Integrating ESL Theory in Mainstream Computer Education: Challenges and Changes

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ABSTRACT

The Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki (WITT) is gearing up to receive large intakes of foreign students into computer education. To gain skills and strategies to meet the challenge of assisting these non-English speaking background (NESB) students, a teacher development 'ourse "ESL in the Mainstrea' " was completed.

This paper focuses on how aspects of ESL theory were applied in the classroom to assist NESB students in BC100. Discussion centres on adjustments made to the learning experience and changes made to the mode of presentation.

The next phase involves exploring the use of technologies for ESL students, in particular the Internet and the WITT intranet to encourage independent learning.

1.   INTRODUCTION

The Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki student numbers are about to be boosted by intakes of full fee paying foreign students, many of these from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB). These students are to be integrated into mainstream Degree and Certificate courses. To date, there have been only one or two NESB students in the computing Certificate courses, and these students have made very few demands on the tutor in or out of class. It is envisaged however, if approximately half the class is made up of NESB students the class dynamics will be very different. To learn skills and to gain strategies for coping with these changes a teacher development course 'ESL in the Mainstream' was completed.

2.   ABOUT THE COURSE: ESL IN THE MAINSTREAM

The course 'ESL in the Mainstream' is developed for Australian teachers, and case studies focus on Australian experiences. The aim of the course is to assist teachers to enable NESB students to experience equal educational opportunities and to achieve equal education outcomes in a supportive environment that is conducive to their learning. (Burke, *et al.* 1998). An accredited teacher delivered the one semester long course to teachers from Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Institutions. As a condition of acceptance onto the course, each participant had to be involved and closely interact with at least one NESB student. This required obtaining the student's permission. The class met with the tutor for a three-hour workshop each week. A certificate was presented

at the end of the course detailing all elements of the course that had been completed satisfactorily.

The course covered a range of content to meet the participants' learning needs. Of particular relevance was:

- introducing new teaching and learning strategies to assist with English as a second language learners
- providing opportunities to research issues in participants' own classrooms leading to reflection and analysis of own practice
- catering for different learning styles with a variety of learning processes.

3. FEATURES OF THE COURSE TO AID THE LEARNING PROCESS

Each weekly workshop included 'Between Unit Activities', (opportunities to investigate issues arising from the workshops and implement strategies in the classroom), given readings to examine and reflect on, exercises to participate in with the NESB student and evaluation on each workshop.

4. AWARENESS OF THE CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY NESB STUDENTS

The content covered in the course and the relationship of working closely with a NESB student created a very real appreciation of the challenges that these students encounter when they are still learning the English language, whilst learning the curriculum content in English. During the very first session of the course an awareness was gained that "the student's competency in English is related to their level of competence in their first language and the cumulative effect of this on the student's learning", (Burke, 1998). This basic knowledge seemed very logical but until these issues had been 'spelt out' no strategies had been put in place in the classroom to help overcome these difficulties. In addition, no consideration had been given to NESB students having to re-learn differences in the presentation of work to meet the needs of their adopted Institute's curriculum.

This knowledge also brought about awareness that students from a lower socio economic (LSE) background may face similar challenges with the formal English language. Street talk and street pronunciation whilst fine for basic interpersonal conversation with peers differs to the more formal oral language used in business (and in academia). Therefore LSE students would experience some degree of the difficulties in learning the Business Communication (BC100) curriculum that NESB students do. In previous years, whilst teaching the BC100 course, students who had displayed gaps in language skills had been considered by the tutor to have learning difficulties. Apart from trying to give them constructive and motivating feedback no other thought had been given to the consequences of these 'gaps' having a cumulative effect. To gain extra help these students were advised to seek support from Student Services. This may have been inappropriate (Burke, 1998).

5. THE CHALLENGE TO CHANGE: APPLYING ESL LEARNING TO THE BC100 COURSE

The challenge to change teaching methods from lecture mode to small group, pair work, and peer work, and to simplify the wording of course lesson materials came with knowledge of the 'daily battle' these students faced whilst coping with reading in English and writing in English. As strategies were gained from the course to assist with the reading and writing challenge they were implemented in the classroom.

