script and empowers the learners.   Looking at this through Hawkins's I/Thou/It framework (Hawkins, 1967) there are two parallel I/Thou/It triads working simultaneously.   There's the standard I/Thou/It of Teacher (I)/Learner (Thou)/ Material (It) but there's a concurrent I/Thou/It where we have a Learner-Teacher/ Teacher-Learner/ English- Card game. By giving the learner control of the it-material (card-game) the learner is also able to take control of the language needed to describe the rules and gameplay of the card game.   The teacher only needs to provide some scaffolding (McLeod, 2019) when needed, perhaps by writing the rules on the board as the learners dictate them or providing the grammar for using imperatives because generally rules are stated in the imperative mood.

Cultural Exchange: Usually before a holiday, I'll put together a lesson looking at the meaning of that holiday. I generally avoid Chinese holidays because for those, we can do a Teach the Teacher type lesson. Below is an example of a worksheet/ template I made for discussing International Workers' Day (May 1st).

International Workers' Day Worksheet   developed by **TOM FAY**

Part A: Talk to your neighbors.   What do you know about May holiday?   Why do you think we have May holiday?   What do people generally do during May holiday?   Write some of your ideas below:

Part B: Where do you think this article came from? newspaper/ magazine/ textbook

            This article talks about… current events/ history/ science/ math/.

Part C: What was something you already knew about International Workers' Day that was in this article?   What were two new things you learned about International Workers' Day from

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this article?   What were some new words you came across?   Write some ideas below and share with your neighbors.

Part D: Back in the 1880's workers were fighting for the 8 hour work day.   What are some issues that affect workers around the world today?   Have you or anyone you know been affected by any of these issues?   (Make a list of at least 3 issues.   More is better!)

Part E: Chat with your neighbors.   What will you do during May holiday?   Have you made any plans with your friends or family?

The Bloody Story of How May Day Became a Holiday for Workers

The story goes back to 1886

Celebrations on May 1 have long had two, seemingly contradictory meanings. On one hand, May Day is known for maypoles, flowers and welcoming the spring. On the other hand, it's a day of worker solidarity and protest; though the U.S. observes its official Labor Day in September, many countries will celebrate Labor Day on May 1st.

How did that happen?

TIME explained in 1929:

"*To old-fashioned people, May Day means flowers, grass, picnics, children, clean frocks. To Socialists and Communists it means speechmaking, parading, bombs, brickbats, conscientious violence. This connotation dates back to May Day, 1886, when around 200,000 U. S. workmen engineered a nationwide strike for an eight-hour day.*"

The May 1, 1886, labor action wasn't just any strike—it was part of what became known as the Haymarket affair. On May 1 of that year, Chicago (along with other cities) was the site of a major union demonstration in support of the eight-hour workday. The Chicago protests were meant to be part of several days of action. On May 3, a strike at the McCormick Reaper factory in the city turned violent; the next day, a peaceful meeting at Haymarket Square became even more so. Here's what TIME magazine said about it in 1938:

A few minutes after ten o'clock on the night of May 4, 1886, a storm began to blow up in Chicago. As the first drops of rain fell, a crowd in Haymarket Square, in the packing house district, began to break up. At eight o'clock there had been 3,000 persons on hand, listening to anarchists denounce the brutality of the police and demand the eight-hour day, but by ten there were only a few hundred. The mayor, who had waited around in expectation of trouble, went home, and went to bed. The last speaker was finishing his talk when a delegation of 180 policemen marched from the station a block away to break up what remained of the meeting. They stopped a short distance from the speaker's wagon. As a captain ordered the meeting to disperse, and the speaker cried out that it was a peaceable gathering, a bomb exploded where the police were. It wounded 67 policemen, of whom seven died. The police opened fire, killing several men and wounding 200, and the Haymarket Tragedy became a part of U. S. history.

In 1889, the International Socialist Conference declared that, in commemoration of the Haymarket affair, May 1 would be an international holiday for labor, now known in many places as International Workers' Day.

Source: http://time.com/3836834/may-day-labor-history/

(Figure 3: Holiday EC template)

This type of lesson is a bit more formal and structured than the others I've outlined, but there's still plenty of room for improvisation and going off on tangents where 'real' communication can occur.

