When Students Lack English Fluency: Adaptive Teaching

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Introduction

English is indisputably the global language in today's world. Rapidly growing immigrant populations residing in tight-knit ethnic neighborhoods in English-speaking nations have generated pockets of non-English speaking residents and an increased demand for adult education and vocational training delivered in English. Courses in English as Second Language or "ESL" are in demand. In addition to adults seeking more education, in the United Kingdom alone, in 2009-2010 nearly half a million, or 16%, of the learners in higher education were international students, according to the U.K. Council for International Student Affairs. (www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/statistics_he.php). These figures continue to rise due in part to political and economic instability in many areas. Learners studying in a language other than their own face formidable challenges – linguistic, sociological, and psychological. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate and explore some of these challenges along with successful adaptive teaching strategies to address the academic needs of learners and facilitate their success.

Linguistic challenges

Languages differ in several ways; no two languages are alike. Learners studying a new language already have a system in place – their first language – in which they are accustomed to think,

behave, interact, and interpret the world. The degree to which one's native language interferes with the acquisition of a new language is difficult to quantify. Fifty years ago, one's native language was believed to provide a template for learning a new language, such that structures or entities that were the same or similar in both languages would be easy to learn, whereas those that were different would come slowly and be more difficult. More recently, facility with additional languages was believed to be acquired in stages similar to those used with a first language.

However, the pendulum has swung back, and the mother tongue once again is perceived both as interfering with and facilitating the acquisition of another language. Cross-linguistic influence, as it is termed, considers when and under what conditions the learner's native language affects the acquisition of the second language. Features of the first language affect the rate of acquisition of the second language. For example, the negative in English is learned somewhat more quickly by speakers of languages such as German or Japanese, which, like English, express negation post-verb. In contrast, speakers of languages such as Spanish or Italian, which place the negative particle before the verb, take longer to master the English form.

Some learners arrive from countries (often former British colonies) where they have been educated in English. Because of this they usually are confident of their English – only to find, in some cases, that the variety or dialect of English they learned in school is significantly different from the dialect in which they are expected to function. As one Kenyan student put it, in a journal entry: "Before coming here I was thinking I speak English, but our English is not the same." Whether English-educated or not, certainly all learners must master a most challenging variety of the language, which is new to most of them: <u>Academic English</u>, with its complex grammar, huge, specialized vocabulary, and rigid writing conventions.

The notion of Academic English as distinct from "normal" everyday English was advanced in 1980 by Cummins, who theorized that learners in their childhood arrived in the classroom with basic interpersonal communication skills, sometimes labeled social language, and within the academic setting developed cognitive academic language proficiency, also known as Academic English. Since that time researchers have noted that Cummins did not capture in sufficient detail the complexity of language development, or do justice to the sometimes subtle and sophisticated nature of social language. In other words, mastering social language can be as cognitively demanding as mastering Academic English.

Academic English differs according to discipline, particularly in vocabulary, but also in written and oral conventions. Within the tertiary educational system, by graduation learners will have been required to discuss, research, and produce academic documents such as lab reports, expository essays, comparative analyses, and the like. Acquiring the requisite skills in Academic English takes time, and indeed they must be learned/acquired, with plenty of practice. In this respect study abroad learners often suffer a significant handicap in comparison with their native-speaking counterparts. However, nonnative-speaking tertiary level learners also have difficulty attempting to function in Academic English within their own country.

Sociological challenges

Aside from the linguistic aspects of the daunting task of learning in another language, the sociological context of the learning must also be taken into account. First, learners possess years of educational experience in their home country. They possess opinions about the purpose and structure of education: they know what to expect of an instructor, and what is expected of them.

When one embarks upon learning in a different culture, however, these opinions and expectations usually are challenged, often unexpectedly.

