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Tracking ESL Students

A major multicultural issue facing college instructors is how to deal with the increasing numbers of students whose home language is not English. These students typically finish an intensive ESL program, pass the TOEFL and enter regular or on-line classrooms where they face difficulties with academic English. This presentation will discuss and propose some solutions, which include higher TOEFL requirements, transition courses and orientation programs.

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Introduction

A major multicultural issue facing college English instructors is how to deal with the increasing numbers of students whose home language is not English. A common question is what drives the course choices for language minority students? Do they take the courses they need for a good education? Or do they try to avoid those classes that have a large written component?

1. The Problem as Reported in the Literature

Students who have just exited ESL programs or who have not done ESL or the TOEFL may feel submerged. This is the typical "sink or swim" model of L2 acquisition. Students are placed in regular classrooms with no language support. The theory is that students will just pick up English by being around it. This theory has a design flaw however as reported by Clair (1994):

Although intuitively appealing, this hypothesis is based on naive notions of language proficiency within a school context, lacks research support, and disregards the importance of first language in second language acquisition.(Clair, 1994, p. 5)

In regular classes, the predominant activity in mainstream classes is teacher-led discussion, but ESL learners have particular trouble understanding input that is sarcastic, ironic or contained puns. Learners are also frustrated with teachers who speak fast or who often departed from the topic at hand.

One student said of a teacher who frequently digressed and talked about his Navy days, "I don't want to spend my time to listen to something I don't understand...When my words come through my brain, and I couldn't, like, have time for me to understand? And then, when I take the time to understand, then he is speaking another stuff" (Harklau, 1994, p. 249).

Regular teachers often seemed to be at a loss in dealing with L2 learners' grammatical and vocabulary errors. They lacked the linguistics background that would let them explain to the learners why their language was wrong. In this case, they ignored the students' errors. On one paper, the teacher wrote, "Syntax needs work-you lose clarity because of your expression"(260). Another teacher told the student, "Just don't write too long in one sentence" (261). Submersion does not lead to proficiency as some advocates think. Mere exposure to the language may facilitate rudimentary social communicative skills, but it is not sufficient for the acquisition of academic language skills. The L2 input in this situation is not comprehensible. The result will be a pidgin or an interlanguage.

There are the three basic demands placed upon the second language (L2) student:

1 .Interactional demands: The ability to comprehend and participate in the social demands of the classroom and the school. The knowledge of the norms to initiate, sustain and close communication with teachers, staff and other students. Norms of turn taking, following the appropriate behavior and demonstrating knowledge.

2. Instructional-task demands: These require the ability to grasp the nature of learning and classroom work and are present across the curriculum. There are 4 essential tasks 1) memory, 2) procedural or routine tasks, 3) comprehension/understanding and 4) opinion.

3. Cognitive demands: These require the ability to assimilate concepts and schemata that are essential to different school subjects. There are two key areas: 1) assimilating concepts and information according to subject area and 2) using and understanding the language employed and modes of inquiry within the subject area.(For example-each subject area has a " jargon.") The term "minority rights" will be understood by US born students but L2 speakers may understand the term differently.

2. The problem as observed at ERAU

Here are some notes from instructors who had internationals in college courses:

Due to the different cultural attitudes, it was very stressful for me as their instructor. Many ESL students do not think they need to abide by any time set or deadlines. Many are very argumentative. Some feel that they don't need to do the complete assignments, they feel part is good enough. I am sure that for the students learning these sets of rules may be difficult. I told them that college is preparing them for the "real world" and they have to take responsibility for what they "do" or don't "do".

I feel that instructors need a short workshop on how to approach these students and what methods of teaching have been successful in the past.

(Phil Jacowitz, Instructor, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Personal communication, October 1, 2001)

The good news is that many of my international students perform very well in my classes. Indeed, over the years I have come to expect the highest grades in my classes to be assigned to international students who have reached that level via "objective" type tests. The bad news is that some of my international students are clannish. This can be both a social and a class-related concern. In terms of the latter, outside assignments that are supposed to be completed by the individual may, in fact, be accomplished by the group.

(Dr. Jim Libbey, professor Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, (Personal communication, October 1, 2001)

International students are a gift to my 345 class as they tend to come from or have experience with other religions. The only problems they have are with their language deficiencies. Cultural issues are rare because they have already adjusted and are very open.

