

A FOREIGN LANGUAGE APPROACH TO CONTENT

AREA INSTRUCTION:

Problems of Teaching content area subject matter to non-native speaking students, and insights from EFL.

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The spread of English around the world as an international language or a language of wider communication (LWC) has speeded up the phenomenon whereby English is a language of study in academic institutions in non-English speaking countries. Over 58% of the senior colleges and universities in the world use English as a primary language of instruction (1,874 out of 3,210, according to figures provided by Washington Educational Research Associates, Inc., in 1981). Additional thousands of universities rely on English medium instruction in various subject areas, especially in technology

and the sciences. This has created certain problems. On the one hand, teachers dealing with content-area study matter have become very aware of the language deficiencies of their students, but are seldom capable of dealing with them. On the other hand, large numbers of programs in English for academic purposes (EAP) have been designed by non-subject specialist language teachers. The two interests need to be brought together. There is a need to prepare all teachers, subject specialists and language specialists alike, to deal effectively with their non-English mother tongue students, to become well-informed about the relationship between second language learning and the development of academic knowledge and skills.

Teachers need to become sensitive to the linguistic as well as to affective, cognitive and experimental factors that can affect a student's progress. They must also be aware of the need for proper attention to EFL literacy skills in teaching every subject. Every subject matter teacher is, in effect, also a teacher of English when English is the medium of instruction.

Students at university level are able to deal with ideas that cannot be represented concretely: concepts and abstractions, (valid--testable--generalizations, etc.) in fields like history, sociology, philosophy, economics and science. They can transfer learned English vocabulary to previously acquired concepts. But learning English terminology in such fields when the learner is not yet academically proficient and is at the same time still learning the concepts, presents real problems. Recognizing and memorizing new vocabulary is pointless unless the learner can relate the items to previously constructed cognitive schemata. Formal definitions are seldom useful. Rather, the teacher needs to use EFL strategies such as example, comparison, demonstration and synonym to clarify meaning. In advanced math and science, limited English proficient (LEP) students have usually already mastered basic scientific and mathematical concepts in their L1, but lack the English proficiency necessary to express what they know or to understand what the teacher says. Content area teachers in these subjects should review the

student's academic record and meet with him/her for an informal assessment of both English proficiency and understanding of concepts.

Subject matter instructors can benefit from some information on--and even informal training in--some of the techniques of TEFL/TESL. It is a convention in our field to identify four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Speaking and writing are traditionally considered PRODUCTIVE SKILLS; listening and reading RECEPTIVE SKILLS. All four skills require that the active cognitive processes of the learner be engaged. There are a number of EFL/ESL teaching/learning techniques and strategies to promote the development of these basic skills that subject matter instructors should be aware of.

Let us consider them one at a time.

LISTENING. Attending to speech is an essential skill for university students, who probably spend more time listening than in any other language activity. EFL/ESL teachers know that spontaneous

spoken language does not sound at all like the written language read aloud. Written language is more densely packed with information, uses longer and complete sentences, more specific words. It is organized and does not include pauses, false starts, rephrasing, or careless articulation. Therefore, university lectures, which are usually more formal and prepared than spontaneous speech, make constant demands on the listener in terms of densely packed content.

For non-native speaking students, such lectures require special training and extended experience to understand. This is intense listening. Lectures are usually easier to follow if the lecturer explains, rephrases, uses some strategies of negotiating meaning and constantly checking comprehension that we find in informal speech and in EFL listening exercises.

Students need to be made aware of learner strategies that will make them more efficient listeners. No one hears 100% of anything. We listen selectively, picking out the important words from a stream of spoken discourse. It is

important for students always to work with chunks of speech or discourse, and not with isolated sentences for listening comprehension in order to adjust to speed and accent, understand redundancies, recognize stressed form (and ignore non-essential unstressed ones), and interpret features of rhythm and intonation. An important skill in EFL listening is intelligent guessing, based on topic and mode. Expectations and intuitions about what one is hearing aid in making inferences that will be important for full comprehension of the message.