For example, generally speaking, teachers in the West are seen as facilitators, sharers and collaborators in the creation and imparting of skills and knowledge; learners are viewed as individuals, who for the most part are responsible for their own learning. Western teaching methods reflect this relationship, emphasizing the cultivation of critical thinking, independent work, and originality. To a student who comes from a background where the teacher is considered the source of all wisdom and knowledge, whereas students are passive recipients, the Western environment may be not only unfamiliar, but overwhelmingly demanding and frightening, at least at first. In addition, learners may resist some classroom activities and teaching methods as inappropriate or ineffective. For instance, activities involving peer evaluation often meet with opposition, or lackluster participation: after all, the *teacher* is the expert, not one's fellow student. This disconnect between 'occidental' and 'oriental' ways of viewing education has been observed 'in reverse' also – when teachers from the West go to China to teach English.

Psychological challenges

Much has been written on the subject of culture shock – the label given to that period of discomfort which most people experience in the initial stage of immersion in a new culture. The most significant effects are psychological, as they encounter unexpected and unexplained new values, behavior, and expectations. Yet immigrant and international learners must rely upon the classroom, the teacher, and other resources such as the Internet to provide the necessary language support. With time, and thanks in good part to human resilience, most learners manage to

surmount the difficulties associated with learning in English, particularly when teaching staff are sensitive to their needs. We now turn our attention to ways in which these needs can be accommodated in the classroom.

Internationalization challenges

In addition to the types of learners described above, learners studying in English within their non-English speaking home culture face challenges also. This scenario is occurring more frequently these days as international exchange programs such as Erasmus, along with Fulbright, have proliferated, creating scenarios in English is the language of instruction. This paper evolved from such a case, when in 2010 one of the authors (Dennis) was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to teach at Liepaja University in Latvia.

Students were informed that all instruction would be conducted in English. Yet many students who wanted to take Intercultural Communications or Qualitative Research spoke little English. Worse, some did not read or write in English. Although students are required to pass a test of English prior to admission, English is rarely spoken on a daily basis in Latvia, and as we know, we "use it or lose it".

On the first day of class as the author discussed the syllabus, she observed a number of blank expressions on faces. The author had to speak very slowly and simply, and substitute simple synonyms for complex words. The students became alarmed at the prospect of 80-page weekly reading assignments. Immediately the author began rethinking her courses to enable students to succeed academically. Her background in instructional design and long experience in the classroom were put to the test.

In week two a translator became available, but the amount of material for each class session had to be cut in half, and the students who understood English grew bored and restless. Consequently the translation service was discontinued, and the Dean announced that only students with adequate language skills could take the class for credit; others could attend but not for credit.

Instructional practices, assignments, and assessments that the author had used for years were inappropriate for these learners. For example, learners feared being called upon to answer a question. They were much more accustomed to the lecture format of instruction, which the author rarely uses. A short in-class essay assignment proved very stressful. The students requested that the final examination be offered as a take-home test, which the author felt impelled to disallow.

Adaptive strategies

In this section we will consider several of the physical, social, linguistic and cultural modifications that worked well for the learners. The classroom assigned was quite spacious, with at least 50 desks, arranged in a manner befitting the lecture mode of instruction. The author shifted the seats into a wide arc so that all students could make eye contact. At week 4 the final class enrollments were 12 and 20 students, so this was not difficult.

For the first several weeks, the students wore name tags to enable the author to learn their names. This struck the students as odd initially but it was clear they appreciated the author's interest in knowing them as individuals.

Each class session began with a brief icebreaker followed by an opportunity for questions on previous or new material. The day's topic was introduced and linked to the previous week's discussion. PowerPoint presentations clarified the flow of discussion and provided the visual

cues for key words. Great care was taken to use simple words and enhance with examples or synonyms.

Multiple copies (but not nearly enough) of the English-language textbooks were placed on reserve in the library. This was problematic as students had to share; and the library hours were shorter than in the United States. The intercultural communications textbook made excellent use of diagrams, graphs, images, and advance organizers. It was written in simple English and the students found it fascinating. Unfortunately, with the research class, the textbook was quite dull and wordy; students discovered that translating key words required a great deal of time. Therefore the author replaced textbook readings with carefully chosen journal articles which she distributed by email.