In this template, Part A activates *schema*.   I know every learner in my class is familiar with May 1st because it's a public holiday in China.   Schools, banks, and government offices are all closed for three days.   In Part A, learners know what the lesson will be about, and I can gauge their level of knowledge on the subject.   Also, all the questions in Part A are written in the present simple, so learners will have some practice with that.

For Part B, I gave them a 450 word article that I edited slightly from *Time Magazine* that looks back at what *Time Magazine* had to say about May 1st at the time of the Haymarket Incident in Chicago, 1886.   I wrote two gist questions so they can scan the article and get a basic idea of what kind of article it is and what it's about. It's important to promote learners' awareness of discourse structures. (Grabe, 2014) I chose this particular text because I think it's not too long.   It comes from *Time Magazine* which although trusted, can be further explored for Critical Discourse Analysis (Cot, 2006) depending on learners' reading levels.

In the past, I would write some more focused reading comprehension questions in Part C, but I found when I did that, learners would just skim the text to find that specific information as if they were taking a standardized reading comprehension test. By leaving the question more open ended, learners are forced to grapple with the text on their own level and find their own meaning within it rather than a prescribed meaning.   Depending on the time and students' needs, I may write more focused comprehension questions on the board so that students can find key information in the text. (Grabe, 2014)   When I taught that text, 'protest' and 'strike' were two words

that most learners hadn't come across before, but the concepts were familiar because strikes and protests are quite common in this part of China, though not widely publicized.   For these kinds of vocabulary checks, I generally have my laptop ready for an image search because despite how handy they can be, the English-Chinese translation apps a lot of people have are not always so accurate.   Also, with an image, a lot more can be taken away: Who's there?   What do they want? Where are they? When was the picture taken?   Embrace the tangents. Tangents are what is really happening in our minds. These are the opportunities that bring a text to life!

Part D furthers the opportunities to raise awareness of important political/ economic situations and make the text relevant.   Most of the learners in my context don't work, but they will need to at some point.   With university students, a lot have done unpaid internships where they might have felt exploited in some way.   This is a chance for storytelling or supposition.

Part E is a wind down.   This particular lesson can be a bit heavy and politically charged.   In Part E, learners can talk about their own plans.   It's also a chance to practice future tense forms.

With this template, any part can be skipped.   Although it's scaffolded (McLeod, 2019) so that each part leads to the next, the tangents can take the lesson off into multiple directions which can make it impossible to finish or cover all the information. But that's OK.   With Demand High ELT (https://demandhighelt.wordpress.com/) Scrivener and Underhill ask 'What is the point of these activities?   Is the teacher a ring master who leads students from one activity to the next?   Is real learning taking place in the classroom?   What can teachers do to demand more from their learners?' With this template, as well as for the one I use in IELTS English Corner, I believe there is enough open space for learners to experiment with language.   There are

multiple opportunities for learners to practice varied grammar structures and use new vocabulary.   The open-ended questions create a space for everyone involved to "to swim around … , to explore the language and the thinking that lies behind the question…" (Underhill & Scrivener, 2012)

Audio/ Video English Corner:

I'm lucky because at my context, we have a small auditorium that we call the Media Room.   It can seat around one hundred people.   It's generally used for large meetings and promotional events, but teachers can use it as well.   It has movie theater style seating where each seat has a fold out desk.   There's a large screen for a projector as well as a computer and a decent speaker set up.   Occasionally I'll use this room for A/V (audio/ video)classes.   Below is a template I've put together for a movie class, but it can easily be adapted for any other type of A/V lesson.

Movies Worksheet   **developed by T. FAY**

Part A: Movie genres.   Tom will show you some movie posters.   What genres do you think these movies are? (at least two genres per movie)

Movie title	Genres
Escape from the Planet of the Apes	
Nosferatu the Vampyre	
When in Rome	
March of the Penguins	
Antz	
The Jerk	
Pan's Labyrinth	
Shutter Island	

- Which genres do you like?   Why?
- Which genres do you dislike?   Why?

Part B: Movie Previews.   Fill in the tables about each movie preview.

	Preview 1	**Preview 2**	**Preview 3**
Movie name			
Movie genres (at least 2)			
What's do you think it's about?			

