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IDEA SHARING: PMI – A TOOL FOR STUDENT REFLECTION

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Introduction

This idea-sharing paper is written from my own teaching experience with tertiary level students who studied English for Specific Purposes (ESP). These courses were English foundation subjects, and they were mandatory for first- and second-year students at my university. I used PMI (de Bono, 1993) with year one students to get their reflection after class in order to learn about their problems, progress, and reactions toward each class so that I could understand them and could give them relevant facilitation. Though I took care of more than one class each semester, I will focus on solely a class I have taught in the second semester recently.

Student Background

The group I taught consisted of 54 students: 12 males and 42 females. Thai was their first language, while English was a subject they had to take. While they were in their first and second year, they had to take 4 English courses (2 courses a year in two semesters), which were taught as “foundation courses” or “foundation English.” They were designed based on students’ background knowledge. For instance, if students were from the Faculty of Medicine, texts would be general medicine-based, such as how to care for a baby, how to stay in good health, and nutrition. If students were from the Faculty of Engineering, texts could be on modern buildings, safety, or the significance of bottled water, for example. Therefore, the English

courses are ESP or English for Specific Purposes, as they were patterned after students' academic backgrounds. At my university, these English courses are designed and taught by lecturers of the Faculty of Liberal Arts.

My students' major subject was Thai. Their grades varied; a few received A and B in their English foundation in the first semester. In fact, the majority of these students received C or D, whereas some failed and had to take a re-examination. A was the best grade whereas D was the lowest. Hence, it could be said that most students were weak in all four skills that the course focused on: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Based on my observation, this class liked to write, especially writing to express their opinions, which was not a normal happening among my Thai students in the other classes.

When I proposed to employ PMI as one of the course requirements and explained the details to them, all were willing to try. However, they wanted to start writing it in Thai because they felt more comfortable, and they claimed that they could express what they really wanted to say more clearly than in English. Then, if they became more confident in their writing skills, they promised to make an attempt to do some. I accepted their request because I wanted to get their reflections rather than using PMI as their writing practice. In addition, it was sensible enough for students to adjust themselves before another take-off. In light of this opportunity, many students wrote their PMI in Thai at first (in 1-2 months), and later wrote in English even if it was not grammatically correct.

To work on this specific topic, I will answer 4 questions: What is PMI? Why was it employed into my classroom? How was it employed, and what were the results?

What is PMI?

Originally, PMI was codified by de Bono in his CoRT Thinking Program in 1993, and has become a creative thinking strategy since

then. Individually, PMI applies 3 questions to a statement/task provided by the teacher:

- What are the positive ideas about this (P)?
- What are the negative ideas about this (M)?
- What is interesting about this (I)?

The 3 ideas above are defined in terms of positive, negative, and interesting elements in my context.

In English language learning, however, PMI is employed as a casual learning log or journal that teachers can implement in their classroom at all levels: elementary, intermediate, as well as advanced learning. **P** stands for PLUS, which refers to something in the process of learning that students find beneficial. **M** is what students consider to be MINUS, and the letter **I** refers to what students find INTERESTING.

In my class, every student wrote his or her PMI and submitted it to me at the end of each class. In addition to the interesting elements that students found during each teaching and learning period, they could ask me questions concerning their study in the course if they wished. The following is what my students' normal learning log looks like:

Name & last name: _____ Student number: _____

Date	P	M	I

Why was PMI employed in my class?

There were 5 reasons why I employed PMI in this class:

1. To see teaching and learning from the students' different points of view;

2. To make my students more active and aware of their learning;
3. To allow students to document the questions or problems they need my help with;
4. To explore ideas for a discussion in a classroom forum or conference with me; and
5. To suspend judgment and get ideas for my own understanding of the class for improvement.

How was it employed?