(Dr. Nancy Parker, Acting Chair, Humanities Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, (Personal communication, October 1, 2001)

3. Problems with Reading and Culture

The Importance of Background Knowledge and Culture

Language and culture are intertwined, and the question of cultural bias in reading often arises. Some would like to purge cultural content from all teaching, but culture is a part of life and students need to understand the cultural implications of reading material whether they agree with

it or not. Language and culture are connected and are dimensions of each other. "Language, in fact, both reflects and affects one's world view, serving as a sort of road map to how one perceives, interprets and thinks about, and expresses one's view of the world." (Fantini, 1997, p. 4) The teacher is a cultural resource especially if one is a native speaker teacher. Here are some comments from international students referring to teachers:

[They represent] their country's culture from the way they speak down to the way they use their fork (Barratt & Kontra, 2000, p. 20).

Reading is a difficult matter. Even when students know the meanings of the separate words, they may not get the meaning of the text. Many factors are involved in reading: readers' familiarity with conventions of written texts in L1 and L2, awareness of cultural differences and awareness of the structures in the text. Added to this mix is the emerging concept of interculturalism which is a knowledge of, rather than acceptance of, the new culture as contrasted to biculturalism where the learners adopt the new culture (McKay, 2000, p. 8).

...English today is being used globally by bilingual speakers, who have chosen not to internalize the norms of native-English speaking countries (10).

English is perceived to be culturally neutral and "...provides the basis for promoting cross-cultural understanding in an increasingly global village" (11).

Cultural understanding and background knowledge are indeed significant factors affecting reading performance. In fact, non-native students who have reading difficulties may not have a reading problem as much as a background knowledge deficit. Earlier practices viewed reading as deriving meaning from print without recognizing the full importance of background knowledge. Reading is interactive, and the knowledge that readers bring to the process is as important as the information found in the text (Melendez & Pritchard, 1985, p. 399). Current research into "schema theory" shows that students interact positively with material whose content is familiar even though the language may not be. A familiar frame of reference is vital to comprehension. This is "an interactive model of reading, which maintains that the background knowledge readers bring to the reading act is as important as the information residing in the text" (Melendez & Pritchard, 1985, p. 399). The teacher needs to ask if the learners have prior knowledge of the subject or a related one. When the schema includes a whole event such as a trip or process, a chain of events is recalled in the reader's mind concerning the situation (Hadley, 200x, p. 147). An unfamiliar situation such as a reading on lasers may be difficult if the students are not from a scientific background. A solution would be to bring in related technology, i.e. television, microwaves or even CD players, which work on the laser principle.

Specific Cultural Considerations

A passage may be linguistically understood, but the real meaning may depend upon a cultural concept, a common proverb or saying for example, that the language learner may not fully comprehend (Pfister & Poser, 1987, p. 3).

Readers have certain expectations about text structure held over from home language. When they can not identify what they are reading, they tend to formulate their own schemata. "Any one individual's interpretation of a message will be heavily influenced by his or her personal history, interests, preconceived ideas, and cultural background" (Hadley, 200x, p. 148). If students understand a text's structure, they can use it to guess unfamiliar words.

Types of texts and tone

Tone refers to how the author appears to the readers and how he feels about the topic. The writer's word choice needs to match his tone. A memo to technicians would be direct and no-nonsense while a memo to customers would be upbeat and enthusiastic. Tone lets the reader know the author's attitude and feelings. A few words that describe tone: admiring, sarcastic, flattering, angry, frightened, humorous, praising, worried, ironic, cruel, etc. The common levels of register discussed earlier are part of the overall tone. For example the dialogue in Mark Twain's short stories is informal with a lot of regional slang. (See Twain's short stories for examples of informal western slang mixed with formal speech.)

The following is from a reading skills book and is used to illustrate a "scornful" tone. What are the cultural considerations?

Spam-that slimy canned pork product-is surprisingly still around after more than fifty years. Despite its high fat content (more than three and a half teaspoons per two-ounce serving) and high calorie count (171 calories per serving), more than four billion cans have been sold since 1937. Spam's greasy, rubbery consistency and salty flavor have made it the butt of may jokes-such as David Letterman's suggestion of Spam-on-a-rope for people who want to eat and shower at the same time....(Langan, 1997, p. 298)

In addition to the obvious theme of "Spam", the author refers to items common to North American culture such as a TV talk show, obsession with fat and calories and the popular soap-on-a-rope-products.

English courses often require students to analyze the tone of a passage and to use different tones in their own writing. Other courses, sciences such as, biology or physics for example, have their own systems for presenting information that include style, tone and specialized vocabulary. Learners need to be able to differentiate between the sub cultural styles in order to fully comprehend (Dubin & Bycina, 1991, p. 200).