Do you want to watch it? (0 not at all to 10 ASAP)			

-Which of these three movies would you MOST like to see?   Which of them would you LEAST like to see?

Part C: Talking about movies
- What was the last movie you saw?   What was it about? (one or two sentences)   Did you like that movie?   Why/ why not?   What rating would you give it from 1 (terrible) to 10 (best movie ever)?
- Have you seen a movie recently that you really didn't like?   What was the name of it? Why didn't you like it?

Part D: Reflection
-    Thinking about this lesson, what are some new things you learned or somethings you feel like you know more about?   What's a question you still have?

(Figure 4: A/V lesson template.)

This lesson has a lot of places where things can get derailed and go off topic.   In Part A of the lesson, the learners are split up into groups of two and three. I show them some movie posters and they can decide which genres they think the movies are based on the posters.   I purposely choose older movies because I think most of my learners haven't seen them, so they are forced to use the poster to determine the genres rather than their own experience with the movie.

I ask for students to choose at least two genres for each movie poster in order to open up the floor for debate.   One group of students might say they think "Escape from Planet of the Apes" is a love story because on the poster there is a man and a woman, while another group might say it's a war movie because there is a group of apes marching with rifles.   Yet another group might chime in that it's a science fiction movie because the poster has a rocket on it.   All these responses give the teacher chances to ratchet up the difficulty with questions like, "Love story?   Like a rom-com or a tragedy?" or "Who's going to war?   Who might win?"   Also, asking

the learners to choose more than one genre for each film can elicit more vocabulary using less material.

In Part B, I show the class three previews for movies that will come out in the next few weeks.   I generally choose movies that will be played in Chinese theaters, but sometimes, I'll show them a spooky horror movie preview because it's fun to get scared for a minute or two.   The questions I ask about each preview touch upon multiple levels of perception.   The first question, movie name, is purely visual.   At the end of the preview, the name pops up, if learners were paying attention, they should be able to find it.   The second question touches more on the atmosphere of the preview.   Some action movie previews tend to be exciting.   Horror movie previews tend to be slow and ominous.   When learners label the genres of the movies, the teacher can always ask, "Why do you think it's a romantic comedy?" the learners can talk about how the preview is bright or that a couple was happy together. The third question asks the learners to guess what the movie is about based on the limited information they were given.   This is always a fun activity, because there is usually a group of students whose idea about the plot is way different that another group, so more debate and conflict can enter the classroom.   Debate and conflict ignite emotions.   These emotions can turn a normal lesson into an event in a learner's life. The final question simply rates the learner's level of interest in the movie based on the preview.   Different learners have different levels of interest, so the numbers they provide can further the discussion/ debate about the merits or inadequacies of each movie.

In a fifty minute lesson, there generally isn't enough time for Part C, but if there is something wrong with the computer, or the power goes off, or people don't want to engage in a lot of debate and discussion in Part B, they can chat about movies they've

seen.   I like to draw attention to the second question about movies they've seen but didn't like so much.   You might have noticed by now that conflict is something I like to foster in my classroom.   I want to create a space where students can disagree with each other and argue with each other, particularly because for many of my learners, they weren't allowed to engage in discussion or debate in their formal education. Also, when people are engaged in debate, they want to make their points as clear as possible.   One question that you might notice is not on the template is 'Do you have a favorite movie?'   There are a variety of reasons why it's not on there, but the biggest reason is because a lot of people tend to have the same favorite movies.   The discussion kind of dies when people talk about movies they've always loved.   Either other people haven't seen them, or other people don't agree but at the same time don't want to vocalize their disagreement for fear of hurting feelings.

In Part D, students can go over new things they learned.   This is a great chance for students to provide feedback to the teacher and their peers about language points they learned.   It's also a good time for the teacher to give some mini-quizzes about what happened in class, for example, "What's the difference between a horror movie and a thriller?" Depending on the feedback students give, the teacher can tweak some things in the lesson for the future, or put together ideas for the next class.

One thing to keep in mind for all these stages, excluding Part D, is that they can all function as lessons on their own depending on what's going on with the learners, the teacher, or the classroom that day.   Part A can become an improv class where small groups of learners each choose a poster and act out their own movie based on what's on the poster.   Part B can become a movie review show like old *Siskel and Ebert* where learners write mini-reviews on each preview and talk about their

opinions.   Part C can be a loose discussion where students in groups swap stories.

