

Initiating and implementing innovative English teaching: Two Teachers' Voices

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This contribution presents two English language teachers' reflections on recent classroom practices initiated in response to their local realities. Their insights highlight effective strategies and topics that activate pupils' background knowledge, lived experiences, and skills. Driven by a desire for deeper pupil engagement, the teachers' initiatives demonstrate practical steps toward meaningful pedagogy.

Benjamin's multisensory approach supported deep vocabulary acquisition among his younger learners. Meanwhile, Anwar

incorporated stories of non-mainstream communities in the US, which helped his high school students navigate discomfort around race and identity, ultimately fostering explorative learning and conceptual understanding.

Lekh: What specific area or theme have you emphasized in your English lessons this year, or more recently?

Benjamin: This winter I wanted to see how multisensory teaching worked in a 5th grade classroom. I wanted to explore how pupils learn by seeing, touching,

hearing and speaking the words they are supposed to learn. The focus was then on learning new vocabulary and in particular nouns relating to an activity common to our community – hiking and the outdoors.

Anwar: We started working on English-speaking countries after the winter holidays. With reference to the USA, my students and I jointly explored issues surrounding race and racism from a historical perspective. We drew lines between American history and current events with the goal of enhancing our



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understanding of the historical roots of contemporary sociopolitical trends. I also chose the topics of race and racism because I wanted to challenge and reflect on the stories I have presented to my pupils. This means I went outside the familiar classroom contents such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks and BLM. Instead, I felt the need to incorporate people and stories about American history that most of us (teachers and students) have never heard before or considered significant.

Lekh: Could you share what specifically motivated you to work systematically with this area?

Benjamin: In my experience, learning new words is the main struggle for young learners of English. There are pupils who like to be outdoors and don't spend their time gaming or on social media. Even when they are online, I have seen that several children prefer content in Norwegian rather than English. Additionally, I have noticed that children like to see, touch and play with objects. Doing this also helps them to learn the name of the object and other words associated with it. As a grandfather

who likes to play with his grandchildren, I have also observed how children learn about objects and things by pointing, touching and even tasting. Through repeated exposure to the objects, children can connect and associate words with the objects in their surroundings.

Based on my experience, I wanted to organize my vocabulary lessons in such a way that pupils could learn by activating their senses. From my own experience of living in Thailand, I know that it is important to be exposed to a language in as many ways as possible.

Anwar: My perception is that many teachers, including me, are hesitant to talk about racism with students even though it is very necessary. Racism, like various other topics, is uncomfortable to talk about. It is much easier to either skip it or just mention that “racism is unacceptable” and then move on. I also believe it is very important to discuss this with students in a safe environment where they won’t feel ashamed or embarrassed about being “wrong” or even in some cases having their beliefs challenged. In the fall, I took part in a course for teachers where we learned how we can discuss racial issues in the USA with our students and that really motivated me to try it out. I got some great book recommendations that I used when creating my lesson plan. And because I was excited about this, I went all in and had so much fun researching and preparing. As another point of motivation, I want to stress that the high school I work in is both big, with over 1300 students, and very culturally diverse. This means that many students might have implicitly experienced racism either as a victim or as a participant or both. The main point was to raise awareness that racism exists even if we have never really talked about it.

Lekh: Which interdisciplinary themes, core language skills, and competence aims of the curriculum (LK20) does your approach address? Please elaborate on how.

Benjamin: Multisensory learning and variety were two of the main focuses this period. To activate cognition, sensory

experiences obtained through touching, hearing and speaking play a central role. This lets the children explore language in a variety of ways, including kinetic ones. The exploring takes place through roleplay and games, enabling the children to find out what things are called by using and playing with the objects together.

The topic of “Hiking” builds on a typical Norwegian outdoor tradition familiar to the pupils. Through the topic, the children also explore American outdoor traditions. We found that there are some differences between Norway and the USA. Using stories about American hikers and what they suggest as important considerations when hiking, pupils practised reading together and learnt new words typical for US hiking traditions.

This way, the topic and classroom learning supported the curricular emphasis that pupils should compare the lifestyle and traditions of the English-speaking world with their own.

Anwar: This lesson was different from my regular work because it was more about explaining concepts by using examples from history and current events. Which means my students were not necessarily studying vocabulary or terminology. It was more important for them to develop conceptual understanding through exploration. For example, they discussed and distinguished colonialism from settler colonialism. The content and teaching were directly relevant to the values and

principles of learning highlighted in the Core Curriculum. Moreover, I believe that as teachers we aren’t just here to teach our students the curriculum in their subjects but also to guide them towards positive character development.

Lekh: In your opinion, which elements of the classroom teaching did the pupils find most motivating or engaging?