5.1 THE READING CHALLENGE

Working closely with the NESB student raised an understanding of the difficulties these students have with reading. The students read the words, then nearly always have to reread the material for meaning (unless they are at a very advanced level). Reading in this manner placed the NESB students and perhaps the LSE students at a disadvantage when reading their textbook, preparing for exams, and reading exam questions.

Strategies suggested to assist with the reading issues in assignments, involved reading aloud, supporting words with the dictionary meaning, and also using the word(s) with the meaning in context (Burke and Kay, 1998). Different ideas were suggested and implemented to help with reading from the textbook . These included: brainstorming the topic

for prior knowledge, (either in small groups or as a class); getting students to pose questions about the topic, modelling the exercise; and introducing new vocabulary in context. It was also important for the teacher to be aware "what the text assumes and the teaching point that the text raises - what culture specific knowledge does it assume? What language knowledge does it assume?" (Burke and Kay, 1998). Implementing these strategies in the classroom took time, but it made a difference to some students and helped them to gain meaning from their texts and develop skills as independent learners.

5.2 CHANGING THE DELIVERY OF WRITTEN COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

The usual methods when facilitating the learning process for written communication was to firstly teach the process (the setup or form that was acceptable for the document in business), then teach the product of the document (for example the general content for a letter of request). No grammar lessons were given. The emphasis was on using appropriate language and tone. The motivation to change was brought about by Burke (1990), emphasising "Be aware of the differences between oral language and written language".

To assist with the writing process it was suggested to present and model with the students a number of points about oral communication, for example:

♦ "oral language is a two way process...

♦ the participants in conversation are present...

♦ meaning is jointly constructed between the two participants ,

♦ sentences are frequently incomplete..

♦ the participants have the benefit of non-verbal language...

♦ participants can jump from topic to topic and back again,

♦ participants understand the context as they are part of it.

♦ and most important of all to emphasise Written language participants are not present..." (Burke, 1990).

The above points are covered to a lesser extent when preparing the students for their oral report. However, introducing these differences whilst discussing the writing process reinforced to the students that the receivers were not present when they were writing the document, and that they had to provide the background details for the reader. In addition, these points accentuated the need to organise the document well and to write complete sentences.

6. BUILDING CLASS SUPPORT - USING A PEER SYSTEM

The NESB student who was co-operating with participation in the ESL course was generally very quiet in class, shy amongst fellow students, and reluctant to take part in and contribute to small group discussion. If the student had something that he had not understood and wanted to ask he would gather his books up slowly to ensure that all other students had left the classroom before approaching the tutor. An informal discussion with the NESB student as to his degree of comfort in participating in group work, elicited the information that he did not feel comfortable with his spoken English. He expressed the wish to be able to 'joke and talk to the other students like 'Jim' does' (Jim spoke in a loud voice and used colloquial and at times colourful language. He was a 'good talker'). Schloss noted in an article taken from (Dwyer, 1989) "Language is learned by using it to interact with others to get something done". The request of the NESB student was taken on board, and a peer system was implemented in the classroom. This buddy system had the noticeable effect of assisting all students to develop confidence when communicating in the classroom.

7. EXPLORING THE USE OF TECHNOLOGIES TO ENCOURAGE INDEPENDENT LEARNING

The WITT Intranet and the Internet are a means to establish a comfortable, low threat learning environment outside the classroom. The WITT intranet can act as a depository for the content covered in class that students may access for reading and revision purposes, the Internet places English in an international context and exposes students to a wider range of English than they would encounter in the classroom (Muehleisen 1997). Using the Internet for English study is motivating: the international

context of English on the web provides learners with greater opportunities to communicate across cultures. (Moote, 2002). The next phase is to continue to develop resources to place on the WITT Intranet to act as a back up for those students who want to review or reread the material.

8.   SUMMARY

Participating in this Course ESL in the Mainstream has created a greater awareness of the challenges facing the NESB students and the New Zealand students who come from a lower socio economic background. Interacting with the NESB student and learning his background and prior educational experiences assisted to create a learning environment to maximise his learning opportunities. The practical application of strategies to assist with reading and writing supported all of the students in the class. Changing the model of delivery from lecture to pairs, using peer work and small group work to develop interaction among the learners was well received by the class and this was reflected in their results.

As a result of participating in this course there is a fuller appreciation of the importance of language development, and learning strategies for language development to assist all students to achieve their full potential.

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