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The Basic Communication Course: Options for Accommodating Non-native Speakers of Mainstream North American English

DONALD L. RUBIN
DONALD TURK

THE demographic composition of U.S. higher education is changing dramatically along a number of dimensions. The steep increase in undergraduates who are not native speakers of mainstream North American Englishes (NNSMNAEs¹) presents particular challenges and opportunities for the teaching of speech communication. The purpose of this paper is to outline the various options for basic speech communication classes as we begin to adapt to the particular needs of those linguistically diverse students who are becoming an increasingly expected part of our clientele. Because students' language backgrounds have most obvious impact on their performance in skills-oriented public speaking classes, and because those classes remain the staple of most programs in communication arts and sciences, we focus here on the introductory class in public speaking.²

A good deal of information points to growing cultural diversity in U.S. colleges and universities, though it is difficult to get a close estimate of the population of NNSMNAEs. For example, from 1988 to 1992 enrollment of undergraduate international students increased by 31% ("College Enrollment by Racial and Ethnic Group," 1994). While many of these international students no doubt have strong English language proficiency, it is telling that over the same period of time, East Asian nations have become more highly represented, whereas Western European nations have become less so (Zikopoulos, 1991). That is, the pool of international students has become markedly less Western in recent years.

Accompanying changes in the population of internationals is a notable increase in non-English dominant U.S. citizens. Between 1982 and 1992, the number of Hispanic undergraduates increased by 83% ("College Enrollment by Racial and Ethnic Group," 1994). Again, some of these U.S. Latinos may not have been NNSMNAEs, but a great many likely were. Moreover, the language situation in the United States has become so complex that

even attempting to pigeon-hole some of our students as native or non-native speakers of English seems like an exercise in arbitrariness. Recently one of us (Rubin) had a conversation with a former graduate student who had just been hired as an assistant professor in the English Department of one of the community college constituents of the City University of New York. This new faculty member is a native speaker of Chinese who earned her doctorate in ESL education. When asked if she was teaching ESL in her new job she replied, "I don't know if I'm teaching ESL. The students have the same kinds of error patterns as ESL students. And they all come from homes where people speak languages other than English—Spanish, Creole, Russian, Vietnamese, or Chinese. But if you ask them, they will tell you that they speak mainly English. They were born in this country, or came when they were very small, and they think of themselves as English speakers. So the classes are not called 'ESL,' but you tell me if I am teaching ESL!" Nero (1995) makes a similar point in describing her students of mainly Caribbean backgrounds as "not quite ESL."

As a result of the ensuing ethnic diversity among both international and domestic students, instructors today are faced with a new panorama of pedagogical concerns. For a more thorough analysis of these cross-cultural pedagogical issues than space permits here, see, for example, Powell and Andersen (1994) or Rubin (1994).

In earlier times, we might encounter relatively few NNSMNAEs—whether internationals or U.S. citizens—in our basic speech courses, simply because they were not so populous on most North American college campuses. On those occasions when such students would make their way into our speech classes, quite possibly we would deal with them on an *ad hoc* basis: suggesting they take a non-performance class in interpersonal communication rather than a public speaking class, or accepting an ESL class in speaking and listening in lieu of the basic class in formal oral discourse. In other words, due to the smaller numbers of NNSMNAEs on campus, departments in the past could determine how to accommodate the needs of these students without the directive of a formal policy. Such head-in-the-sand approaches are no longer tenable; the presence of NNSMNAEs on our campuses has become a central (and in our view, welcome) fact of college and university life. Koester & Lustig (1991) express a similar position, arguing that the pedagogical imperative for adapting to international and multicultural students in speech communication is reinforced by our need to develop interpersonal and rhetorical theory which can be generalized beyond the illusory hegemony of Western practices. It is not our purpose in this paper to undertake a critique of Western assumptions underlying much communication theory.³ We would merely note that one advantage of working with increased numbers of non-Western students is that it problematizes many of these assumptions, and should, therefore, lend to more tenable theory.

