It's Not What We Expected! A Case Study of Adult Learner Views in ESL Pedagogy

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Patsy Lightbown's article entitled "Classroom SLA Research and Second Language Teaching" (2000) in *Applied Linguistics* demonstrates that a rift still exists between theory and practice in second language acquisition (SLA). Researchers and teachers are often at odds when it comes to how research should be integrated into pedagogical decisions. However, another rift exists that often has equally detrimental implications for adult ESL learners. This is the disconnect between teachers' and students' beliefs and expectations about language pedagogy. If teachers base their pedagogical decisions for the adult ESL classroom on theories and assumptions that run counter to the intuition of adult learners, then an unproductive learning environment may emerge. To complicate matters further, if the adult learners have studied English in their native countries, then they likely bring certain expectations in regards to pedagogy which may or may not be met. In fact, highly educated students who come to an English-speaking country and study ESL may bring a host of pedagogical expectations (some related to language learning and others related to more general pedagogical practices) that run counter to those of their teachers. Consequences such as poor attendance, high attrition, and general dissatisfaction with the course may result.

This article presents a case study of an adult ESL program where students and teachers viewed language pedagogy differently, often resulting in some general dissatisfaction and perhaps contributing to student attrition. This is not meant to be an indictment of this particular program. Many students report being quite satisfied with the program described below. However, the data in this case study, at the very least, raise the question of how to better articulate pedagogical rationale to the students in light of the various adult expectations. In the time I spent conducting this study, I never observed teachers explain the rationale behind their pedagogical decisions, and so any student who questioned certain practices was frustrated and sometimes resentful. As the study will demonstrate, these frustrations and resentments were rarely voiced and so the teachers did not know to respond nor dialogue with students about the techniques they employed.

Background

Before describing the study, it will be helpful to outline some general tendencies in adult ESL research. Several approaches and orientations in adult ESL scholarship have replaced the more traditional grammar-based approaches. Certainly Stephen Krashen's (1983) work on comprehensible input and the Natural Approach has had an enormous impact on classroom approaches. Instead of grammar drills, an emphasis on comprehensible input has resulted in methods that strive to make all classroom interaction comprehensible in the target language. Additionally, the communicative approach, based on Dell Hymes' (1972) work, has influenced classroom teachers. In the communicative approach, the necessity of considering the communicative contexts that interlocuters find themselves in is highlighted. Classroom approaches based on a communicative approach do not necessarily de-emphasize grammar, but certainly more emphasis is placed on being able to communicate in specific contexts.

Critical pedagogy (CP) has also been an orientation that has influenced classroom research and practices. Based on early work by Paulo Freire with adult literacy in Brazil, CP researchers have noted that the emphasis in the adult ESL classroom must not be solely language (Auerbach, 1993; Nunan, 1988; Thomas, 1988). Indeed, Auerbach and Burgess (1989) criticize the traditional language learning approaches in an adult ESL setting because they tend to "prepare students for subservient roles and reinforce relations within the classroom by precluding the creation of meaning and development of critical thinking skills" (p. 475). To counter a tendency to focus on these "subservient roles" and prepare students only for minimum-wage jobs, many scholars have advocated a paradigm shift in ESL pedagogy and in classroom practices. Central to this shift is an emphasis on, as Freire (1970) says, forging "a pedagogy . . . with the oppressed, not for the oppressed" (p. 30).

These new directions in adult ESL pedagogy have produced new pedagogical orientations, classroom techniques, and materials. Certainly not all classroom teachers are aware of all the different approaches, but these new approaches have led in large part to more student-centered techniques. Among the most salient of these techniques are group work, inductive approaches to grammar, and limited error correction. These techniques are in keeping with the philosophical underpinnings of the approaches because they allow students to be more in charge of their language development. Instead of the teachers always determining the curriculum, students in learner-centered classrooms are more empowered to participate in curricular decisions.

The question that prompted this study is do adult ESL students share the same enthusiasm for these techniques, or do they view such techniques as an inexplicable abdication of duty by the teacher who, by relying on these approaches, is failing to

adequately prepare for class? Skilton-Sylvester's (2002) study of Cambodian immigrants' participation in an adult ESL program, found that many learners who left the program did so because the program did not allow them to develop their true identities in the classroom activities. Klassen and Burnaby (1993) found that adult ESL students found ways to cope with English in all environments except in their ESL class where they felt most unable to cope and understand how to get along. In the case study below, some learners reveal that it was not only their identities that suffered, but they were dissatisfed with many of the student-centered techniques that were unexpected and considered marginally effective, making their ESL classes a place where they could not get along. While not all student-centered classrooms have activities that students do not like, this study indicates that many adult students are uncomfortable with new language learning techniques and prefer more traditional and grammar-driven approaches. The irony is that adult ESL teachers who use student-centered techniques to make their curricular decisions more transparent often fail to dialogue with students about why they are using certain approaches, and therein lies the disconnect and the differing expectations.

