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Providing Effective Instruction to ESL Students in the Classroom

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Introduction

This article aims at addressing some challenges teachers face due to the growing number of Michigan students whose first language is other than English. The teachers whom we meet at workshops and conferences often express frustration at the absence of adequate training in the area of second language literacy in teacher preparation programs. The following pages may be of some help to all those who sometimes wonder whether their pedagogical practices best meet the needs of English as a Second Language (ESL) students in their classrooms.

Linguistic Considerations

Second language learning is a very complex and not fully understood process that occurs in a social and cultural context. The ESL students you may have in your classroom most likely come from quite diverse linguistic, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, which affect their attitudes, performance, and, to a large degree, their success in school. In spite of this rich diversity, all ESL students share common patterns in learning language and culture with which teachers may want to become familiar.

Students who are new to the United States inevitably go through the initial stages of culture shock as they try to reconcile the cultural patterns brought from their homes with the unfamiliar demands of the host culture. The range of issues may vary from unknown foods to different rules for eye contact to views on authority; yet all of them may cause stress and feelings of alienation as problems occur on a daily basis (Foster, 1962; Lambert, 1967; Adler, 1972). Since students seldom speak English at this stage, the chances for clarifying misunderstandings are limited. Although students, stressed and overwhelmed, usually learn little English during the initial stage of culture shock, once they familiarize themselves with the new environment, they embark on the process of learning the English language.

While there are many competing theories of second language acquisition (Ellis, 2000) some notions are commonly accepted by experts and may prove helpful to classroom teachers. One such concept is *interlanguage,* a term introduced by Selinker (1972) to refer to one's knowledge and usage of a second language. According to Selinker, at any given time, your ESL students will be using their target language (English) by producing grammatical forms that sometimes reflect the structures of their native languages; at other times, students may create truly novel forms, neither present in English nor in their mother tongue. It is important to understand that both types of errors are the signs of progress as the students move toward

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higher proficiency in English. This complex process occurs in stages and, though appropriate instruction accelerates learning, it does not necessarily alter the developmental stages through which students pass as they learn a new language.

ESL students tend to make specific types of errors reflecting the differences between their native languages and English. Such errors may occur in the area of pronunciation, e.g., Korean students' mispronunciation of *r* and *l*. These two separate sounds in English are considered two versions of the same sound in Korean where the pronunciation of one or the other depends on the surrounding sounds. Spanish speakers pronounce such words as "school," "special," and "student" with a vowel sound at the beginning of the word, since initial clusters /sk/, /sp/, and /st/ do not exist in Spanish. Quite often the omission of inflectional suffixes, e.g., the past tense suffix *ed*, reflects the lack of similar grammatical features in the native tongue, as may be the case for Chinese speakers. Syntactic errors are also common, as is well illustrated by the utterance "cheese cream" instead of "cream cheese" in the speech of one speaker of a Slavic language whose mother tongue does not permit the use of a noun as an adjective.

Many difficulties encountered by English language learners are universal and shared by students regardless of their linguistic background.

In addition to pronunciation and grammar, ESL students make vocabulary errors that reflect semantic features found in their first language. Consider this pair of false friends: the English adjective "actual" and the Polish adjective "aktualny" meaning "current" rather than "real." It is easy to see why Polish learners of English tend to misuse the word "actual."

As the above examples illustrate, quite a few errors result from first language interference with English. Many difficulties encountered by English language learners are universal and shared by students regardless of their linguistic background. These challenges stem from the fact that many structures in English, as well as in other languages, are utilized in a highly arbitrary fashion. Even if some rules govern their usage, numerous exceptions to these rules exist thus making any systematic instruction difficult, if not impossible. Let us take a closer look at some of the culprits responsible for the on-going frustration of both ESL students and their teachers.

Let us start with prepositions that tend to be misused even by otherwise perfectly fluent ESL speakers. While some patterns in their usage can be teased out through painstaking linguistic analysis, such investigations would be of little help to classroom teachers facing the dilemma of how to respond to a great number of preposition errors in ESL students' writing. There are at least three reasons why prepositions are such a nuisance. First, since they are function words that describe time and space relations between nouns, they do not have any tangible meanings of their own; thus, they are difficult to learn. This difficulty is hardly helped by the fact that they tend to be one-syllable words and, as such, they do not draw much attention. In addition, their usage varies greatly from one language to another (e.g., in English we borrow *from* someone, while in French we borrow *to* someone—"emprunter *a* quelqu'un"). Finally, even within English, the same preposition may have many different meanings depending on the context. Consider the following sentence and try to guess all the possible meanings of the preposition *for*: "John went to Atlanta *for* his brother." At least three options are readily available: "to get his brother," "instead of his brother," "because his brother asked him to." It is evident from the above examples that learning the use of prepositions poses a challenge to ESL students.