Indeed, our colleagues in English composition have taken a responsive stance in articulating some of the instructional alternatives for teaching first-year writing to non-native speakers. Silva (1994) entertains four options: (1) using developmental studies classes as vehicles for teaching ESL writing; (2) mainstreaming ESL students into conventional first-year composition classes; (3) creating specially adapted writing classes for ESL students only; and (4) creating class sections that systematically integrate ESL and native-English speaking students in courses with a deliberate cross-cultural curriculum. Ultimately, Silva recommends allowing the full range of options for placing NNSMNAE.

Before we, in a parallel fashion, consider options for public speaking instruction for NNSMNAEs, it is worth exploring what kind of history of instruction in oral communication NNSMNAEs are likely to bring to a speech class.

WHAT PRIOR TRAINING DO NNSMNAES BRING TO SPEECH CLASS?

In an exploratory study, we conducted a series of interviews with twelve NNSMNAE students who had enrolled (or who were currently enrolled) in mainstream public speaking courses. This project expanded the focus of Yook and Seiler's (1990) earlier interview study by examining a wider range of nationalities and exploring NNSMNAE's educational histories in greater depth. The interview pool in the present study included students from Denmark, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Japan, Korea, Russia and Venezuela. The interview consisted of open-ended questions designed to prompt the students to make a comparison among oral communication instruction (a) in their native country, (b) in ESL classes, and (c) in North American public speaking classes.

A small percentage of the students reported having informal public speaking experiences in some of their content-area classes (e.g., business class presentations, drama class performances). None of the students had any formal instruction (actual oral presentation classes) in public speaking in their native country. For most of these students, the entire concept of standing up and giving a formal presentation was associated primarily with English language contexts. The findings confirm those of Yook and Seiler (1990).

When NNSMNAE students enter American ESL programs, their initial oral communication needs are usually associated with "everyday world" communication tasks like navigating the campus or the supermarket. Our informants indicated that most of the oral training they received in ESL classes was directed toward these highly pragmatic social exchanges. This observation is confirmed by examining speaking/listening activities found in widely adopted ESL listening/speaking texts. Oral instruction presented in popular ESL texts is activity based and primarily aimed at increasing proficiency in two general areas: conversational skills and problem-solving communication.

The McGraw-Hill *Interactions* (Keller & Thrush, 1987) and *Mosaic* (Ferrer & Whalley, 1990) listening/speaking series, among the most widely used in post-secondary intensive English institutes, exemplify the oral instruction modules that can be found in many ESL speaking-centered texts. The *Interactions* and *Mosaic* programs offer students ways of mastering oral skills primarily through activities with extracurricular emphasis. The *Interactions* "Speaking Activity Series" is an oral communication program for secondary and post-secondary beginning-level students of English as a foreign language. It offers the NNSMNAE a broad view of the English-speaking environment that they are likely to encounter outside the classroom. Emphasizing basic interviewing and social conversation techniques, characteristic topics found in the series include; "Starting Conversations and Telling People You Don't Understand," "Making Emergency Calls," "Conducting a Debate," and "Giving Excuses." The *Interactions* series offers little, if any, instruction in the oral skills necessary for effective academic presentation.

The *Mosaic* listening/speaking program offers NNSMNAE students instruction in study skills and language functions. This instruction is offered mostly in listening activities based on lectures, chapter themes and sample conversations. In the *Mosaic* program, speaking skills are taught in activity sections of the texts entitled "Speak Out." The activities focus mostly on speaking, but they also involve listening to other classmates. The "Speak Out" activities are usually conducted in small-group format, and students are often required to make some elementary presentation of material(s) to the rest the class. "Speak Out" activities offer no instruction regarding the content/organizational aspects of these presentations, however.

It is important to note that the explicit role of pronunciation training in intermediate to advanced ESL series like *Interactions* or *Mosaic* is negligible. In his review of oral language practices in ESL instruction, Murphy (1991) acknowledges that recent trends in communicative language teaching place greater emphasis on developing fluency than on pho-

nological accuracy, even for beginning ESL students. Murphy advocates an integrated approach wherein pronunciation is developed in ESL classrooms primarily in communicative contexts. Murphy's recommendation notwithstanding, it seems most likely that pronunciation training will have been something most NNSMNAE experience as divorced from and more basic than what gets labeled as oral communication instruction in their ESL classes.