The Study

Ethnographically-oriented case studies have the benefit of allowing multiple voices to share their opinion of the same topic from different perspectives (Gillespie, 1993; Van Lier, 1988; Watson-Gegeo, 1988; Wiley, 1993). This methodology is especially useful in addressing attitudes towards pedagogical techniques and how this affects views of an ESL program's effectiveness. This research paradigm allows one not only to develop a *thick description* (Geertz, 1973), but it also is the one paradigm that most directly speaks to teachers (Van Lier, 1988) and can heal the rift between theory and practice in SLA. For these reasons, an ethnographic methodology was selected for this study.

In this semester-long study of a moderate sized (150 students) ESL program known as the Green Acres ESL School (a pseudonym), located on the campus of a large mid-western university, I examined the attitudes of the adult ESL students towards the techniques that their teachers used. Green Acres has a diverse population, but the three main ethnic groups are Latin American, Chinese, and Korean. Over 80% of the students are female.

Ethnographic studies seek to identify *encultured members* (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972); that is, group members who understand the culture of the group well. This was a challenge at Green Acres since each student comes to the school with a different agenda. Some students come to the school simply to give structure to their day because their spouse is gone all day attending graduate classes, others to learn enough English to attend an American university, and others to be able to able to watch TV and/or

participate in popular events. In the end, these three motivations became the basis for selecting three main encultured group categories: spouses, potential university students, and popular events' participants. I identified these groups of students who share some common characteristics, and I interviewed students from each of the groups. First and most important are the female spouses whose husbands are full-time graduate students. The majority of students at Green Acres are from this group. However, the other two groups are a very important component of the school and add an interesting dimension to each classroom.

I interviewed a total of ten students from different levels (beginning, intermediate, advanced) who represent the different kinds of students mentioned above. I also conducted three focus group interviews with the three major different ethnic groups: Chinese, Korean, and Latin-American. This was done primarily because some students were hesitant to discuss teaching techniques in one-on-one interviews. They were far more talkative, open, and ultimately critical in the focus groups. The focus groups also allowed a comparison of the way different ethnic groups viewed the techniques at the school. Each focus groups consisted of eight to ten participants.

I also interviewed 10 teachers who are presently or had recently taught at the school and had been at the school long enough so that they were encultured in the educational setting. The school has a part-time staff of eight teachers, one of whom serves as director. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded according to themes such as attitudes towards group work, classroom activities, and error correction. I asked *grand tour* questions (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972) so that students could give me a verbal tour of the educational culture, the pedagogical techniques, and their feelings about them. A representative list of questions is included in the appendix. I also examined pedagogical practices by observing and audio-recording ten classes and examining course materials.

Data Analysis

After collecting all data, I coded the 300 pages of transcripts, field notes, and documents using seven categories. During my data collecting, seven themes seemed the most revelatory in regards to the culture at the school. These seven themes are:

1. formality of school (classes)
2. L2 teaching/learning beliefs
3. teaching/learning of American culture
4. student attrition
5. testing
6. socialization
7. language learning goals

My first step in beginning an analysis was to use the data to provide an accurate description of the program (Patton, 1990). Comparing and contrasting comments from informants as well as noting actions of cultural participants in regards to these categories accomplished this part of the analysis. Patton (1990) notes that in analysis, qualitative researchers can use a case analysis or a cross-case analysis. A case analysis is used when the researcher writes a case study for each person interviewed. A cross-case analysis means "grouping together answers from different people to common questions or analyzing different perspectives on central issues" (Patton, 1990, p. 376). For this study, I deemed a cross-case analysis more appropriate because students at the school vary considerably in their backgrounds and their expectations from the program. In order to highlight the diversity in regards to the major attributes of the program, a cross-case analysis was the best choice.

To begin the analysis, I coded all the data and then grouped the comments, journal entries, and sections of documents with similar codes. This coding allowed a comparing and contrasting of the issues at hand, such as different views as to whether the teachers should use group work. By comparing quotes from teachers and students, it became clear that each group varied in its opinion regarding this area. This coding, sorting and grouping of data by themes allowed a balanced description of the school and its culture.

