Instructional Approaches and Strategies across Communicative Competencies for Pre-College, Community College, University, and Adult Learners (Re)Entering the Academic Classroom

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When it comes to understanding what English language learners (ELLs) need in the classroom, it can be a challenge to identify both the existing needs and the strategies necessary to transform the classroom experience effectively, much less evaluate which approaches and techniques are most appropriate for learners in the same age group but different academic contexts, L1s, and proficiency levels. This issue of identification and strategizing becomes even more complex when we examine the volume of ELLs into classrooms on campuses of community colleges, universities, and continuing education centers. According to David and Kanno (2020), while "ELLs are more likely to enroll in 2-year community colleges than in 4-year colleges" and community colleges enroll "41% of all undergraduates" in the United States, only "16.2% of ELLs attained a bachelor's degree within 10 years after high school graduation" and "66.2% of ELLs never progressed out of the ESL programs in which they enrolled" nationwide (pp. 1-2). These percentages highlight the number of students in need of supported education experiences and resources as well as the need for adaptable curricula that enhances the necessary English language placement methods, course sequence lengths, and types of courses available to these learners. This paper examines the needs of learners either preparing to enter the English-medium classroom at a community college, university, or continuing education center and present a TESOL pedagogy-based curriculum to mediate the needs of these learners and prepare them for conversing, writing, and presenting in academic settings.

Although the majority of community colleges across the United States offer ESL programs for students and non-degree seeking community members, the existing courses focus on the "development of concrete language skills, rather than integrating skills to accomplish authentic language tasks" (David and Kanno, 2020, p. 8). While discrete skills are necessary for many learners, the limitation of developing discrete skills lies in the difficulty to employ discrete

skills in the diverse range of real-world situations all ELLs encounter simply as a result of living in an English-medium environment. Consequently, it appears that many of the educational opportunities and resources for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners are lacking in their long-term effects when it comes to long-term English language acquisition. This in no way faults the in-service teachers who serve this demographic but highlights the necessity of implementing classroom material and strategies that create opportunities for language acquisition over task completion.

In order to provide a fresh perspective on how to improve the already-existing work that happens semester after semester in many classrooms, we turn to Gay (2002), Lachance, Honigsfeld, and Harrell (2018), and Grapin et al. (2021) to examine how culturally responsive teaching, equal education opportunities, and instructional strategies can make learning more accessible and relevant for CLD students, ultimately equipping them with the learning skills to continue progressing in their language acquisition when they leave the classroom.

Gay (2002) suggests that one of the primary ways to engage and equip students for long-term language acquisition is to develop culturally responsive teaching strategies that validate the learner's "right to grapple with learning challenges from the point of strength and relevance found in their own cultural frames of reference" (p. 114). By teaching to the frame of reference and cultural background, learners can simultaneously develop their perspectives and the language skills to articulate them to their peers, professors, employers, and community members. Gay suggests strategies like researching your students' L1s, cultural backgrounds, and perceptions of skills and perspectives that may be highly valued in an academic or American setting but not in the primary culture of the learner.

Similarly, Lachance, Honigsfeld, and Harrell (2018) suggest that the significant linguistic

and cultural assets ELLs bring to the classroom are neither fully recognized nor appreciated when these students do not have sufficient "access to rigorous, grade-level concepts for learning" (p. 1). These particular researchers focused their study on K-12 classrooms and found that academic language is often inaccessible for ELLs and lacks appropriate scaffolding across grade levels. While this study treats the K-12 ELL demographic and this paper and designed curriculum aims to serve ELLs in the higher or returning education sphere, it is critical to note two things we learn from Lachance, Honigsfeld, and Harrell: first, even ELLs in the K-12 levels are often not fully supported. Second, if these are the skills that are lacking in the K-12 context, how much more has this lack of educational support compounded the abilities and opportunities of ELLs who are up against the demands of higher education having never received accessible education neither in the L1 nor in the early years of schooling in an English-medium school? To address this discrepancy in many classrooms, standards, and experiences, we turn to Grapin et al. (2021) who advise that we rethink educational strategies used in the past that teach ELLs in ways that are more appropriate for native speakers which often result in the watering down of standards, content, and expectations for capable, intelligent, bilingual learners.