In sum, then, it appears that the norm for NNSMNAE will be to approach a basic course in speech communication with little experience in formal public speaking in their native language. They may have had some ESL class activities in giving reports, but most of their oral instruction in ESL will have related to speaking and listening in nonacademic interpersonal contexts. Intensive pronunciation training is probably something they may feel they have completed prior to intermediate and advanced work in oral communication. Against this backdrop of NNSMNAEs' previous exposure to oral communication instruction, communication programs can begin to make informed decisions about placement options.

OPTIONS FOR PLACING NNSMNAES

The Intensive English Program

When NNSMNAEs attempt to enroll in basic public speaking classes, course directors could beg the issue by simply bumping them back to intensive English classes. In most (not all) cases, these classes are housed outside the communication department and are staffed by teachers trained in ESL and applied linguistics, not in rhetoric and communication. Often intensive English classes do not bear credit toward graduation. Invariably this option places NNSMNAEs in an "ESL ghetto" in which they have little opportunity to observe, model, and gain feedback from mainstream native speakers. As indicated earlier in this paper, ESL instruction in oral communication generally focuses on issues of pragmatic or instrumental conversation and idiomatic vocabulary. Only in rare cases do ESL oral communication classes touch on key public speaking issues of invention and preparation, audience analysis, and nonverbal demeanor. For a communication department to select this option, therefore, would be effectively to decline responsibility for teaching the skills of public communication to NNSMNAEs.

Murphy (1992), however, describes a unique transitional course, located within an intensive ESL program, that is specifically designed to prepare NNSMNAEs with prerequisite skills for the basic communication course. Students learn about audience adaptation, techniques for preparation, and delivery. Emphasis is on oral performance, but initially in cooperative learning groups rather than behind a podium. No special provisions would need to be made for NNSMNAEs exiting from such a class into a mainstream public speaking course. Presumably these students would be responsible for the same assignments and held to the same standards as all other students in the same class.

To be sure, it is beyond the ken of most public speaking instructors to help students who need intensive pronunciation training or who lack a basic academic vocabulary. These students do indeed require the resources and expertise available from ESL professionals. On the other hand, basic course directors and instructors must be careful that when referring NNSMNAEs to intensive English programs they do not confuse the criterion of intelligibility with the criterion of precision. Students whose limited English proficiency prevents well-intentioned and attentive listeners from understanding are the legitimate clientele for intensive ESL institutes. But, we believe, students who are intelligible, notwithstanding accent and idiom patterns that mark them as non-native, ought reasonably to be accommodated in some form of credit-bearing public speaking course.

Mainstreaming

A communication department might set the policy that NNSMNAEs who have met university requirements for matriculation (e.g., TOEFL score, graduation from a U.S. high school) ought to be treated identically to any other regularly admitted student who seeks to enroll in a public speaking class.

The great advantage of mainstreaming NNSMNAEs (besides the administrative reprieve from scheduling special class sections) is that students of diverse language backgrounds will have a chance to interact. For NNSMNAEs, this means more intensive exposure to "comprehensible input" (Krashen, 1982) in MNAE, crucial for their development of native-like English proficiency. For NSMNAEs, a critical mass of culturally diverse students in their classes means more authentic practice in communicating with audiences who may not share basic values and common experiences. Practice speaking before heterogeneous listeners will help refine audience adaptation skills.

A major reservation regarding mainstreaming, however, pertains to the qualifications of mainstream speech instructors to respond to and evaluate NNSMNAE speech performances. While speech instructors are no doubt on the whole culturally enlightened folk, most will not have had special training in contrastive analysis or applied linguistics, and many may have had relatively little experience processing NNSMNAE. How might this lack of training and experience affect instructors' evaluation practices in an evaluation-intensive class like public speaking?

