Center for Teaching & Learning
Faculty Development Talks

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Engaging ESL Students in the College Classroom

Kyle McIntosh, Assistant Professor of English & Writing

Scenario

- Imagine you are teaching a class in your subject area with a fairly large number of students – about half – who use English as a second (or third, fourth, fifth) language. You've noticed that some of these students seem reticent to speak during class, participate in group work, or visit during your office hours. Furthermore, the quality of their graded work is often below average. You email these students and try to talk to them after class to see if they need any help, but they don't really respond. What do you do next?

Challenge of engaging ESL students

- Their reticence can have multiple causes (Soo & Goh, 2013):

  - Lack of confidence in listening, speaking, reading and/or writing abilities;

  - Uncertainty about culturally-specific knowledge and/or expectations;

  - Assumptions about the roles of students and teachers;

  - Feelings of detachment from peers and greater community.

- Reticence to speak or otherwise participate in class does not necessarily mean that ESL students do not understand content or are not interested in improving their language skills.

Overview of strategies

- Facilitating comprehension

- Bridging cultural gaps

- Expanding linguistic repertoires

- Creating a sense of community inside & outside of the classroom

- Recommending additional resources

Facilitating comprehension

▪ Use direct speech acts (*e.g., I recommend fixing this.*) when giving instructions and feedback; indirect speech acts (*e.g., Would you mind fixing this?*) can be difficult for ESL students to interpret (Baker & Bricker, 2010).

▪ Note key points in lectures/discussions that you can return to regularly; meaningful repetition aids comprehension.

▪ Include visuals (photos, timelines, graphs, charts, real-world artifacts, etc.) to tap into non-linguistic knowledge; if you're showing a video, turn on subtitles.

Bridging cultural gaps

- Look for culturally-specific words and phrases (e.g., Wall Street, busted for a crime) in lectures and texts, and prepare clear definitions, explanations, or examples.

- Explain reasons behind classroom and institutional practices: Why is discussion encouraged? Why is plagiarism prohibited?

- Create opportunities for ESL students to be cultural informants by asking how certain ideas or assumptions may be viewed in other countries or by different groups in the U.S., but try not to put them on the spot; allow anyone to answer.

Expanding linguistic repertoires

- Give all students a few minutes to write down their thoughts on topics/texts before group work/discussion; this can reduce anxiety about speaking.

- Allow ESL students to use their first language to clarify terms and concepts in English, but stress that bilingual dictionaries and translation software are tools, not substitutes, for learning.

- Also let ESL students serve as linguistic informants for words and phrases in other languages; even having them tell you how to say their names correctly can mean a lot.

Creating a sense of community inside of the classroom

- When there is group work, try to place ESL and non-ESL students together in relatively even numbers.

- If possible, assign topics or projects that highlight global issues and give students roles that let them to play to their strengths.

- Structure group work so that it is clearly scaffolded and tied to assessment; this can improve participation of ESL students (Cruickshank, Chen & Warren, 2012).

Creating a sense of community outside of the classroom

- Use online discussion boards, which have been shown to help ESL students develop important communication skills while reducing feelings of social isolation (Birch & Volkov, 2007).

- If possible, add a service learning project to your class to further community engagement (Russel, 2007).

- Announce campus and community events related to the course, and give students extra credit for attending and writing up brief reports; this can also lead to peer interaction outside of class.

Recommending additional resources

- Peer Tutoring in subject areas & ESL

- Saunders Writing Center (only for writing assignments)

- UT Center for Public Speaking (for presentations and interviews)

- ESL Websites

References

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Thank you!