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CHAPTER FOUR

The Information-Fluent English Language Learner:

Cultural and Pedagogical Considerations

Megan Hodge

Introduction

Many of the students who wish to study in America have insufficient command of the English language to pass the TOEFL or IELTS examinations required for enrollment at U.S. institutions of higher education, and as a result, programs designed to teach proficiency in the English language have been developed at some of these universities. In addition to English grammar and vocabulary, some programs also seek to acculturate students to Western academic norms such as critical thinking, academic integrity, and the paper-writing process.

As many of the international students in the US first experience American education through these English language programs, the cultural norms taught by the programs are vital to the academic success of these students; without them, students struggle to recognize plagiarism in their writing, find reliable sources, and more. Librarians are uniquely equipped to meet this instructional need, a fact increasingly recognized by university ESL faculty and reflected in the recent creation and growth of ACRL's Academic Library Services to International Students Interest Group.

In my role as library liaison to Virginia Commonwealth University's English language program, I provide course-integrated instruction to around a dozen classes each semester. This instruction takes the form of interactive introductions to library spaces and resources as well as the teaching of content including evaluating sources, avoiding plagiarism, developing a search strategy, searching in library databases, and preparing for oral

debates. This chapter describes the pedagogical practices I've found to be most effective in my own experience as well as from my research into ESL pedagogy for adult learners. These best practices also extend to building sensitivity to different academic backgrounds into your lessons.

Cultural Differences in Classroom Behaviors

While international students can, of course, come from almost any country, over 60 percent of international students in the United States come from just four countries: China, India, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea.¹ Regardless of a student's country of origin, however, it is advisable to become aware of cultural differences which may affect your lesson planning process.

First, be prepared for many students to arrive ten minutes or more after the official class start time. As Moeckel and Presnell note, "Egyptians and other Arabs may view appointment times as relative, not exact," and students often apply this conception of time to their classes once in the United States.² Later start times may be more common in lower-level language classes, where faculty are still acculturating their students to Western academic and cultural norms, than in upper-level classes. It is therefore advisable to check with the professor of record to learn whether students are likely to arrive on time, whether the professor generally starts class punctually, and to develop a lesson plan flexible enough to adapt to varying start times.

Not surprisingly, English language learners tend to sit with classmates who hail from the same country of origin. While this propensity can increase comfort in the classroom, it often leads to students speaking their native language with each other rather than English. Such native-language chatting may not always be inappropriate, even in the ESL classroom; for example, stronger students may serve as informal tutors by translating difficult concepts for their classmates. If assessment of individual students' language skills is desired, consider redistributing students around the classroom. Before attempting such a redistribution, however, consider that in some cultures, women are not permitted to socialize with men outside of their families and may therefore feel uncomfortable if asked to work with men. This is, again, a circumstance upon which the professor of record will be able to advise you.

When incorporating motivational and game-like elements into instruction for English language learners, consider consulting with the TESOL faculty member to ensure they will be comprehended and have the desired motivational effect. Pop culture references and humor based on idiom need to be carefully selected, if used at all, though funny GIFs and references to blockbuster movies such as those made by Disney and Marvel reliably draw smiles of recognition. Muslim students may not find candy a desirable bribe or reward for class participation due to religious guidelines about food preparation. Finally, some cultures value communal rather than individual efforts. In-class competitions, such as *Jeopardy*-style review games, may therefore be off-putting and even demotivating to students from such cultures. Putting students into groups to compete as teams will often alleviate feelings of demotivation that might be generated from competitive activities.

While English language learners (ELLs) and domestic students alike tend to learn more when the lecture is limited in favor of active learning and class discussion, small amounts

of lecture are generally unavoidable. It is important to regularly pause, even during a short lecture, to check student comprehension of what you are discussing because ELLs often will not let you know that they do not understand or have a question. However, simply asking “Any questions?” or “Does that make sense?” may not suffice. As Howze and Moore note, “In order to save face, many international students may say they understand, when in truth they may be more confused than ever.”³ Additionally, in some cultures, “head nodding can indicate a negative rather than an affirmative response.”⁴ Taking the time to administer a formative assessment—whether this takes the form of students writing a one-minute paper on a sticky note or completing a brief and fun online quiz in Kahoot or PollEverywhere—allows the instructor to check comprehension and clarify as needed.

Finally, anyone learning a new language, international student or no, may feel shy or uncertain about using that language in front of an unknown native speaker (i.e., you or the librarian guest-lecturer) who cannot yet be trusted not to judge or ridicule their pronunciation and diction.⁵ In the interests of scaffolding learning (the students are enrolled in an English language program to learn to write and speak English, after all) but in a way that reduces student discomfort, several strategies can be employed. When possible, provide time for students to collect their thoughts before answering a question; this can be done via methods such as think/pair/share and group presentations. Audience response boards, as in figure 4.1 below, have the dual benefit of increasing participation in students nervous about speaking in front of the librarian and preventing the more confident students from dominating a class discussion. Above all, avoid putting individual students on the spot by asking them to extemporaneously answer a question; the one exception to this guideline is that such questioning is an effective classroom management technique if students are off-task.

