

## TEACHING ESL STUDENTS

On Oct 31, 2005, a session on teaching ESL students was sponsored by the Foundations Program in Social Science. Nick Elson, ESL Coordinator, Faculty of Arts <[Nelson@yorku.ca](mailto:Nelson@yorku.ca)> shares his comments here. Contact Nick directly for more information.

### 1. ESL Students at York University

The presence of students from ESL backgrounds is an important part of York's academic and cultural make-up. These students bring different perspectives to the learning process, they create links with diverse communities, and bring meaning to the term "internationalization." They have achieved something quite remarkable, in many cases, by mastering a second language to the point where they are academically qualified for admission to the university.

### 2. Language in the Classroom

ESL: BICS/CALP; interlanguage; the fluency myth; the death of the native speaker; Englishes, proficiencies

University study places a heavy emphasis on language use, even for native speakers of English. Language in the classroom involves how it is used by students, as well as by instructors, and strategies for effective language use can have an important and positive effect on the learning process. The second language dilemma for students from ESL backgrounds is that they are both *users* and *learners* of the language simultaneously. This has particular implications for timed assignments such as exams. In applied linguistics, language use is commonly divided into two broad categories: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). The latter is the slowest to develop, is the most complex, and is the greatest source of difficulties for students from ESL backgrounds in the academic context.

### 3. Cultural /language issues

Cultural competence; cultural strategies; C5 (Critical cross-cultural communicative competence)

Discrete cultural issues are not as prominent in the classroom as they used to be, with the advent of the internet, television programmes, films and general international exposure. Some issues may be:

- A familiarity and directness in classroom exchanges that they may not be accustomed to
- Slang and swear words may be used in classroom discussion.
- A perceived lack of respect for the instructor
- A lack of familiarity with the norms of classroom or tutorial behaviour
- Unfamiliarity of students born and raised in Canada with assumptions and expectations of ESL students.

- Assumptions by instructors that all students share a base of common knowledge

Of significantly more interest are the issues of language and power, the role of English around the world, and its place in the distribution of linguistic, cultural, and economic power. This means teaching students strategies for making sense of cultural experiences and observations.

### **Classes**

- Particularly if students are first year, overt discussion of the teaching/learning format, course expectations, and expectations at the university can be very helpful to everyone. ESL students frequently do not have the same assumptions that students who have spent 12 years in the Canadian educational system may have.
- The better prepared they are for the lectures, the more they will understand. If there are readings assigned for that class, stress that they should do them, since this will make the lectures more accessible by making them familiar with vocabulary and concepts that will come up in the lecture.
- Remind them not to panic if the lectures seem to move very quickly and their ability to follow what's going on seems low. This will usually change as they get used to the speaking style of the lecturer, the subject matter, and the lecture format. Instructors have frequently observed that for some of their ESL students, the problem is not language or culture so much as a lack of familiarity with the implicit assumptions of the course and a lack of background knowledge.
- It is important to stress that much of what they experience has little to do with the fact that they are not native speakers of English. Almost all first year students will be making very similar adjustments.
- Urge them to see the instructor after the class, or ask you about problems they have in the course. There is a tendency to just let things slide until it is too late.

### **Tutorials**

- Explain what the purpose of tutorials is, to encourage the sharing of ideas, information and opinions related to the course materials and subject matter. Stress the role of tutorials in helping to make classes and lectures more accessible.
- These discussions can be lively and exciting and they should try to participate. Encourage participation by :
  - Urging them to prepare questions beforehand so that they can raise them in the discussion.
  - Urging them not to worry too much about how it sounds; their ideas are more important than how they express them. Incorporate them into class discussions so that native speakers of English in the group do not react negatively to their class performance.

- Making your teaching as visual as possible: notes, handouts, overheads, summaries, PowerPoint

#### 4. Responding to Student Writing

- Focus on *quality* rather than *quantity*: One and a half good pages are better than five poor ones.
- Comments on papers are generally ineffective from an instructional standpoint. Consider carefully what feedback is likely to be useful.
- Use a series of drafts if possible, tracking the students' progress and intercepting errors at an early stage.
- Correction:
  1. Errors are natural: They have logic. Be selective in corrections
  2. Emphasize *content* correction over grammar
  3. Single out errors that result in difficulty in communicating
  4. Single out high frequency errors
  5. Point out errors, but don't necessarily correct them.
  6. Reformulation and feedback
  7. Establish a checklist of a few errors that they tend to make and to use it before handing in assignments.
- Go over papers with the student, where practical
- Discuss plagiarism issues with them: "Patchwriting" etc. Humans appropriate others language for group membership, to grow, define themselves in new ways. We depend on community for our language, our voices, our arguments. They are not part of this community.
- Ask for re-writes where feasible
- Teach editing techniques
- Allow time in class to review written work before handing it in
- Consider whether extra time on tests or exams for ESL students is appropriate.

#### 5. Learning Strategies to pass on to ESL students

- Take the time to be well-organized and prepared. Preparation makes you familiar with words and phrases that will probably come up in the class, making you better able to listen and understand. Forming study groups can be helpful in this. Study groups that include native English speakers can be helpful.
- When reading, don't get hung up on individual words; focus on the *overall* meaning of sentences and paragraphs.
- Don't let problems or concerns build up in the course. If you feel you are slipping behind, for example, don't let it slide. Make an effort to contact the instructor or the tutorial leader to get help.
- Be familiar with helpful resources: ESL courses, the ESL Open Learning Centre (037 Vanier College), Centre for Academic Writing
- Sometimes instructors in courses arrange special library tours for their students
- Critical reading skills: self reflection, purpose, recognizing strategies, choice; logical fallacies; inference, "reading under the lines."