The interpretation of this kind of data can be subjective so triangulation is necessary to see if the same interpretation can be derived from multiple sources. For instance, the question of attrition brought different sorts of answers from teachers and students. Since this can be a controversial area, I could not rely solely on comments and interviews. I had to supplement these with observations of student attendance in a class. I analyzed enrollment and attrition patterns from morning, afternoon, and evening classes in an effort to understand the motivation for attrition.

A particularly relevant feature of the students at this school is their level of education. The students at Green Acres are all well-educated with most having a college degree from a university in their native country. Many have graduate degrees as well. This undoubtedly influences students' expectations of language learning techniques since most students have had exposure to second and foreign language classes in their home countries. This high level of education also limits the study's generalizability. Nonetheless, the data present an interesting picture of some of the kinds of differing expectations that may occur when teachers and students are not uniform in their beliefs about teaching techniques.

Findings

Group Work

One of the major differences for many students at the Green Acres ESL School and their native countries in terms of approaches to learning an L2 is the use of group work. Julia, one of the teachers at Green Acres and a strong advocate of group work, noted she has difficulty convincing students of the efficacy of group work. Many students said in interviews that they think teachers who use group work are abdicating their duties. Even in Conversation I and Conversation II, many students will not actively participate in group work. Rather, they expect the teacher to give some sort of lecture. One Chinese student put it this way: "I think some teachers would say, 'OK, you four in group talk for ten minutes or twenty minutes.' Teacher go away and the students talk for twenty minutes. . . . I prefer to listen to the teacher."

A related issue to group work is how much student participation the teacher should allow. There is a difference of opinion among the different ethnic groups on this issue. The main difference lies between those students who are Asian and those who are Latin American. Asian students expressed their opinion that the teacher should be the focus of any class, and students should participate only when asked specifically by the teacher. This attitude often conflicts with the beliefs and attitudes of the Latin American students. When I asked a group of Latin American students about their Asian classmates' participation in class, the Latin Americans expressed their dismay that the Chinese and Korean classmates would not talk in group work or other activities. One Latin American focus group participant related that having Asian members in the same classroom is good for cultural enrichment. However, due to different language backgrounds and pedagogical expectations, it can be problematic in language learning matters. She put it this way:

> Sometimes the Chinese have bad pronunciation. They write very well, but bad pronunciation. And this is the situation with the Chinese and Koreans. They think they have higher levels than they really have. And sometimes they want to go to classes which are no good for them.

Students from Latin American backgrounds voiced their frustration several times at having to listen to "bad English" from Chinese-speaking classmates in group work and in class discussion. They enjoy the cultural enrichment of learning about China and Korea from their classmates, but want them to speak less than they do.

On the other hand, the Chinese students think that Latin American students monopolize conversation in group work and in class discussion. Their view was that

students should listen to the teacher, and they were often indignant that classmates spoke more than the teacher.

Inductive Approaches to Grammar

Two extremes exist at the school among the teachers regarding grammar instruction: those who follow a natural approach that is student-centered and de-emphasizes formal grammar, and those who follow a grammar-based methodology. These competing attitudes towards the role of grammar informs and shapes behaviors of the teachers and the activities they do in class.

Those who follow a natural approach rarely prepare grammar instruction. Rather, they prepare activities designed to pique student interest. For example, on the day I observed Conversation I, the teacher designed a lesson on adjectival usage. She wrote fifteen adjectives on the board that could be used to describe people such as *cheerful*, *inquisitive*, and *happy.* The students were asked to pick out the three that described themselves the best and tell why. During the class, one student asked about the suffix *-ness* that could be used to form the noun *cheerfulness*. The teacher was somewhat unprepared for such a question as her response revealed:

> Well, you can be cheerful. Cheerful, cheerful, cheerful and that's the specific quality, but cheerfulness is like . . . the general idea and is not specific, it's more general. Someone who shows cheerfulness is someone who goes through life with politeness. You know what I mean? If you don't fully understand the *-ness* don't worry about it. As long as you understand the root word itself. The root meaning. You know because we'll be speaking about it in the general sense.

The student was noticeably and understandably frustrated by this answer, but did not pursue the issue further. However, the lesson seemed to be a success in that students did practice several unfamiliar adjectives, and by the sheer repetition of the adjectives, the students might have a good chance of remembering them and being able to use them in future communication. However, all the students interviewed expressed concern that a lack of explicit grammar instruction would hinder their acquisition of standard English. They simply could not conceive of the benefits of an inductive approach. On the other hand, the natural approach teachers were very proud of the fact that they did not burden the students with grammar explanations. The more popular teachers were those who think there is a place for explicit grammar instruction in the classroom. The teachers who did not incorporate grammar lessons were usually criticized for their lack of teaching ability.