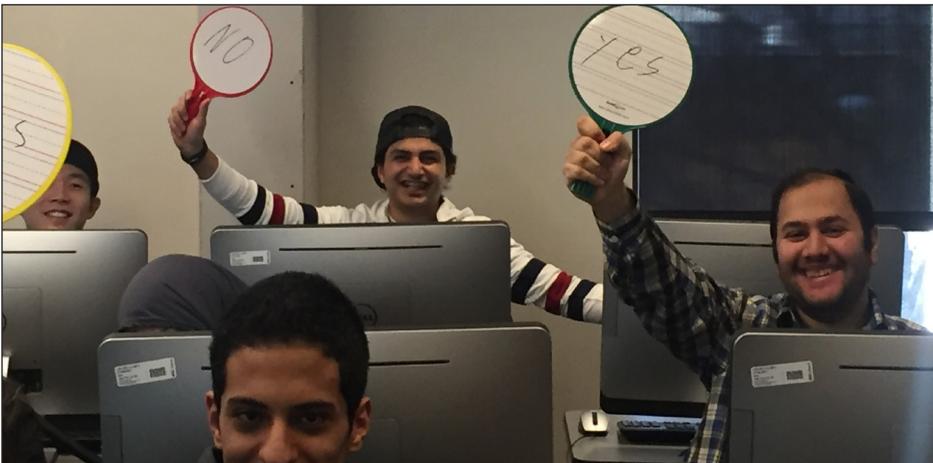


Figure 4.1. Audience using response boards

Pedagogical Strategies

Many of the strategies outlined in this section will be familiar to anyone who has gone through a teacher education program or is familiar with the literature on instruction, whether inside or outside libraries and higher education. These best practices are often especially effective with English language learners in library classrooms.

Scaffolding student learning

To help students be successful learners, it is important for instructors to provide the support, or scaffolding, that makes learning possible. As defined by Mu, “Scaffolding procedures in the library include: breaking down library tasks into subtasks, modeling the strategies needed to complete the tasks, and engaging students in activities that ensure a gradual shift in responsibility from the reference librarian or subject specialist to the students.”⁶ As mentioned above, a vital part of supporting English language learners is equipping them with the skills needed to thrive in an American university classroom.

One such skill is effective note-taking. Knowing when and how to take notes is a strategy proven to result in dramatically greater retention, yet it is a skill that students both domestic and international often lack.⁷ Providing explicit cues to students about when to write something down—for example, when a new vocabulary word is introduced—can therefore be very helpful. An additional strategy is the use of repetition; one librarian “reminds students that his use of repetition is on purpose as a reminder to study the material.”⁸ Another method is the use of advance organizers, where students are given incomplete notes and are asked to fill them in over the course of the lesson. Teaching and repeating these cues help students learn a behavior which will hopefully become instinctive after enough practice.

Similarly, modeling practices, such as creating an organization mechanism for newly learned knowledge, helps students develop practices that will aid their studies in the present as well as throughout the rest of their academic studies. Thinking metacognitively about organizing new information is another study skill that studies have shown over and over again to be effective in increasing retention.⁹ In the library classroom, this can take the form of creating a table to visualize the differences between scholarly and popular sources, or of organizing the reasons an example website is not trustworthy into the five Ws: who, what, when, where, and why.¹⁰ Explaining why you are organizing the information this way makes explicit some of the knowledge that you have as a subject expert and, again, models an academic practice that can be used in other contexts.

Another method is to use analogies and comparisons to activate students’ prior knowledge about a subject and help them more readily incorporate new modes of thinking into pre-existing mental frameworks.¹¹ For example, Western ideas about citation can be new to some international students. It can be helpful to begin a discussion on this topic by first exploring a similar idea that is shared across cultures: stealing a home-cooked meal. While the scenario of someone stealing a meal you have cooked to claim it as their own at a potluck may seem silly and often evokes grins from students, they universally agree that they would feel upset, annoyed, or hurt should someone do it to them. From a discussion of these feelings, the topic of academic integrity and citation can be eased into, with the disclaimer that Westerners feel the same way about someone using their written work without attribution. Such comparisons enable students to step more easily into frameworks that are otherwise alien.

Increasing student comprehension

For any lesson to be effective, students must understand what their teacher is communicating. With English language learners, students are already operating within the frameworks of a new language and a new academic culture to which library jargon is an added layer. Without understanding your vocabulary, it will be increasingly difficult for

students to understand the concepts that those words describe. Taking a few additional measures to ensure maximal comprehension is therefore advisable.

