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Promoting Advocacies in an ESL Classroom in the Philippines: Insights from an Action Research Project

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Introduction

The promotion of 21st century skills requires learners to gain relevant experiences to build on competencies to become actively engaged citizens. In the case of English language classrooms where skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking are enhanced, educators are prompted to go beyond their current classroom contexts by incorporating social issues in their lessons. However, institutional constraints, lack of resources, and misinterpretation of curricular goals pose challenges in implementing worthwhile projects. Moreover, current curricular innovations require educational institutions to pursue projects that entail the use of technology and multimodal skills to develop learners' responsiveness to the challenges of globalization. This paper presents insights from an action research project with college students taking a course in purposive communication. It argues that the promotion of advocacies can be achieved through tasks focused on meaningful use of language and multimodality in context, sustained engagement through other sectors of society, and capitalizing on diversity as a resource

Global concerns such as environmental destruction, unequal distribution of resources among communities, fake news, and mental health are some of the issues confronting students of the present generation. While classrooms have become more sophisticated due to the incorporation of 21st-century skills, technology use, and different modalities of learning, educators face great challenges in creating conditions for teaching students who are critically aware of the global concerns mentioned earlier (Mambu, 2011). Curricular reforms in different educational systems around the world have emphasized the need to develop lessons that incorporate social issues. Considering that English language lessons are not only aimed at developing needed competencies in communication, it is equally essential that learners develop English language skills to produce counterdiscourses (Pennycook, 2017; Valdez, 2012). That is, since critical pedagogy emphasizes engagement with greater social issues, counterdiscourses help learners participate in resisting dominant discourses that reflect problematic assumptions about society. For instance, the use of advocacy campaigns in raising awareness about different social issues such as race, class, gender, and other local and global concerns (Canagarajah, 1999; Hestres, 2017) reflect the need for

critical awareness and transformative action. In addition, Janks (2010) proposed a framework that critical literacy projects stem from the notion of dominance and as such, access to resources, which can be a challenge for community members. Therefore, educators who seek to challenge marginalization must view solutions from a diverse set of perspectives.

Given these points, we view that promoting advocacies through critical pedagogy and action research are suitable approaches in examining the ways learners and teachers engage meaningfully in social issues locally and globally. As a progressive movement, critical pedagogy is an approach to education that requires meaningful dialogue, a questioning stance, and transformative projects (Freire, 2000). Teachers who advocate critical pedagogy see students as partners in the learning process. Hence, dialogic communication is constantly observed to negotiate meaningful input that is not only relevant academically, but also in the immediate contexts of the stakeholders. Moreover, critical pedagogy promotes a questioning environment. That is, it encourages teachers and learners to interrogate questionable assumptions about social issues. More importantly, advocates of critical pedagogy believe that the approach is successful if stakeholders pursue worthwhile projects that intend to bring about transformation in their respective communities. In relation to our approach, the project draws insights from a wider action research project in teaching 21st-century skills in communication classes. As Dowling and Brown (2012) have forwarded, action research is an approach to practitioner research that focuses on solving problems resulting in improvements in various fields. In education, it focuses primarily on solving problems in the classroom. As a recursive process, it involves processes such as needs analysis, formulation, and testing of interventions, and evaluating the interventions effectivity (Tripp, 2005). Given the salient points from critical pedagogy and action research, the present investigation uses infographic designs to promote different advocacies deemed suitable for various community problems. The advocacies, in turn, helped students use language and multimodal resources strategically, sustain meaningful interaction with community members, and approach problems from a diverse set of perspectives.

In the Philippine context, the implementation of the K-12 curriculum and the impact of the ASEAN integration has resulted in major changes in the scope of educational content. One of the major changes in the tertiary level is the reduction of general education courses in college. With a decongested curriculum at the college level, a content-focused course called purposive communication is offered in all universities. One of the competencies of the course is the inclusion of social issues in the lessons. Specifically, the inclusion of the Sustainable Development Goals (henceforth, SDGs) espoused by the United Nations is one feature that grounds the development of the course. Further, capitalizing on the 21st-century learning skills, the teaching of purposive communication employs the use of technology in developing advocacies highlighting these SDGs. The present paper reports findings from an action research project that documents the development of advocacy projects in a purposive communication course conducted in a tertiary level institution in the Philippines. It argues that the promotion of advocacies can be achieved through tasks focused on meaningful use of language and multimodality in context, sustained engagement through other sectors of society, and capitalizing on diversity as a resource.