Cultures are powerful human creations, affording their members a shared identity, a cohesive framework for selecting, constructing and interpreting perceptions, and for assigning value and meaning in constant fashion...things that fit into this cultural framework are given the labels "human nature," "instinct," "common sense," "logic." Things that don't fit are different, and therefore either illogical, immoral, nonsensical, or the result of a naïve and inferior stage of development of "human nature" (Galloway, 1992, p. 88).

Realize that for some items there are no equivalents. For example humor may not cross the language barrier. Students otherwise competent in English may feel left out when jokes go over their heads.

Help students realize that their view of the world is culturally bound, and both teachers and learners need to begin to appreciate the different cultural frameworks used to perceive the world (Hadley, 2001, p. 383).

4. Suggested Solutions

A: Orientation and Transition Programs

The "adjunct model" can serve as a transitional orientation course for L2 students already enrolled in an academic program. A related ESL support course is set up that helps students develop their academic English skills using material from the regular class or classes that they are taking (Iancu, 1993, p. 20). Combining ESL courses such as reading, grammar, writing, communication and study skills-note-taking with a regular course allows the students to see what academic courses are like while they are working on language skills. In addition, since the language material is taken from the academic course, it provides a transition from the sheltered environment of an ESL institute or school-based ESL class to the regular classroom with native speakers. Another advantage is that it allows the content instructor to teach without worrying about non-native speakers who may have difficulty and even fail because of language problems. In one program in Oregon, students with 450 TOEFL level enrolled in the paired content/ESL classes. Professors were then able to view the ESL students in their classes more as a source of enrichment through diversity than as an impediment to classroom interaction since the adjunct class addressed the language problems and allowed the ESL teacher to review and restate material (Iancu, 1993, p. 22). This model also helps develop relationships across disciplines on campus and provides encouragement to students to continue their studies in a major field. They get immediate intellectual nourishment when they take the introductory adjunct courses in the humanities and social sciences (Sudermann & Cisar, 1992, p. 296). Students working with content material are motivated more than they would be with the typical ESL materials alone. In

addition content-based instruction increases learners' self-confidence and cultural literacy in addition to their language proficiency (Leaver & Stryker, 1989, p. 273). A strong network of tutors for both writing and content area is also helpful.

Such a course takes careful planning and coordination with the departments involved. For example, while the content instructor is presenting an overview of the course and introducing terminology, the ESL instructor can cover definitions and introduce study skills such as listening and note-taking and academic reading. (Snow & Brinton, 1988, p. 559).

Student Comments. The following are student comments on the Freshman Summer Program at the University of California at Los Angeles where they attended paired content area and ESL courses:

"FSP gave me an edge in fall quarter. I knew roughly what to expect at UCLA."

"I grew up more mature after spending seven weeks in FSP and was very confident to work hard to overcome all the barriers."

"Knowing where to get help, tutoring, and to set aside time to talk to professors. Time management was also

a great benefit." (Snow & Brinton, 1988, p. 564)

B: ESL Sections

Some colleges offer a series of ESL writing classes to assist L2 students who are making the transition from SL to regular classes. Students enroll in a series of courses similar to the 'college prep' or "fundamentals" courses offered to the native speakers who are weak in their reading and writing skills. These courses are taught by ESL instructors and use texts designed for ESL students or college prep texts supplemented by teacher-made handouts.

Once students have finished these prerequisite courses, they take special sheltered sections of college composition and literature courses which are taught by trained ESL specialists. The requirements are the same as in the regular sections, but the books and supplemental materials are designed for international students and contain extra work in grammar and style. These courses may be supplemented by a lab section or a writing/tutoring center.

C: Textbooks and Aids

More and more “mainstream texts are including sections for the ESL writer. For example, *Keys For Writers*, a popular handbook, has notes for ESL students scattered throughout the text., and it contains a section for ESL writers from pages 403-434 that address topics such as “Cultural, rhetorical and linguistic differences... verbs followed by an infinitive...verbs followed by –ing” (Raimes, 2002).

Another text, *Focus* (Campbell, 1996), designed for college prep courses, includes an ESL appendix called “Tips for ESL Students” (pp. 278-284). Even the non-ESL sections look at times like an ESL text as *Focus* provides conjugations of simple present (p. 116) simple past and “to be” pp. 122-123) and exercises that resemble those found in ESL texts (p. 127).

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