Benjamin: The selected theme provided a good starting point because it was something the children were already familiar with. The objects described by the key words the children were supposed to learn were present in the classroom throughout the lessons so that they could touch and feel them. As the theme of the lesson was “Hiking”, I brought along my own used hiking equipment such as a tent, sleeping mat and pegs into the classroom. For pupils, it was not only the objects, but also their smell, scratches, and rips, which became subjects of discussion. For example, the sleeping mat smelled of bonfire and the coffee kettle had carbon build-up. This connected pupils to their lived experiences and memories, which enhanced learning through sensory activation. Additionally, we had a “campfire” moment every lesson where we came together around a make-believe fire to discuss the theme at hand and practice vocabulary for talking about something that cannot be seen or touched. Elements of hiking, such as making camp, were also covered in the classroom by putting up the tent and testing it ourselves. *How*

many children can fit in a tent made for two people?

The activity that worked the best was “labelling your world”. This activity is well suited for a diverse classroom where skills vary. After presenting the objects in English and letting the children explore them by lifting, smelling, opening and talking about them, the children got pieces of paper and a small piece of cord. The objective was for the children to label each object by writing the word on the paper and to attach it to the objects on display around the classroom. The children who either already knew the word, or who quickly picked up the new vocabu-

lary, were able to label objects fast. Those who needed some more time to learn the words could then look at the labels already fastened to the sleeping mat or the tent peg and go back to their own desk and write it down. In that way, all the objects were labelled. Afterwards, the labels remained on the objects for the whole duration of the subject.

Anwar: While working on the topic of racism, my students worked in groups. In one of the activities, each group was assigned an issue related to the topic, and their task was to prepare and deliver it as co-teachers to the classroom. The assigned topics were “War on Drugs”, “Tough

on Crime bill”, and “Prisons for profit”. I emphasized that they should conduct a thorough exploration of their assigned topic rather than of the mechanics of what they would teach and how. After the presentations, I tied everything together by providing historical context. I explained how, after slavery was abolished in the US, several laws were created to arrest newly freed Black Americans. This allowed plantations to exploit them as forced labour; without this free labour, the plantations would have collapsed both agriculturally and economically.

This connection helped students realize that long prison sentences – where inmates



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work for private profit rather than rehabilitation – are not a modern invention. Instead, it is an old system that still exists today, just in a different form. By piecing these historical elements together, the students gained a deeper understanding of how the past shapes the present and the future. Ultimately, it showed them why studying history is so vital, especially its cruellest chapters.

Lekh: Looking ahead, what are the most important lessons you’ve learned, and what practical advice would you give to a colleague who wants to start working systematically with this theme in their own classroom?

Benjamin: Knowing the pupils’ interests proved to be a good starting point for picking an engaging topic. This helps teachers to select physical everyday objects that can be brought into the classroom. If possible, the objects should be placed in the classroom between the lessons for continuous exposure. The objects and associated words should be appropriate to the proficiency level of the pupils. It is important to include a wide variety of simple words, rather than focusing on a few difficult and unfamiliar words. For example, the theme of “hiking” included

almost thirty different objects and about ten activities or concepts, such as “making camp” and “packing a backpack”. Working through these activities, pupils used essential verbs which were repeatedly acted out and acted upon. This consistent repetition helps all the pupils to remember and become familiar with more than just nouns. I also found that it was important to follow the same routine in every lesson to maintain predictability. Ultimately, focusing on words that can be instantly used to communicate about relatable everyday situations is important for younger pupils.

Anwar: As far as the practicalities are concerned, I have two suggestions. First, when addressing a serious topic, it is very important to be thoroughly prepared. Uncomfortable moments arise, and teachers might hear thoughts or opinions from their students that they disagree with, or that would normally feel out of line with their own values. But my strategy was to meet their thoughts with genuine curiosity, with a clear goal of guiding them instead of judging them. Second, do not be afraid to discuss uncomfortable topics with your students! Many of my students felt offended and defensive, which required me to stay sharp and composed to

provide a clear and constructive answer to their questions. However, I felt that the outcome was rewarding. Most of my students gave me feedback, both in person or via direct messaging, that they found this lesson to be extremely important and helpful in understanding themselves and society. To paraphrase one of my students:

“I think I’m speaking for most of the class when I say that we needed to hear what you talked about. Personally, I can relate to a lot of what you said – I’ve experienced everything from racism to friends who have reached out for help. It’s incredibly important, especially for us boys, to talk about things like this, and it was really nice to have a lesson that focused more on these topics. I could tell that many of the boys in the class needed that conversation, so I wanted to say thank you for taking the time to share your experiences and give us advice.”