PMI was designed as part of the students' portfolio, which was a required document they had to submit at the end of the semester. I allowed around 5-7 minutes before class was dismissed for the students to write this log. In doing so, students had to provide their names and student numbers, to date each entry, and to write in readable handwriting. They could use both sides of the A4 paper to write as much as they wanted. They could be creative (a relevant cartoon, design, animation, etc. could be added), and also they could omit a column they did not have any comment on by marking – .

I returned the students' logs with answers, comments, and suggestions the following week. They had to keep all the entries in their portfolio to be submitted as the overall work at the end of the course. They also had to read the answers and update their own work. They were recommended to exchange their logs with their friends so that they can learn from each other the ideas, questions and how to solve the problems. In other words, class collaboration and peer learning and helping one another were supported.

What were the results?

In terms of students' feedback on the teaching and learning, I found that PMI was very useful.

Under the P, some students claimed that they enjoyed group work and pair work because they could share the ideas and learn how to learn from peers. Some could identify their weaknesses and

see the purposes of language learning from classroom activities. Almost all students liked their teacher to tell them how she acquired English. For example, San said:

“I liked to listen to how you learned to speak English. I compared your learning strategies with mine and applied them to my own use. I think I may improve my speaking skills this way.”

Kanda pointed out:

“I got into the web sites you and friends recommended and found out a lot on the topic I was interested in. It was amazing to know that knowledge was so enormous out there!”

Under the M, several students wanted me to speak more slowly because they could not catch up with what I said. Ann, for example, commented, “You spoke too fast. Please slow I could understand more.” Paan said, “this time you slowed down. I like it.” Won added, “I liked it when you spoke slow. I am not good in English, so I listened slow, too.” Some did not like to speak in front of their friends because they lacked the confidence to speak in English in front of many people. Rattana, for example, said, “I felt uncomfortable to speak in front of class because I was not sure about my speech.” Many students wanted to write their PMI solely in Thai. They claimed they could express their actual feelings in their mother-tongue. Kate said, “Let me write in Thai first, then in a month or two, I will shift into English.” My students liked the teacher to give them explanations and examples on new structures rather than trying to find some on their own because they were not sure if theirs would be correct. Some students felt that studying in class or in the sound lab was not motivating. They wanted to visit the places mentioned in the text such as a factory or a shopping center. Suda wrote under M: “It

would be fun if we could visit a factory run by some British so that we could talk to people there in English.”

As for the I, I got a lot of ‘interesting’ questions such as whether paraphrasing is a good way to learn to speak or to write, whether extensive reading could improve other skills (for example, speaking and writing), and why teachers did not give students’ overall grades based only on class work (notwithstanding the final examination). I answered all of them. For instance, the answers to the first two questions were “yes.” I also gave them examples of why paraphrasing helped them improve their speaking and writing. For example, it encouraged them to use their own words and sentence structures while the meaning was the same as the original (Oshima & Hogue, 2006: 129). I told my students that paraphrasing could then help them learn to use different vocabulary and forms.

Then, to what extent did the PMI make my students more active and aware of their learning? I found several interesting ideas and useful reflections from my class, which might be beneficial for EFL classroom teaching and learning. They are as follows.

First, I noticed that the students were more active because they had something enjoyable to do. Though they were poor in English, these students were creative, and they liked to write something to express their opinions to the teacher. For example, Kanjana said:

“I like to write PMI because I like to read your answer. I feel as if I read the editorial page in a magazine whenever I read it. Besides, you answer every bit of our questions. I feel close to you this way.”

Second, the students gained more knowledge and became motivated to learn. For example, Alm told me in person that she “felt relaxed to write PMI. I have learned a lot more of the world outside the classroom through your answers.” Jade explained to me:

“I liked to see my friends’ ideas toward class, so I exchanged my PMI with theirs every week to learn from one another. Sometimes my group takes turns to ask you questions, you know?”

I was very pleased to be able to inspire them to write. I felt that this motivation is very valuable for students to learn English since they are more active and enthusiastic.