The next set of structures causing great frustration is articles. Equally inconspicuous and without a tangible meaning of their own, they are one of the most commonly misused items by English language learners, especially if their native tongue does not possess articles. It is likely their usage is widely different from that of English articles; for example, French requires the use of the definite article when English does not: *la* Suisse, but *Switzerland*. As with preposi-

tions, the use of articles is quite arbitrary within English itself. Compare: "I have *a* cold" vs. "I have t*he* flu." "Why am I more familiar with my flu than with my cold?" an ESL student may ask.

Last, but not least, on our list of culprits are phrasal verbs, such as *give up, give in, put up, put off,* and the like. Quite easy to use for English native speakers, they constitute a formidable challenge for ESL students, as their verbal particles can be mistaken for prepositions and their meanings taken literally. It is not uncommon for ESL learners to write at the bottom of the page or board when they are asked to "write something *down.*"

> *The teacher must always be alert to opportunities for students to interact with the language in ways they can understand.*

While many other structures of the English language may pose serious problems for ESL students, we have focused in this section on prepositions, articles, and phrasal verbs since they have one important feature in common: Their usage cannot be sufficiently explained by existing grammatical rules and, therefore, evades systematic instruction. Their acquisition requires time and multiple exposures to rich, contextualized language. In some cases, errors may never disappear completely. Knowing those facts helps us shape our instruction and assessment of English language learners and makes our expectations more realistic.

Second Language Learning Considerations

Several factors are important for teachers to be aware of if they are to work most effectively with ESL populations. First is the need to understand the difference between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1984). BICS refers to the everyday oral language that students use in their day-to-day, face-to-face communication with others. It is highly contextualized through the use of gestures, intonation, and opportunity for ongoing clarification. This language, often referred to as "playground" language, develops relatively quickly in ESL students—from 1 to 2 years (Cummins, 1984).

CALP, on the other hand, refers to the language necessary for success in the academic studies of school. This language, of a far more decontextualized nature, takes from 5 to 7 years or more to develop (Cummins, 1984). This is the language of classroom lectures, textbooks, and academic activities that students need to master if they are to have successful experiences in school.

Another factor, which Krashen (1985) has proposed is essential for language acquisition, is "comprehensible input." This is the level of language that students are capable of comprehending but which is slightly beyond their current level of language development. It is the level at which they are best able to achieve growth in the new language. The implication of this notion is that teachers may need to adjust their language somewhat to accommodate second language speakers through the use of fewer idioms, less complex language structures, and continuous attention to what students are and are not comprehending. The teacher must always be alert to opportunities for students to interact with the language in ways they can understand.

Finally, with regard to language learning issues, it is critical to remember that language is best learned in the context of meaningful content. We know that students need to be highly motivated to learn a second language (Richard-Amato, 1996; Spangenberg-Urbschat & Pritchard, 1994). Kids need to feel they are a part of the culture and that they have an investment in learning. One way to foster that motivation is to provide opportunities for students to practice language in meaningful, real-life situations, not contrived, unnatural language exercises and drills. They need opportunities to interact with more proficient English speakers and they need to communicate real ideas with these speakers. This means that language and real content should be taught together. Language is best learned when speaking about relevant and interesting content that draws students in and develops excitement in learning. Reading books and other

materials that are engaging to students provides the motivation to learn the concepts needed to carry on conversations about these engaging topics.

Oral Language and Literacy Connection

Oral language is the foundation for literacy development. For ESL students, once a foundation of oral language has been established, continued language and literacy development occur simultaneously.

It has been suggested that students first be taught to read and write in their native language, if possible (Garcia, 2000). Literacy skills and strategies will then transfer more easily to the second language. If that is not possible, literacy should be taught only after children have developed some oral language ability in the new language. It is important to remember that, even if students are good readers in their first language, the skills and strategies they know cannot be transferred until and unless they have attained a certain threshold of language knowledge in the second language.

One of the most critical factors that comes into play is that of vocabulary knowledge. Knowing vocabulary with limited understanding of syntax can take one further than understanding syntax with limited vocabulary. The primary consideration when teaching reading needs to be vocabulary development along with background knowledge.