Grapin et al. suggest addressing content areas and skills-based courses that scaffold the ELL's experience and chances of success, specifically procedures like "preteaching vocabulary, providing sentence frames and starters, and using visual aids" (2021, p. 1). The researchers specify these three techniques for several reasons with the primary advantage being their multidisciplinary application and "relevance across multiple content areas" (Grapin et al. 2021, p. 4). These suggested approaches allow ELLs to focus on concepts rather than discrete language, thus remedying a primary issue revealed by David and Kanno (2021). Ultimately, the result of adopting simple strategies outlined by Grapin et al. (2021) frees the ELL to support the

cognitive load of learning and acquiring over memorizing and parroting language that will be of no use outside the classroom. The resulting balance of acquiring academic language and scaffolded language and learning skills.

In building on these researchers and integrating these researched suggestions into the course entitled “Speak, Write and Present: Become an English-Speaking “Triple Threat” (arbitrarily assigned the course number “ESL 310”), Abrar-Ul-Hassan (2011) and Francisco (2013) support the curriculum’s underlying approaches of outcomes-based, competency-based, and inquiry-based learning. ESL 310’s primary philosophy is that to succeed in academic language and interaction in English, non-native speakers (NNSs) should be supported first in establishing their communicative competencies in speech and writing in that order. Abrar-Ul-Hassan (2011) and Francisco (2013) both agree that when intermediate- to advanced-level learners do not know how to use language for authentic communication, acquiring grammatical structures and higher register language can be stunted and ultimately fail to equip the learner to employ language in the needed ways (p. 513; p. 342).

With all of these considerations and statistics in mind, I created this ENG 310 course for the ELL demographic that is entering or returning to the academic context of a community college, university, or continuing education center. This course employs both outcomes- and competency-based approaches (Murray and Christison, 2020, p. 9) and focuses on the communicative authenticity necessary to succeed in the skills of informal and formal conversation, academic and topic-oriented writing, and presentational speaking. Based on the research of the previously mentioned authors and research teams, it is clear that while ELLs of this demographic need course material that is challenging and maintains the standards to which every other native-speaker learner is held, it is equally as necessary to provide instruction that

equips ELLs to meet these expectations in ways that can be reapplied outside the classroom. This course is intended for ELLs of any L1 and can most certainly be modified to include specific phonetic instruction depending on common errors among the represented L1s. The units are ordered intentionally to first address conversation, then writing, and finally academic presentations in order to first establish a conversational comfort and skill within the classroom, extending the L2 ability to exchange casual and popular ideas and personally-held beliefs to the writing domain which requires the learner to have a solid understanding of his or her own thought processes which are most effectively teased out through speaking freely with as little cognitive demand and monitoring as possible. Finally, the organizational skills emphasized in the writing unit transfer to the presentation-focused unit so that the learner can focus on acquiring the presentation delivery skills that produce a persuasive and confident presentation.

The ultimate goal of this course is to provide students with the environment suitable for making the discovery that they can accomplish their academic goals in a language that may, at times, pose more problems than advantages, particularly for students who encounter challenges with their L1-sharing peers or home culture expectations and standards. By incorporating materials, activities, homework, and projects that require creativity and freedom of choice in message. What most ELLs need is not the input of content alone, but the tools to express in a comprehensible and listenable way. As a demographic of students, ELLs bring so much knowledge, experience, and perspective to every classroom. ESL 310 contains the course components, formative and summative assessments, and portfolio-based progress measures as a result of this perspective. The ultimate objective of this course is to leave the learner with something to show for their efforts and evidence that they can succeed in communicating across contexts and media.

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