Apart from being active, PMI leads students to an overall understanding of what the class is all about. They were also aware that the class was not the only source of learning. Our communication via PMI confirmed that they could learn from TV programs, web-sites, newspapers, Facebook, and direct contact with native speakers or visitors from other countries. In this respect, PMI is “an effective tool to learning how to learn” (Sanpatchayapong, 2010: 127). I noticed that the students made revisions, notes, and exchanged ideas among themselves. They also read texts in depth and read more on the areas in which they needed improvement, such as grammar and reading techniques.

In terms of documenting the questions or problems they needed my help with; I was able to trace the students’ problems, such as their weaknesses in listening. Some students were not able to catch up with my lectures, so I had to speak slowly and clearly. Some did not understand the dialogues they listened to in class because they were not familiar with the accent, nor were they used to the normal speed at which the native speakers spoke to each other on the tape. I suggested that they make copies of the tapes so that they could listen to the discourses again as frequently as possible at home. I told them that constant practices would help. After my suggestion, I noticed that the students learned how to ask questions, and they tried to find the solutions more by themselves or among the other students. These incidents confirmed that the techniques worked.

I assigned group work and asked each group to allocate a role to an individual member to be responsible for. I found that group work was a good activity to make students become active in their learning as well as in solving their own problems. I suggested techniques to them to learn more English such as listening to the news in English and reading as many good books or other sources (e.g. novels, short stories, and newspapers) as they could.

The students' questions were also useful for the next class preparation. I became more aware of the differences in their learning, and the PMI made us closer and made the classroom climate a friendly one.

As for the ideas for a discussion in a classroom forum or conference with students, PMI was a good source for themes, such as how to make questions, the significance of critical reading, and cultural issues to discuss with students when we had a forum or conference (we did once a month).

Last, regarding the ideas for my own understanding of the class and for class improvement in the future, I learned from the students' feedback. I got their opinions of the teaching and learning (e.g. topics they liked and disliked), learned about their needs (e.g. visit outside places, watch movies, and do role-plays), their skill development (speaking and reading), details of the problems that they encountered and solved (or did not solve, e.g. time-management, their lack of confidence in speaking, and grammar), and received suggestions from them (e.g. fewer assignments, more interactive activities, and a well-known guest-speaker in the class). I used the feedback to access assignments and examinations as well as to make the next course more relevant to the students' needs and their background knowledge.

Conclusion

In sum, PMI has been an effective tool for me to get feedback from students in my teaching context. However, to employ PMI in the class, teachers have to plan well. I found that it was time-consuming

to read PMI from each period. Therefore, teachers may let students write every other week, at the end of the month, etc., depending on their context. This activity can be flexible, and it depends on the purpose of each teacher. Based on my experience, all classes are different, and there are always things to pay attention to and to learn from.

Thus, you can employ PMI in your class and see for yourself how it works or does not work, and it would be helpful to exchange views about this tool. Why don't we collaborate across institutes? There is more to learn from our students, isn't there?

Tips for a first-time PMI user:

1. PMI can be used at all education levels.
2. Explain to students why you want them to write PMI.
3. Give them examples how to write PMI. You may allow students to do this in their mother language first. Then gradually shift the writing to English or another target language.
4. Students have to provide their names and student numbers, date each entry, and they have to write out their opinions under the PMI with readable handwriting. They may well omit a column they do not have any comment on by marking –.
5. PMI can be written on a piece of paper or a note pad. Students can also use both sides of A4 paper to write as much as they want. The length of the PMI also depends on the teacher's consideration (e.g. time, comments, and evaluation).
6. Students can be creative (a relevant cartoon, design, animation, etc. could be added), and young children can draw or choose emoticons to suit each category.
7. The PMI should be written/given right after class so that the feedback is fresh and direct. You can give students 5 - 7 minutes before the class ends to do it and then return it to you right away.
8. The frequency of PMI use should be flexible, but you have to be consistent so that the feedback can be observed, evaluated,

and made use of as a useful reflection of the class development.

9. The teacher has to answer every question that students ask in their PMI. They appreciate constructive comments and the teacher's suggestions.

The Author

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