Method

For this study, forty-four (44) college students pursuing a business degree from a private university were tapped to be participants. Business degree students are required to take purposive communication, one of the core subjects offered in the general education curriculum. The course intends to equip learners with the necessary communication skills in engaging with multidisciplinary tasks, allowing learners to explore different advocacy projects anchored on the UN SDG. In the implementation of the project, activities such as public forums, lectures, and discussions from relevant readings were held to allow students to gain a deeper understanding of the SDGs such as No Poverty, Quality Education, Sustainable Cities and Communities, and Life Below Water among others.

In this action research project, different ways of how advocacies could be communicated through infographic materials were documented. Several steps were undertaken throughout the implementation of the project.

First, students were asked to identify and share their favorite infograph about a particular social issue. Then, a lecture on designing infographics was given, highlighting the favorable practices in effectively forwarding advocacy through visual information. With the understanding of these practices, the students, together with the teacher, designed a rubric that focuses on the following components: Content, Composition, Creativity, and Format.

In designing the infographic, students were tasked to select a specific advocacy. Several sessions were allotted to outline the purpose of the advocacy, identify its target audience, and strategize the course of action. Students were tasked to gather statistics and information from credible sources in preparing their infograph. The importance of citing their sources was emphasized. They were reminded to formulate hashtags to facilitate the promotion of their causes. When the students satisfied these requirements, they were instructed to share their initial outputs in the private Facebook group of the class for peer evaluation. Comments given by their classmates observed the initially agreed-upon rubric.

The students were given the opportunity to present and explain their infographic materials in class. The teacher provided additional feedback to further guide the students in revising their outputs before the final submission. After accomplishing the project, students were tasked to write reflective pieces sharing their insights and learning throughout the infographic-making process.

Results and Discussion

Based on the infographic materials, reflective pieces, as well as interaction in the online platform, three elements were identified: infographic materials in promoting advocacies sensitizes learners on the use of language and multimodality in context; infographic materials allow them to sustain engagement in society; and finally, these materials capitalize on diversity as a resource. The following sections show these specific points.

Use of Language and Multimodality in Context

Since 21st century learners should be equipped with the necessary skills in communication, the focus should go beyond language. Learners need to deploy other multimodal resources afforded by communication technology to express meaning in a more effective fashion (Navera et al., 2019). In the following examples, the advocacy infographics show the strategic deployment of language and other multimodal resources. In Figure 1, the infographic Garbage Island has three parts: background of the problem, its causes, and possible solutions. For the background of the problem, the infographic shows an image of an island filled with garbage and is supplemented with statistics in terms of the rank of a city (Paranaque) in waste production. For the cause of the problem, the infographic illustrates the kinds of garbage disposed of by people. For the third part, members of the community are invited to take part in the advocacy by joining monthly city cleanups. In terms of using language, not only are the keywords used to emphasize critical awareness of the problem, but also the steps that can be undertaken to help in alleviating the effects of poor garbage disposal. With regard to multimodal resources, the use of images, color texts, varieties of fonts, and hashtags helped in strengthening the message of the infographic. Specifically, the use of a variety of fonts and colored texts (as seen in the words WASTE and 3rd) helps emphasize the extent of the problem in the community as well as call to specific actions (as seen in the phrase Monthly Cleanups). These direct readers to specific information related to the advocacy. Moreover, the use of the hashtag #LinisPinas (clean the Philippines) increases the communicative potential of the infographic as this can be shared through different social media platforms to expand the potential participation of other stakeholders to take part in the advocacy.
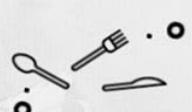
Figure 1. Garbage Island.