The template is there for support.   There's no reason to stick to every stage.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have defined, to the best of my knowledge what English Corner is

ideally and what I've experienced on the ground.   I've described the lessons that are

called English Corner in my context and have provided some templates and ideas

teachers can use when they're tasked with running these types of lessons.   Now I

will provide some final thoughts and advice.

English Corner by nature is a class where the expectations and learner outcomes

are ill-defined at best.   For the teacher who is walking into this kind of class where

there is no curriculum, no syllabus, and no set group of students, it can be frightening

and nerve-wracking, especially on the first day on the job.   But I argue that rather

than worrying, complaining, or giving up, the teacher can see this as an opportunity

for self-development.   Try out that new lesson plan template you read about or heard

about in a training session.   Bring in a found object; make it a conversation piece.

Use authentic texts, don't worry about grading the language!   Play a board game. Go

off script!   Let emergent language (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009) reveal itself.   Be

there for the learners.   Follow the rabbit down the rabbit hole, see where it takes you!

The lesson is not a materials showcase.   Materials are props that can be used to

coax out real communication.   You are not a ringmaster in a circus, you're there to

help people learn and practice communication.   The most well-designed, fun, and

engaging activity can fall flat at any time, be ready for that to happen because it will.

Be flexible.   Reflect questions back at learners.   Create an atmosphere of inquiry.

With smartphones, image searches can be done in seconds, there's no need for you to

explain vocabulary or grammar points.   Get your learners to do it for you, that's how you can increase the demand (Underhill & Scrivener, 2012).

Finally have fun.   Use this class to improvise and stretch out. Listen to what's going on in their worlds find ways to connect your classroom with the outside world. Create a space for the unpredictable to occur.   Embrace it! These 'off-script' moments are where learning is happening (Underhill, 2014).   Take your learners to the precipice of their understanding, then jump off (Vygotsky, 1978).   If there is no definition of success, then failure is impossible.   But most importantly, don't forget your notebook!

Appendix: A directory of key concepts

In this appendix, I will define some of the key concepts in this paper. For each

concept, I will give a short description as well as reference for further reading when

possible.

Activating schema

This is just a fancy way to describe setting the context for a concept by seeing what

experience students have had with that concept in the past. There are many ways to do

this such as using photographs or videos, objects in the classroom or objects brought

in for this specific purpose. Here's a simple example, if a student came across the

word, 'receipt' for the first time and asked what it meant, the teacher could ask,

'When was the last time you went to the supermarket? After you paid, did the worker

at the supermarket give you anything?' Anyone who lives in an urban environment

has been to a supermarket where they received a receipt. By tapping into these kinds

of shared daily experiences, teachers can make concepts much more memorable than

a simple translation (Ferlazzo & Hull Sypnieski, 2018).

Active listening

Active listening is one of the key concepts we learn at SIT Graduate Institute. The

term was coined by Carl Rogers and Richard Farson in a book they wrote called

"Active Listening" (Rogers & Farson, 1957). It is a set of skills a person can learn to

help them fully concentrate on what is being said rather than just passively hearing.

Active listening is an important skill for language teachers because it can help build

rapport with learners. Learners will like the teacher if the teacher seems concerned

and interested about what learners have to say. It is also good noticing mistakes and

common errors that learners are making. When reflecting back exactly what the

teacher heard, they can replicate an error or mistake a student made which can help

the student to notice their error or mistake. Likewise for language students, active

listening is an important skill to learn because it can improve their listening ability.

Also, when they use active listening tools such as paraphrasing the speaker can see

how much of their message came across. The internet is filled with great resources for

learning active listening including a video whose link you can find in my reference

section (GCFLearnFree.org, 2019).