Error Correction

All students unanimously agree that explicit error correction should be employed as a pedagogical technique. They expressed resentment about teachers not correcting them. The students reject any teaching approach that would eliminate explicit error correction by the teacher. They fear fossilization in their language development and deem constant correction as the only remedy. Students understand and appreciate that the teachers are being polite and not wanting to make them feel uncomfortable (a very Freirean notion), but this is not the main emphasis for them. "Sometimes teachers are afraid to hurt your feelings," said one student. This sentiment was echoed by another student who noted, "But we don't know if we make mistakes. If I say something, I don't know if it's right." Students related many stories about their attempts to use English in the community and felt that if the teachers had corrected them in class, then they would have had fewer embarrassing situations in the real world. I think it is fair to draw the conclusion that while no language learner likes to appear foolish, the situation is magnified at Green Acres due to the fact students are often the educated elite in their countries, and they do not want to sound uneducated. Many students related stories about local people who laughed at them or told them to "learn English before coming to this country." One student in an intermediate class related her experience when she went to buy her books for her ESL class. All the books for Green Acres are located in a special section in the university bookstore. When this student asked where she could locate the books, a salesperson responded by saying, "Oh, you're an F2. Your section is over there." F2 is her visa status. The student said the only reply she could manage was, "I'm not an F2." The students at the school want to be able to go out and interact in the community without having marked English and correction by their English teachers, they believe, is the best means to this end.

Many teachers are certainly influenced by Stephen Krashen (1983) and his view that explicit grammar instruction and correction is inferior to the Natural Method. Teachers at the school who refuse to correct or teach grammar believe they are being faithful to new research. However, this is not explained to students, and it becomes a contentious issue, especially for adult students who have had some English training that emphasizes grammar in other countries. The usual reaction of these students to methodologies that de-emphasize grammar and error correction is bewilderment and quite often attrition. In any given class the attrition rate is around 50% over the course of a 15-week semester. While students leave for many reasons, the issue of mismatching of pedagogical practices is undoubtedly, as many students noted, a contributing factor.

Interestingly, teachers who feel as though they do indeed correct, expressed frustration that it never seems to increase proficiency as quickly as they would like.

Teachers who prefer the more advanced classes do more correction than those who work with lower level learners. They believe that explicit correction does eventually assist in acquisition. Many teachers who work with lower level learners are more suspicious of correction and have an intuitive feeling that exposure to the language will result in acquisition and that correction can be a hindrance because it raises anxiety levels and does not really seem to aid in acquisition. The teachers at the higher levels think a systematic explanation of English grammar coupled with constant correction will result in error-free proficiency in English. The teachers with an emphasis on grammar reported having a lower rate of attrition in their classes.

Discussion and Implications

> We have to be honest and say it is English that brings them in the door. But it's the caring and nurturing that keeps them here. You know . . . to me . . . a lot of it is really the caring . . . I mean, by the end of the semester I feel a real bond.

This comment comes from Miriam, one of the most popular teachers at the school. It captures a prevailing sentiment among the teachers concerning their roles. They feel that in the end, while methodology is important, their role as nurturers is equally if not more important. While they are concerned with methodology, they do not view it as paramount to a successful class. For their part, students at Green Acres appreciate the care and concern of the teachers and for many students this is indeed a tremendous benefit, but overall they are more concerned with a successful English learning experience, and this starts with sound methodology.

A former director of the school, Stephanie, very succinctly noted that in her opinion, the students "just don't want the pressure of a real school." While some students report that they appreciate the nurturing environment, they primarily seek a school that will teach them English. Ironically, the very thing that intensifies their feelings of being disconnected from their new surroundings is the issue that problematizes language learning: The students are well-educated and had professional lives in their home countries. Due to their level of education, they expect classes to be a certain way and when these expectations are not met by the school or by individual teachers, they are dissatisfied with the academic life of the school even though they relish the community spirit. The problems with attrition and the debate over the role of explicit grammar instruction indicate that students and teachers have not yet found a perfect combination of traditional and new language teaching techniques.

The goals of the students determine their attitudes towards the school. Unquestionably, the teachers feel a need to help students fit into their new surroundings.

This remains crucial and essential. Yet all classes are not academic in nature and students wish they were. Consequently, attrition occurs because the class or the school itself lacks a certain air of formality.