SPEAKING. Answering questions and giving oral reports probably constitute the extent of the speaking that students must do, except for socializing outside of class where that is possible, or having conferences with the instructor, where the "caretaker" approaches of the other party will assist the process. Clarity of both speech and meaning are essential for the two kinds of "formal" speaking that EFL students are usually called on to do in content area courses. The principles of rhetoric that are used to teach

EFL writing will be helpful for organizing and presenting ideas orally; the recognition skills that help students improve their EFL listening comprehension (articulation of phonemes, speed, rhythm, intonation and stress patterns) will also be useful when applied to the production of the spoken language.

READING. Efficient, effective reading is the most essential skill of a university student, probably even more important than listening. According to Diane Larsen-Freeman (1984) four aspects enter into the reading process: background knowledge, logic, integration of ideas and activation of appropriate schema.

According to her, various studies have found that second language learners are handicapped by deficiencies in these four aspects. The reading level of a university student must be at the "easy" (fluent or independent) stage for optimum benefit from English for Academic Purposes materials. Here are some of the things that a reader of EAP needs to be able to do:

1. identify styles: scientific, narrative, expository, descriptive
2. interpret graphs, charts, symbols and other visuals
3. arrange events in chronological order, recognize organization and sequencing
4. differentiate between fact and opinion, recognize point of view
5. process information, separate the important from the not important.
6. identify the main idea and the supporting details
7. understand syntactical devices (e.g., embedding complex nominalization, subordination/coordination, redundancies)
8. develop literary awareness and appreciation of style

Vocabulary skills are related to reading since vocabulary comprehension and word recognition are important factors in increased reading, speed. Students need to learn to deal with unfamiliar words (word attack skills). One useful technique from EFL is to read through a passage to see if the



meaning of a word is essential or can be skipped. If the word seems to be important, try to identify the part of the speech or recognize the position of the word, its function and place in the sentence; sound it out; consult the dictionary only as a last resort. As in listening, the context is important, and intelligent guessing should be used when confronting a new word.

Students need to learn that they can choose appropriate reading rates and that they can be flexible about this: Scan rapidly for specific detail; skim quickly for general understanding; read carefully for full comprehension. The skills of skimming, scanning, and intensive reading can be explicitly taught.

Students need also to learn to deal with ambiguity, to make inferences from what they read and make sense of a passage even if some details are unclear. The "cloze" exercise is an EFL technique that will help students read for understanding without paying attention to every word, while paragraph analysis helps them

understand logical relationships in extended written discourse.

WRITING. The "models approach" to writing presumes that the more one reads, the better one writes, and that students should therefore be exposed to examples of good writing in all fields. What kinds of writing are students required to do? --essays, reports, etc.?

Then they should have experience reading these kinds of writing. Good academic writing requires organization of ideas, coherence of presentation, control of devices for cohesion within the context (reference, etc.), and appropriate standards of spelling and usage.

Note taking is an important writing task for university students that involves both listening and writing skills combined.

Training in note taking with video chunks can be useful (use news reports, editorials, lectures, interviews, etc.).

In teaching writing in EFL, teachers now recognize the usefulness of process analysis over the product analysis that was once used exclusively to judge students' writing. In analyzing the PRODUCT, one looks at aspects of rhetoric, cohesion and coherence, grammar form, patterns of organization, development of topic, choice of vocabulary, and communication of ideas, to judge the students's output. In a PROCESS approach, the teacher considers what happens to produce the product. Techniques are brainstorming, thinking aloud and free writing, free association, journal keeping, generating ideas, developing, revising and editing drafts. The word processor is an excellent tool for process writing.

Teachers who are sympathetic to their students' problems with language and are aware of some of the remedial techniques of EFL will find that they can increase their own satisfaction in teaching their subjects, at the same time helping students improve their mastery of the four basic language skills together with their subject matter knowledge.

References:

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