Affordances

Affordances are opportunities that can be exploited for further learning. They can pop

up anytime during a lesson. Here's an example: during a speaking activity where

learners are using the present perfect to talk about past experiences, the teacher

notices a lot of learners saying, 'I have ever been to…' The teacher can write that

down in their notebook. While the activity continues, the teacher can quietly board the

question, 'Have you ever been to McDonald's?' Possibly a student or two will notice

the teacher writing that question. As the speaking activity winds down, more students

might notice the question.   Some might even scoff at the question, 'Of course I've

been to McDonald's.' They may say, 'Yes, I have **ever** been to McDonald's.' Which

can open up a whole new line of inquiry as to why one can say, 'I have never been to

McDonald's.' but one cannot say, 'I have **ever** been to McDonald's.' The learning

can be strengthened by playing a short round of 'Never Have I Ever.' (For the rules of

Never Have I Ever, check out

https://www.wikihow.com/Play-%22Never-Have-I-Ever%22)

Doing more with fewer materials

The smart phone is an amazing tool that the vast majority of teachers and learners all

have in their pockets. When activating schema, the teacher can ask the class to do

image searches on whatever the target language of the lesson is that day. This saves

the teacher time because the teacher doesn't need to to find, print, and laminate a bunch of images. Also, affordances may come up when the images students find are homonyms of the target language. The teacher can draw attention to those homonyms to show there are a lot of words with the same spelling, but different meanings like address (house number/ speech). When using a coursebook, rather than just running through the exercises, then checking to see if everyone has the 'right' answers, the teacher can stretch out the material. For example, if the coursebook has a list of subjects that are generally taught in high school, after checking that the students are familiar with these subjects, 'Physics, Algebra, Chemistry, Literature, Biology, Political Science' the teacher can ask students to rate each subject from 1 to 5 how much they like them or rank them in order of importance in the 'real' world. When students share their ratings or rankings with each other there is a lot more information that the class as a whole can work with. Science oriented students can chat or argue with Liberal Arts minded students about their ratings or rankings. What was before just a list of vocabulary is now a platform students can use to express themselves. (See *Activating schema* and *Fostering conflict and emotional use of language in a safe space*).

Embracing tangents

This goes back to emergent language where we help our learners with what they need now rather than what we think they might need in the future. A few weeks ago, Chicago the Musical came to town. A lot of my students saw it. I saw it too. It was the talk of the town at that time because we don't get a lot of Broadway style musicals up here. In class that week, students were asking questions about the musical that I didn't know. We all took out our phones and did mini-research about the musical and Bob Fosse, who wrote it. Each person in the class looked at a different aspect of the

musical like when it was written and where it was first performed, who wrote the musical, context about the period of time when it took place, where this particular production will go next, etc. After a few minutes of mini-research, we put together what we'd found and chatted about it. Tangents show us what's really going on in our learners' minds, if we can follow them, why not use them in our lessons?

Embracing uncertainty

When I did my CELTA, our trainers drilled into us that when we give instructions for an activity or task, our instructions must be brief and clear in order to avoid confusion or uncertainty among the students and the teacher. We were encouraged to write scripts for ourselves to use in our observed lessons. This is generally good advice, especially for new teachers. If you're teaching a particular grammar point, it's important that students are clear about when and how to use the grammar point accurately. But what about being purposely vague when giving instructions? Vague instructions may create confusion, but then students are forced to make sense out of very little. This kind of uncertainty simulates real-life second (or third language) interactions. Unless a person is CEFR level C2 in a foreign language, there will be words or phrases they don't understand or that they are a little uncertain about, but that person needs to make sense of things in order to navigate a particular language interaction. In a classroom, where we embrace uncertainty, we train our learners to make sense out of confusion. Oftentimes, we will find that different students interpret vague instructions in different ways which produces more affordances and teachable opportunities for teachers. I'll toss a lesson plan out the window in order to focus on what my students need at any particular time. (See *Flexible planning* and *Embracing tangents*)

Emergent language

Emergent language is language that comes up in a lesson, but isn't the Target Language. So let's say you're checking in with students at the beginning of a lesson when a learner says they got 'into a car problem' that day. Was it an accident? Engine trouble? A flat tire? No taxis? When we notice and put the spotlight on emergent language, we can help our learners with what they actually need right now rather than what we think they might need in the future.   Teaching Unplugged is a useful resource with a lot of suggestions on how to harness emergent language (Meddings & Thornbury, 2017). Scott Thornbury's blog, *An A-Z of ELT* is also quite helpful (https://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/).