Pedagogical Considerations

Good pedagogy is good pedagogy. Many of the effective practices that teachers routinely implement in their classrooms are appropriate for ESL students, as well. Certain practices should be considered for the second language student in particular.

The findings of several second language researchers (e.g., Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001; Richard-Amato, 1996), together with our own observations, have helped us develop the following suggestions about effective instructional practices. These strategies or procedures can, perhaps, be clustered into four overriding categories: establishing a positive classroom environment; providing comprehensible input; specific language and literacy tips; and assessment issues.

Establishing a positive classroom environment

With regard to providing a positive classroom context, the following suggestions should be considered:

- Establish predictable routines during the class day to reduce student anxiety.
- Label the classroom with English (and, when possible, bilingual) signs.
- Teach ways to ask for clarification. Develop signals for students to use if they are confused, or when they wish to participate.
- Provide a sensitive buddy or mentor for ESL students to help them through the day and show them the ropes.
- Set up partner work or small group cooperative learning activities; students need the chance to share ideas and help each other understand.
- Allow students to rehearse their thinking and their language by talking in pairs or small groups before being asked to speak in front of the whole class.
- Allow students time to pre-read, silently, prior to oral reading.
- Let students discuss or write about new concepts in their native language, and encourage them to talk over what they're learning with parents. This will allow them to be experts in teaching their parents.

Providing comprehensible input

Providing comprehensible input for students is a crucial component for language development. To this end, teachers would be wise to attend to the following:

- Begin with the known by teaching to students' strengths. Let them share their culture and provide multicultural and bilingual books to which students can more easily relate.
- Contextualize instruction; use a variety of materials that make learning concrete, make language more comprehensible, and generally enhance comprehension. The use of charts, graphs, pictures, hands-on material, gestures, acting out, demonstrations, etc., can all be used to this end.
- Provide resources that meet your students' interests and ability levels.

- Provide instructional level texts for your students; this may mean having multiple texts available with similar concepts at different levels to accommodate the range of abilities of your students.
- Make text accessible through various means: teacher read-alouds, partner reading, collaborative reading, and books on tape for students to listen to.
- Beware of your use of idioms and American cultural references that may be unknown or confusing to ESL students (e.g., nursery rhymes, Santa Claus, the legend of George Washington and the cherry tree).
- Allow the use of bilingual dictionaries, and show students how to use them effectively.
- Help students realize that all words must be understood in the context in which they are used.
- Use a think-aloud to demonstrate how to recognize unknown words in context.
- Make the task manageable; make sure students understand what is expected. If they need support, provide it. Always model lesson tasks.

Specific language and literacy tips

Vocabulary and background knowledge are two of the most critical needs for successful reading and learning. Where background knowledge is lacking, it must be developed. The following list deals with specific language and literacy tips:

- Identify key concepts and pre-teach important content vocabulary and concepts before students attempt to read or study material in class.
- Provide needed academic language and necessary language functions; important concepts such as "compare," "classify," "synthesize," "persuade," and "evaluate" must be defined and modeled, with examples provided.
- Give students opportunities to use and write about what they know in order to learn. If background knowledge is lacking, it must be developed.
- In writing instruction, focus first on ideas, and second on mechanics. In reading, make sure materials are at the student's instructional level.

- Plan language focus lessons where there is an apparent need (e.g., verb endings, modals, noun plurals, use of possessives, prepositions, articles, comparison words, etc.).
- Provide students with many opportunities for meaningful interaction with the language.

Assessment issues

The final area of instructional practice that teachers need to consider is that of assessment. Not only do we want to know the extent to which students have learned what we have taught, but what to teach next. With that in mind:

- Observe students carefully to ascertain their understanding.
- When assessing students, allow them to demonstrate understanding in a variety of ways. Performance assessment is often more appropriate than a typical test. Remember that every paper and pencil test is a language test!
- Be certain to communicate with parents. Keep them informed about the progress of the student.
- Provide encouragement by offering support and sincere praise. Success enhances motivation and promotes ever-greater success!

Conclusion

Certainly, much of what is done with mainstream students is appropriate for ESL students. Specific considerations for ESL students' success must be kept in mind. It is our hope that we have provided teachers with some concrete suggestions for approaching ESL students in the mainstream classroom. Providing cultural, linguistic and instructional scaffolding will go far in ensuring all students' success.

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