Some students view group work as a way for the teacher to "be lazy," while the teachers view group work as a way to address the concern of students that they do not have enough opportunities to practice. If teachers continue to use group work, they need to maintain constant dialogue with students. Teachers should explain their rationale in using group work, and students must voice their desire to listen to the "expert."

Another issue that must be addressed is "free talking." Teachers view "going off on a tangent" as beneficial and interesting for the students. However, the students want to follow a more structured plan. The students grow weary of starting every Monday with half the class period taken up with impromptu discussions of what each student did over the weekend.

It should be noted that sometimes teachers do rely on these discussions as fillers on the occasions they are not adequately prepared for class. Many of the teachers admitted that on days they are not prepared, "We just talk." For those students who want a more formal and systematic approach to English, these informal discussions are frustrating. While they enjoy the discussions, they do not think the official lesson has begun and as a result think their English may not be improving. Whether or not simple exposure to the L2 is sufficient for acquisition is a question that lies outside the boundaries of this study; however, it is obvious that the students who want more formality can be frustrated because their belief about L2 learning is incongruent with the beliefs of the teachers. This frustration alone may hinder acquisition.

The most pressing issue that I noticed is the need to address the issue of "listening to bad English." Many students complained that it is a waste of their time to come to class and listen to other students dominate the class and answer every question. While group work was viewed as the answer to this, instructors need to pursue other solutions.

The school's former director captured the attitude of the students towards different teachers' approaches by noting that they "tend to gravitate to those teachers who best fit their notion of a language classroom." To a large extent this is true. Students typically self-select classes with some guidance from teachers. In observing classes and talking with students, it became apparent that students often selected a class not based on their level of proficiency, but based on the teacher and the time of day of the class.

Conclusion

Certainly, results of this ethnographic case study are not generalizable to every situation, nor does space allow for a complete description of all the incongruities between teachers and students. But there are some remarks that can be made about the nature of the adult ESL classroom and student reactions to teaching techniques.

First, a lack of understanding and appreciation of the students' perceptions causes a rift or gap between students and teachers. This problem can be resolved in several ways: attrition, more student-teacher dialogue, or the altering of classroom procedures. They are all problematic. Attrition certainly is not a good solution. Dialogue may or may not resolve issues and many teachers are unwilling (or unable) to change classroom techniques. I think it incumbent upon the teachers to decide what combination of the last two suggestions is right for their pedagogical contexts. Teachers should begin to acknowledge that perhaps students understand their own needs and learning preferences and despite their lack of familiarity with SLA research, they know what works for them as students. Well-intentioned researchers warn against "assuming that a total linguistic and cultural assimilation into the dominant group is desirable, necessary or inevitable" (Wiley, 1993, p. 428) in adult ESL when it comes to teaching culture. The same could be said for teaching methodology. Students need not be ignored when considering methodology nor must they be assimilated into current methodological practices. Teachers must guard against making the class unrecognizable, so that it becomes the one place that students feel they cannot manage (Klassen & Burnaby, 1993).

Second, every teacher knows that it is impossible to please every student in a classroom, nor should we try to. However, second language learning involves a range of emotions that other learning often does not. Language is deeply personal and all second language learners develop a "language ego" (Brown, 1994) that is often fragile. Teachers should be aware of this and work to develop trust with the students in regard to classroom techniques. The more trust that develops, the more chance of successful dialogue between students and teachers. This trust and dialogue will allow teachers to clearly articulate their rationale for classroom decisions. For those teachers who do not have clear rationale, they should develop it. To not develop it betrays the integrity of the classroom and the trust between student and teacher.

Finally, this trust also will allow frustrated students to feel more open about sharing their frustrations and their expectations with the teachers. Ultimately such dialogue, whether formal or informal, will benefit language acquisition in the adult ESL classroom. Teachers may not be able to please everyone, but at least students should be made to understand why teachers do what they do in the language classroom.

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Appendix A
Interview Questions

Questions for Students

1. Why is there a problem with attrition at the ESL School?
2. What are the methods and activities teachers use to help improve your English?
3. Describe a typical class period.
4. What are your language learning goals?
5. Do you like learning American culture in addition to English?
6. Which teacher uses an approach you like?
7. What is your best memory of the School?
8. What is your worst memory of the School?
9. What should be changed at the School?

Questions for Teachers

1. Why is attrition a problem?
2. What methods do you use in your classes?
3. How do adults best learn a second language?
4. What is an experience you have had that captures the spirit of the School?
5. What are the language learning goals of your students?
6. Do you have an English-only rule in class?
7. What direction should the School take from here?