Flexible planning

When planning lessons, it's important not to be too rigid. Sometimes a task or activity that worked with one group of students may not work well with another group. It's important to know when to provide more or less scaffolding for a task, or even when to cut a task or activity out of the plan. Different students have different needs, there is no such thing as the one-size-fits-all lesson plan.

Fostering conflict and emotional use of language in a safe space

The other day, a colleague of mine taught a lesson where the content was hairstyles. Rather than showing pictures of different hairdos, she started the class off by asking, "When was the last time you had a bad hair day?" That got her students talking about embarrassing situations they were in when their hair wouldn't do what they wanted. There was a lot of laughter coming out of the room. Later, students talked about mandatory hairstyles their high schools dictated all students should have and how much these students hated those mandated hairstyles. I could hear her learners talking over each other, clamoring to tell their stories or express their feelings on the subject.

The emotions the students felt throughout the lesson drove to want to communicate.
They had inner motivation. Similarly, when people debate a topic, they often want to
make their point as clear as possible in order to persuade others or simply make their
opinions known. Keeping the space safe for people to express themselves is key. In
my context, in China, that means generally avoiding domestic politics and keeping the
debates centered around personal preferences or school life.

Having fun

Most learners in my context come from a strict, top-down, authoritarian education
system where the teacher dispenses knowledge for students to soak up. Rote
memorization is a common method that's employed. There's not much group work.
Almost all learning is tested using formal exams. This doesn't leave much room for
fun and play. In my classroom, humor is a valuable tool that can be used to disarm
learners, open their minds, and make them more receptive to whatever the language
points of the day. Wearing a smile, having a laugh, being interested in the things your
learners are interested in, these are things that can lighten the mood and help build
rapport with your learners. It's like that fable, 'The North Wind and the Sun' where
the Sun and the Wind have a competition to see who's stronger. The wind tries to
blow some guy's clothes off, but the guy holds onto his clothes tighter, while the sun
just makes it hot so the guy takes his clothes off. It's the same in the classroom, we
can't force our learners to learn, we can only make learning attractive enough for
them to do it themselves.

I/ Thou/ It Triad

At SIT Graduate Institute, one of the first articles we read in the Foundations course is
"I, Thou, and It" by David Hawkins (Hawkins, 1967). In the article Hawkins talks
about the relationship between the teacher (I), the learner (Thou), and the subject

being taught (It). He says there needs to be genuine respect and interest between these three in order for learning to occur. In the essay, he says that no one learns in a vacuum, there needs to be an I in order for Thou to learn. Likewise, there needs to be a Thou in order for I to grow as a teacher. Finally, there needs to be an It for I and Thou to interact with. This framework helps to humanize the education process. It also reinforces the importance of our subject, that it's not just some pages in a textbook that need to be 'covered' that day, but that it's compelling. It compels I and Thou to work together.

Not doing for the students what they can do

Our students are capable of more than we give them credit for. When eliciting vocabulary for a speaking activity, let them write it on the board. It gets them out of their seats and opens the class up for affordances. When you go back to the board to check for spelling or proper usage, give the students time to notice things first before you start to underline errors or make corrections. When it comes time to make corrections, allow the students correct themselves and each other. It's the same when correcting pronunciation. Give the students time to notice their errors. Get them into self-correction and correcting each other. They won't always have a teacher following them around correcting them all the time. Get them to notice themselves.

Scaffolding

Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist, developed the idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD is the distance between what a person can do without help and what they can do with help from a skilled partner. Scaffolding is the help a teacher provides a student in order for them to get through the ZPD (McLeod, 2019). Scaffolding can be anything from writing grammar structures on the board for students to refer to, including graphical organizers like

Venn diagrams or empty boxes on a handout for students to fill in, or having images to pre-teach or remind students of pertinent vocabulary. One thing to be careful of is over-scaffolding, providing too much assistance. Remember, language is a tool that you are giving to your students so that they can use it to solve problems in the future. It's important to let your students use the language, allow them to fumble around a bit. No one likes to be helped too much.

Teachable moments

Teachable moments are points that come up in a lesson where the teacher can draw attention to an issue students are having. To know when a teachable moment is happening, a teacher needs to be able to notice what's happening in the classroom during an activity or interaction. The teaching notebook can be an indispensable tool for noticing. (See *Affordances*, *Emergent language*, and *Embracing tangents*.)

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