A limited body of research on teaching college composition bears on this question of evaluation. Braine (1994) claims that freshmen composition teachers who are trained mainly in English literature apply harsh standards to ESL writers. These mainstream teachers appear to harbor the unrealistic expectation that NNSMNAEs will meet native speaker proficiency levels. Janopoulos (1992, 1995), in contrast, draws the opposite conclusion. He claims that mainstream writing teachers are too lenient with NNSMNAE writers. Only a small proportion of mainstream teachers take a "no mollycoddling" approach to evaluating NNSMNAEs. Others hold that ESL writers ought to be granted extra time to complete their assignments. The majority of teachers, according to Janopoulos, require only a "good faith effort" from NNSMNAE. Indeed, this tendency to bend over backward in evaluating at least some internationals is confirmed by Rubin and Williams (1995). Janopoulos is concerned that NNSMNAE writers who enjoy leniency from their basic course instructors will eventually suffer that much more in the less nurturing evaluations they receive in upper division courses and in anonymous writing proficiency examinations.

Little empirical data are available to directly inform us about speech teachers' biases in evaluating NNSMNAE's oral performance. Yook and Seiler (1990) report that a majority of Asian students *believe* they are discriminated against in grading. Yook and Seiler, however, caution speech instructors to avoid either underestimating or overcompensating when evaluating Asians' public speaking.

Special Sections of NNSMNAE Speech

While ESL composition researchers cannot agree whether mainstream writing instructors are too tough or too soft on NNSMNAEs, they do seem to concur in recommending setting aside special sections of the basic writing course for second language writers (see especially Braine, 1994). These special sections would be staffed by instructors trained to work with linguistically diverse student populations, so that students would be more likely to receive appropriate evaluation. Class sections may have smaller enrollments. In addition, assignments and textbooks would be geared to the particular interests and needs of culturally diverse students.

A textbook like *Academically Speaking* (Kayfetz & Stice, 1987), might help one envision what such a course could look like⁴. Part of the Wadsworth English for Academic

Purposes Series, this text continues to be adopted in a significant number of classrooms nationwide. It starts off by delineating specific situations in which students use the academic register. Then the text crafts activities around these various situations to familiarize students with the rules and standards of performance that are typically expected from mainstream students. An entire unit in the book is devoted to developing academic presentational skills. The chapters in this unit offer academic public speaking instruction comparable to a mainstream public speaking text. Among the topics covered in these chapters are "Steps To Follow When Preparing an Outline for a Talk," "The Characteristics of a Good Speaker," "Practicing and Presenting a Process Speech," "Presenting an Impromptu Speech," and "How Long Should You Speak?" *Speech Communication for International Students* (Dale & Wolf, 1988) is a similarly structured book that contains an entire chapter on MNAE idioms and also does attempt to integrate some "pronunciation tips" throughout the course.

In classes composed exclusively of other second language/second culture learners, students often experience a comfort level not available to them when they believe they are subject to ridicule from NSMNAE classmates (Shen, 1989). In the sheltered setting of special class sections, then, NNSMNAEs may be more willing to experiment with advanced speech structures.

On the other hand, the particular disadvantage of a special class sections for NNSMNAE is that these classes may be denigrated among the student body and faculty as less rigorous than the mainstream speech classes. Students enrolling in these classes may be regarded as having remedial needs. In fact, Braine (1994) reports that at one institution only about half the international students eligible to enroll in special ESL writing classes chose to take them; the remainder chose to enroll in mainstream classes.

Cultural Inclusion

One attractive alternative, albeit more radical and complex, is to accommodate NNSMNAEs as well as NSMNAEs into a reformed, culturally inclusive class in public speaking. Here all students would reap the benefits of cross-cultural interaction while simultaneously acquiring oral proficiency that fosters more diverse forms of public expression than one typically finds in mainstream classes. Ideally, the cross-cultural component of this course should be woven into the curriculum so as to contribute to, and not distract from, building fundamental skills in public speaking. In a number of ways, the cross-cultural focus could be used to advance the repertoire of oral skills available for both mainstream and NNSMNAE students alike. As a brief example, if mainstream students could come to appreciate the rhetorical power of rhythmic balance and proverb-like adages in Arabic style ("saj;" see Oller, 1987), they might benefit by experimenting with such phrasing in their own speeches.