Sustained Engagement in Society

The power of promoting advocacies lies in its sustained engagement with members of society. This is in keeping with the notion of dialogue with the members of the community since advocacies capitalize on partnerships with concerned groups. In Figure 2a, two students created Fire Preparedness, an infographic focusing on the presentation of steps to undertake before, during, and after a fire. In addition, current statistics on incidents of fire in the city are included. However, the community in which this poster was shared with commented that this needed to be written in the mother tongue in order for it to be understood. As a result, a corresponding translation was provided (as seen in Figure 2b). In addition, subsequent drafts of the infographic also show the strategic organization of the images resulting in a more reader-friendly output. While English language classes may be interpreted as a venue that only uses English, projects such as these help learners adjust to the demands of the community, prompting them to draw on other linguistic/multimodal resources to express their communicative intent.
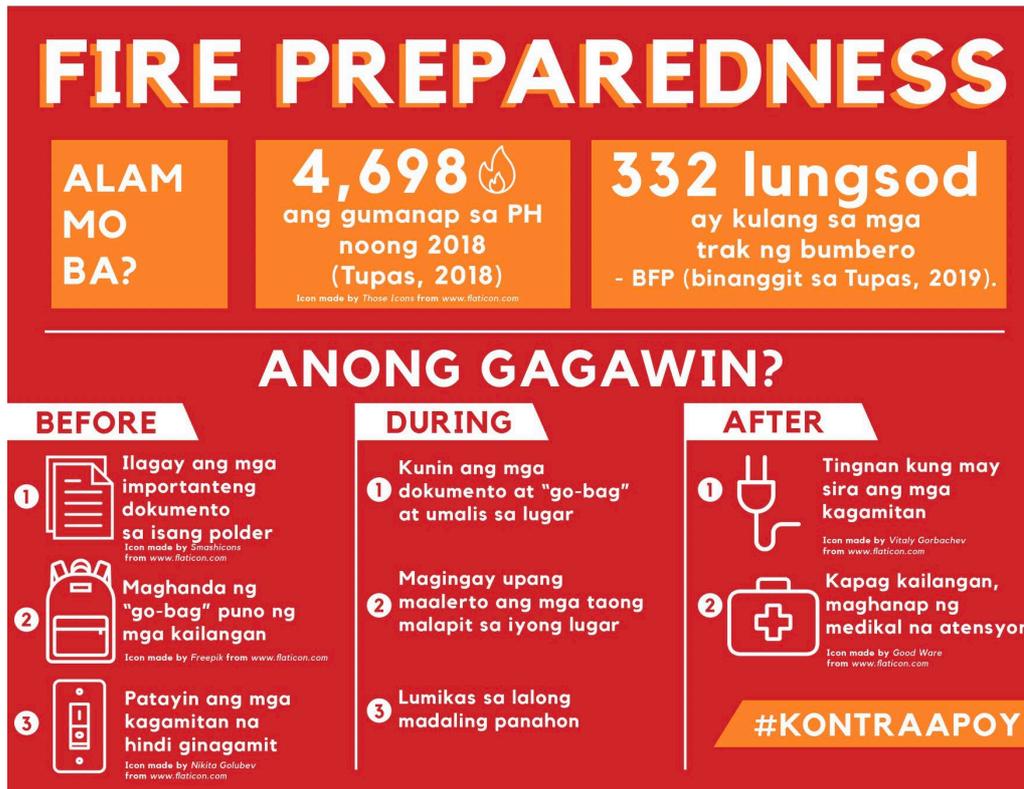
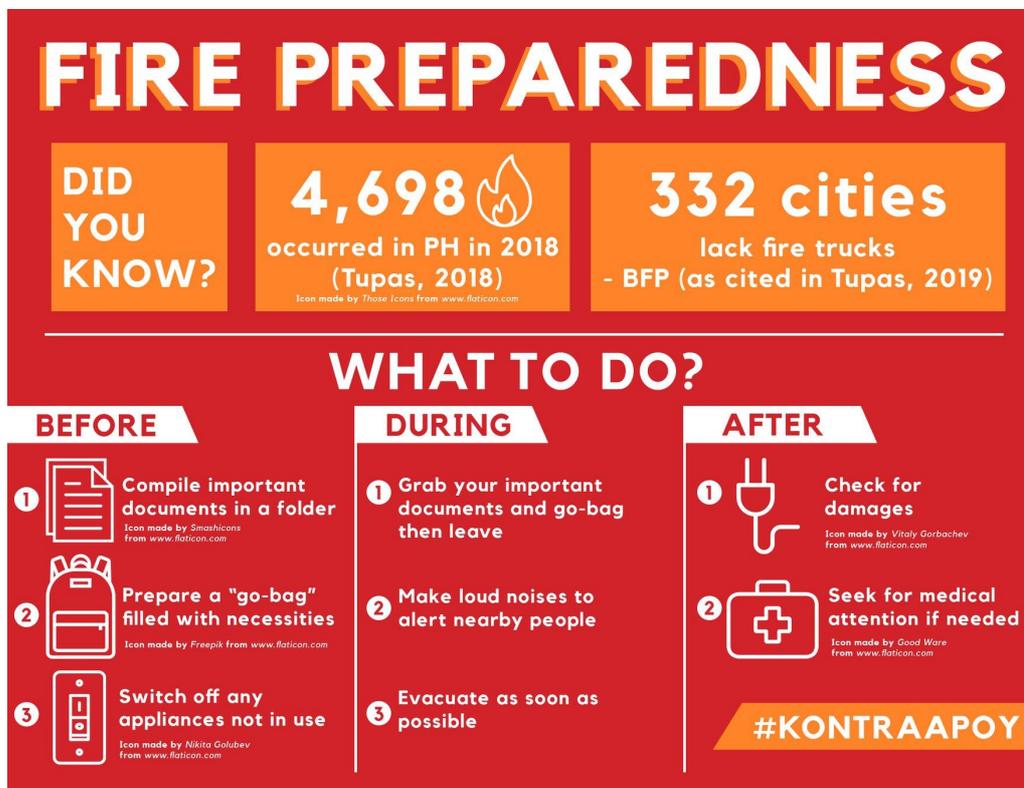*Figure 2a.* Fire preparedness infographic (Output after consultation with community members).