Several studies have demonstrated that American undergraduates often do not understand library terminology and that a single library session is generally insufficient for long-term retention of such terminology.¹² Avoiding library jargon with English language learners is even more essential; use “search engine” for “database,” “article” or “publication” for “source,” and so on. However, keep in mind that even non-library words, such as “bias,” may be unfamiliar to students and require definition. Conducting a comprehension check upon first using these words (e.g., “what does ‘trustworthy’ mean?”) not only ensures that students do not miss important pieces of information but can also be used to break up even short lectures and introduce elements of interactivity. Students could, for example, be asked to work with a partner or small group to determine their definition of “trustworthy” and to identify a website or publication that they believe is trustworthy. Other strategies include rephrasing, using images, and using new vocabulary words in differing contexts.¹³ Finally, all newly introduced words should be written out on a whiteboard/blackboard in addition to being spoken aloud, so students can see how the word is spelled as well as pronounced.

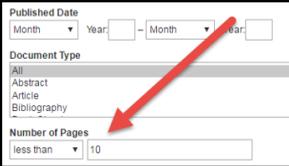
Even if the vocabulary you use while teaching is familiar, the speed of your speech may pose a barrier to student understanding. Enunciate longer words and try to speak more slowly. This doesn’t mean you need to emulate Dory speaking whale in *Finding Nemo*, but be aware of the speed of your speech and “use longer pauses between semantic groups so that students can process the whole meaning and not spend too much time deciphering individual words or sentences.”¹⁴ If using an audio or video clip in class, turn on closed captioning and moderate the speed. On YouTube, this can be done by clicking the gear icon on any video and changing the speed from Normal to 0.75. Internet browser extensions like Transpose and Video Speed Controller enable you to slow down videos that don’t have that functionality built in.

To mitigate the cognitive overload of following directions and learning new concepts/vocabulary at the same time, students often find it very helpful to have step-by-step instructions written out on the whiteboard/on your slides. Leaving these instructions up while students work together is also useful to keep students focused during longer activities as they can check whether they have, in fact, completed all tasks.

1. Enter your key words



2. Scroll down and change the Number of Pages to less than 10



3. Click Search at the top of the page

Figure 4.2. Step-by-Step Instructions

Finally, English language learners often appreciate the ability to listen to a longer text as well as read it. This helps them learn how to pronounce words they may have only seen in written form and helps the reading process go more quickly. A useful tool is TTSreader.com, a website as well as Chrome extension that reads aloud any text selected by a patron. TTSreader highlights each sentence as it is being read and offers British as well as American accents. Some databases, such as *Opposing Viewpoints*, offer this functionality as well.

Handling the Unexpected

The experienced teacher realizes that even the most thoughtfully prepared lesson plan can be diverted from its course for reasons entirely beyond human control: an unusually energetic or torpid class, current events such as the death of a celebrity, or an internet outage. The habits of building flexibility into your plans, as well as regularly checking the time to gauge whether your subsequent activities need to be modified to account for earlier parts of your lesson taking more or less time than you anticipated, will serve you well. Additionally, it may be beneficial to prepare for some other scenarios in the English language learner library classroom.

Anticipate that you probably will not get through your entire lesson plan. Discussions and activities both often take longer than expected; students often have questions about what they are supposed to be doing, questions about vocabulary, and questions about technical issues if, for example, they end up lost in a database. Reading may also take longer than expected, so use shorter articles if students need to read in class—to evaluate a source, for example. EBSCO databases include the functionality of limiting search results by number of pages, which is convenient both for in-class activities as well as a tip for students to keep in mind as they search for sources for their assignments. This slower pace has the additional benefits of reducing library anxiety and feeling like a luxury to librarians accustomed to the frenetic pace of a traditional fifty-minute session.

A related consideration is whether to use websites or other technology. Websites like PearDeck and Kahoot, which can turn presentations into active learning opportunities, often require that several steps be followed in order for students to log in as well as instructions on how to use them. If you are teaching in the context of a one-shot or have only an hour for your lesson, the minutes spent walking around to ensure everyone has logged in and explaining how the activity will work may use up precious time that would be better spent on your intended learning objectives, among which comfort with instructional tools is probably not included.

A common challenge in the twenty-first-century classroom is digital distraction, whether in the form of students texting their friends on their phones or checking Facebook on the classroom computers. Like their American counterparts, English language learners are not immune to the allure of their phones. Be aware, however, that what looks like off-task behavior may be a student looking up an unfamiliar word in an app on their phone. Consider asking the faculty member what their classroom phone policy is; some collect them at the beginning of class and return them at the end; others encourage their use during lessons where there is likely to be a lot of new vocabulary.

Conclusion

In closing, it is important to note that the most effective resource in being successful in the ELL library classroom is the faculty member. The professor can tell you ahead of time how many students there will be, whether they are mostly at the same level of proficiency or of widely varying abilities, if there is one student who tends to monopolize class discussions, and whether mobile phones are allowed in their classroom. As Polger and Sheidlower note, “an engaged professor is the best ally.”¹⁵ Faculty help extends to the classroom as well: they can circulate around the room, helping to answer questions and keep students on task, point out words that you did not realize were unfamiliar to students, and increase student engagement and buy-in by contributing judiciously to class discussions. Together, professor and librarian can ensure that English language learners get the most from their library instruction.

Notes

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15. Polger and Sheidlower, *Engaging Diverse Learners*, 68.

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