The cultural inclusion option is supported by the appearance in recent years of several speech communication texts which explicitly move students in that direction (e.g., Berko, Rosenfeld & Samovar, 1994; Gamble & Gamble 1994). Perhaps the most marked prototype for this sort of textbook currently available is *Public Speaking: A Cultural Perspective* (Jaffe, 1995). This text presents a standard public speaking module crafted from pluralistic components. It is, therefore, usable by instructors who have had little or no training in applied linguistics. While the book covers all the standard content areas of public speaking, it also includes several sections devoted specifically to alternative and non-mainstream perspectives. For example, in addition to traditional Western organizational patterns like problem-solution or chronological order, the text describes and permits "other organizational patterns commonly used by women and ethnic speakers" (p. 187). These include the wave, spiral, and star patterns.

If the cultural inclusion option is to work properly, culturally diverse perspectives must be interwoven into the class structure and presented as powerful options for all students, not

tacked on as "special topics" following the real meat of the course, nor portrayed as "exotic" curiosities one might encounter among marginalized others. Perhaps the most critical barrier instructors will face in implementing a culturally inclusive speech class will be student resistance (mostly among mainstream culture students, but not exclusively). Studies of multicultural innovation in higher education have already begun documenting this common response pattern (e.g., Villalpando, 1995). Student resistance to multicultural innovation is perhaps inevitable. Experience dictates that rather than ignoring resistance and silencing its expression, resistance ought to be openly acknowledged and examined in a dignified way as one of several predictable components of response to diversity (Tatum, 1992).

CONCLUSION

Each of four options outlined in this paper has particular advantages to recommend it and particular disadvantages of which to be forewarned. For some communication departments, practice will be determined primarily by available resources. For example, if a particular department has no access to appropriately trained instructors for special NNSMNAE sections of speech, that will not be a viable option. Whatever particular pedagogical strategies departments choose, it is important that they be followed up with evaluation studies to substantiate empirically their specific advantages and disadvantages. But we have not the luxury of waiting for a definitive meta-analysis of evaluation studies. As a collective field of study, it is incumbent on the communication arts and sciences to develop in principled ways—and in very short order—both curricula and personnel prepared to meet the challenge of teaching speech to NNSMNAEs.

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Donald L. Rubin (Ph.D., University of Minnesota, 1978) is Professor and Head of the Department of Speech Communication, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602.

Donald Turk (M.A., University of Georgia) is enrolled in the Ph.D. program in the Department of Speech Communication, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602.

¹This acronym is admittedly unwieldy. We nevertheless choose to adopt it here for two reasons. First, it is more inclusive and more precise than the more conventional labels, ESL (English as a Second Language) or the now disfavored LEP (Limited English Proficiency). As we develop later in this essay, we wish to include speakers who may indeed be native speakers of some World English (Smith, 1987) variety other than North American mainstream English. We wish also to reject the simplistic (and perhaps imperialistic) view that there is even a single Standard American English (Wolfram, 1991). Second, we adopt the acronym NNSMNAE as a deliberate consciousness raising tool for our profession. In this way we hope to help quash a mind set that might relegate students labeled as ESL to someone else's program and mistakenly tend to homogenize the language backgrounds of any students who are not so labeled.

²We focus also on mainstream institutions serving mainly monolingual, English dominant students. No doubt the dynamics of cultural adjustment are quite different for teaching a speech class with a deliberate ESOL slant to a bilingual population (see Rudnick, Crain-Mena, Klorer & Lewis, 1995).

³For non-Western approaches to rhetorical and communication theory, see for example Oliver (1961, 1969) or the recent work by Garrett (1993).

⁴Our discussion of any textbook in this article is for purely illustrative purposes. We are not advocating the use of any particular text for the "Special Section" or "Cultural Inclu-

sion" options. Our refusal to advocate a text is due to the fact that, to our knowledge, there is no empirical evidence suggesting that one of these texts satisfies the needs of NNSMNAEs better than the others.

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