Figure 2b. Fire preparedness infographic.

Capitalizing on Diversity as a Resource

While language classes provide tasks that reflect real-life communication situations, developing infographic materials that reflect problematic realities is essential in any advocacy. Moreover, since classrooms recognize the inherent power of diversity as a resource (Canagarajah, 2012), advocacies can help sensitize learners to view problems and formulate solutions from a multi/interdisciplinary perspective. In Figure 3, another pair of students created an infographic that illustrates the problem of victim-blaming in sexual-related cases of abuse. Statistics of sexually abused women and the possible reasons why certain cases are not pursued (shame, lack of awareness, impact on self-esteem, and victim-blaming) are presented. Since sexual abuse is premised on notions of power and dominance between genders, this form of oppression occurs in many contexts. As such, sexual abuse is a multidisciplinary concern because it involves the legal, mental/physical, and social welfare of women. In turn, this can be addressed through a variety of ways from the use of social media (technology), educational initiatives, and mental health programs. Further, as can be seen, the aforementioned means in addressing sexual abuse is not confined to a single agency or entity, but rather all members of the community are encouraged to take part in the advocacy. As regards technology use, the infographic mainly uses Facebook as its platform, and for ease of searching or accessing the infographic, a hashtag (#HearForYou2) is used. This facilitates better promotion of advocacy. Second, the use of data from the National Demographic and Health Survey shows the extent of the problem of sexual abuse that calls for urgent action. Finally, the emphasis on "victim-blaming" shows the need for people to reconsider their perspectives regarding sexual abuse because of its impact on the mental well-being of victims. Since social media is a powerful tool that can easily elicit unfounded judgments, the infographic reminds its viewers that support through listening before judging is needed.

Figure 3. Victim blaming infographic.

Based on the aforementioned observations, the following insights were drawn:

First, the use of language and multimodality in designing infographic material allows students to be creative and highlight what they perceive to be important to capture the attention of their target audience and achieve the purpose of their advocacy. Since an infographic material is concise, the messages imparted should be encapsulated in a very appealing manner. Moreover, the task allows learners to project ideas with a specific target; the language style, format, and even placement of multimodal elements lead to an authentic text which can be used by other community members (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Harrison & Prado, 2019).

Second, sustained engagement through other sectors of society enables students to develop critical awareness as languages have the power to be inclusive and can ultimately reach a wide audience. Based on the results, it can be said that an effective advocacy is clearly expressed through languages that can be understood by its audience (Mambu, 2011).

Third, capitalizing on diversity as a resource provides an opportunity for students to incorporate other disciplines in promoting awareness and solutions to social issues. In keeping with the multidisciplinary approach that the current curriculum wishes to inculcate among students, tasks such as developing infographic materials allow them to engage with social issues through a variety of perspectives. Also, the use of technology like social media as a platform in promoting their infographic materials proves to be timely and effective as it is very practical and accessible to almost everyone. In keeping with critical pedagogy's principle of active engagement, the agency of students in selecting their advocacies is important because this allows teachers to provide them with activities that would elicit positive responses (Mante-Estacio & Ugalingan, 2018). In addition, the tasks allow learners to see the value of what they are doing, hence, motivating them to be intentional and committed to their output. Moreover, committing to advocacies prompts teachers to guide learners in being critical with facts and information since infographic materials are shared across different channels.

Conclusion

Actively engaging in social issues comes in various forms – some advocacy groups invest in talks, workshops, and projects. However, before these initiatives come into fruition, proper research and information dissemination are required. English language teachers are in a prime position to help students find their voices amidst the marketplace of ideas. In fact, teachers in English language classrooms are encouraged to go beyond honing the macro skills of their students and extend the scope of their lessons to include socially-relevant issues.

This research has found that the interplay of language use and multimodality in context, sustained engagement, and diversity are instrumental in the creation of accurate and effective infographic materials that promote different advocacies relevant to the community. Given that this action research project is part of a wider investigation, several directions can be pursued. First, teachers can develop tasks that can engage learners in developing other advocacy materials using different media and platforms (e.g., video, blogs, tweets). Second, schools can encourage greater participation among community members in developing materials in promoting different advocacies. Third, since critical pedagogy aims at capitalizing on the participation of different stakeholders in the community, researchers can see the development of advocacy projects afforded by diverse voices in order to be heard.

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