The author alternated brief oral presentations in class with periods of small group work and discussion. Sometimes students were encouraged to construct a concept map or a list of relevant issues associated with the week's focus. The advantage to students was that they were free to converse in their language, with a spokesperson presenting their conclusions to the entire class in English.

The author refrained from calling on students unless they raised their hand. She always made a point to praise and thank students for contributing. Role play was used with minimal success as the students were very self-conscious. Case studies and relevant news items generated enthusiastic participation. For instance, one week the media covered a business situation that was integrated into cultural dimensions of organization behavior. Students occasionally brought articles to class to share.

Assignments were always introduced and explained in terms of their usefulness in the real world. In the qualitative research class, students enjoyed developing research questions on contemporary trends and issues of interest to them. As a result, their background and justification were vivid and authentic. These sections of their hypothetical research study were presented orally rather than as formal papers.

With both classes, field work assignments were devised. The value of these activities was that students were personally interested, could work in pairs, and managed to overcome their reticence in class because they wanted to report on their experiences. Field work allowed the students to interact in the community on their own terms, while meeting requirements and achieving course objectives. The assignments were relatively simple to design, as were the grading rubrics.

Learners were allowed some choice of assignments, such as a specific country to profile for the intercultural communications class. Assignments included short take-home papers which learners could submit in person or by email. No long term papers were required. A study guide for the final exam was distributed well in advance; the exam involved short answer questions. Students were encouraged to bring their Latvian-English dictionary.

At the close of each class session, time was reserved for questions and prelude to the subsequent week's focus. Following each class a summary was distributed along with the PowerPoint presentation.

By far the most profound and constructive learning activity for both classes was the weekly journal assignment. Students were expected to submit an entry every week, however simplistic it was. Through this work they poured out their hearts and revealed deep and poignant learning:

1. This course makes me think about life and values. It makes me think wider.

2. (Inter)cultural communication shows us how small the world is geographicly (sic) and how big it is inside us.

3. You help us to watch the world through different eyes.

Retrospective

In the months that followed this remarkable and life-changing experience of teaching and immersion in a foreign culture, the author actively investigated additional strategies for similar situations. She focused particularly on exercises with the potential to generate critical thinking and transformative learning. Her search yielded many unusual classroom learning and assessment activities (Cuff, 2011, personal communication), as exemplified here:

1. Review television or radio coverage of a current event from the perspective of an expert in the discipline (interculturalist or qualitative researcher).

2. Describe an actual incident in your experience which supports (or refutes) a key point from the course.

3. Investigate the textbook author and try to determine his/her interest in writing the book.

4. Design a collage representing ideas of issues addressed during the course/in the text.

5. Draw a cartoon or caricature depicting a critical incident.

6. Role play your high recommendation of a class activity (or reading assignment) and what you learned.

7. Compose in writing, or discuss with a classmate, the most useful "take-away" points from an assignment or class discussion.

8. Select passages from a reading assignment or material you have found on your own, and explain their value.

9. Locate relevant material on the Internet and debate its merits.

In summary, the adaptive measures that proved most effective were similar on several counts. They involved intentionally structured assignments and increased student confidence and motivation. Multiple senses were employed during learning and assessment activities. Also, numerous informal opportunities for feedback were provided through 1:1 emails during the week.

Conclusion

One common hurdle facing students in English-speaking classrooms is the high level of English fluency required. Non-standard English-speaking students often struggle with academic English grammar, vocabulary, and specific discourse and writing conventions. We have shared some ways in which instructors can decrease the stress-inducing reliance on spoken and written academic English while ensuring that adequate learning is occurring. Faculty who take the time to modify course design and instructional methods will assist and support students in their quest for academic success. Additionally, learners will gain culturally, psychologically, and socially. At this time we invite our audience to present questions or comments.

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