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# Designing and Maintaining an ESL Program for Intermediate Adults in an Open-Enrollment Program

by David Wardell, Mt. Hood Community College

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During the fall quarter of 1991, I was assigned to an intermediate ESL class for adults at a satellite campus of Mt. Hood Community College in Portland, Oregon. Although this language program operated under conditions that were less than optimum, these circumstances may, in fact, be common to a great many ESL training projects which serve adult learners. Because some very satisfactory outcomes were reached despite these difficult conditions, I would like to share some observations about this local teaching and learning experience with the general ESL community.

## Negative Factors

Strict time constraints set for this language training limited the hours of instruction and interaction with the students. These classes were held between 8:00 and 9:30 a.m. Monday through Thursday over a ten-week period. Child care and transportation problems arose frequently because of this early time frame. Furthermore, because other training programs followed closely on our heels, the ESL classrooms had to be vacated promptly. As a result, these rigid class periods reduced opportunities for informal discussions between teachers and students—not to mention time for socialization among the students themselves.

Moreover, the student body in these classes was rarely stable because of the

college's open-enrollment policy. At any time during the term any person who appeared at the MHCC registration desk seeking ESL instruction and who held satisfactory immigration credentials, was slotted into one of our three morning ESL classes.<sup>1</sup> Even in the next to last week of the term one new student was introduced into my section. While placement did take into consideration a learner's general English proficiency (Beginning, Lower Intermediate, Higher Intermediate), new students sometimes struggled because they had not been exposed to earlier lessons or because they lacked familiarity with their teacher's expectations and strategies.

At the same time, attrition in these classes was generally higher than that which I have experienced in most of my other teaching assignments. Some students who attended regularly for several weeks simply disappeared never to be seen again. The reasons for these losses were never easy to determine; however, the pressures of full-time employment, family obligations, and ill health were probably the leading causes for students dropping out. Other students may have left because they lacked the sustained commitment needed for successful language development.

Meanwhile, it was not always easy to identify the long term goals of the participants in this language project. While several students voiced a desire to continue in specific college programs (e.g.

computer science) and others clearly demonstrated the potential to become assimilated into the regular community college community, other students openly dismissed any interest in further academic work. Few had any definite course charted for the immediate future which a language project could support. Nevertheless, one common belief among these students was the idea that acquiring a good command of English would ultimately improve their chances for success in this land where they had started new lives.

### Positive Factors

Cultural diversity was the hallmark of my high intermediate ESL group, and this—perhaps more than anything else—served to strengthen the students' language learning experience. Within this single class were students from China, Japan, Korea, Cambodia, Vietnam, Romania, Poland, the Soviet Union, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. In all of my prior English teaching experiences, homogeneous student populations had been the rule—all Thai, all Iranian, all Chinese or all Japanese. Here for the first time in my career there was no "buzz" of first language chatter invading the English learning environment. Not only did my MHCC students need to manipulate the teaching materials in English, but they also had to initiate their preliminary negotiations about how to perform these activities solely in the target language. For example, determining who was to ask questions first, who was to write the answers, who was to direct the role play, and so forth took place exclusively in English. True, this process was occasionally cumbersome, yet the extra effort these students made in

communicating with one another in English contributed substantially to their overall linguistic growth. Furthermore, our success in maintaining the target language as the dominant mode of communication throughout our lessons undercuts the common notion in EFL classrooms<sup>2</sup> that students cannot perform language learning tasks satisfactorily until they first have an opportunity to "set the tasks" in their own language.

The nature of this course made it impossible for the college to enforce attendance, yet—despite an attrition rate that may have surpassed that of a traditional ESL college course—a core of ten or twelve students remained loyal from beginning to end. Their dedication provided an internal stability which helped maintain the pace and spirit of the training.

At the same time, the maturity level of this group helped these students progress linguistically. The ages within this intermediate class ranged from late teens and early twenties to several elderly students who had entered retirement. Thus, the average age must have fallen somewhere in the mid-thirties. These adults attended English classes because they chose to come for this training—not because they were compelled to do so by parents or some other authority. This self-motivation and commitment to self-improvement was doubtless a significant factor which contributed to their language development. Though most of these adults were gainfully employed (at least on a part-time basis), some were housewives and a few were between jobs. Distractions that sometimes occur with adolescents never arose during this class; the students kept their attention focused on

the lessons, and this devotion ultimately had its rewards.

### Instructional Approach

The lessons throughout the fall term were "contextual." Specifically, the classes during this ten-week period included units on gardening, Halloween, fire safety, Thanksgiving, and salmon.

The unit on gardening dealt with general details about how to create and maintain a home garden and concluded with a "treasure hunt" at a nearby nursery where students had to identify bulbs, gardening equipment, and other supplies that had been discussed in class. The unit on Halloween, which examined the history of this celebration from its pagan origins to the modern day, tried to introduce newcomers to the U.S. to some of the local madness stimulated by this October 31 festival. The fire safety unit was based on a brochure produced by the United States Fire Administration and distributed through the McDonald's restaurant chain. The unit on Thanksgiving covered colonial history of the United States as well as the traditions associated with this national holiday. And the unit on salmon, which contained a series of lessons developed from an article in a Portland newspaper, promoted concern for ecology.

This topical approach was an attempt to make the language learning interesting and meaningful to a diverse adult audience. Rather than "bottom up" learning this class was "top down." In other words, rather than dwelling on specific grammar points and other discrete linguistic skills, the training attempted to frame the lessons around general themes with general relevance to the students' lives. As each of

these themes was explored, attention was given to specific linguistic problems as the need arose.

The instructional techniques for each non-stop, ninety-minute period were deliberately varied so as to address the four language skill areas (listening, speaking, reading and writing) as well as to ensure that student attention remained high. These activities, which used teacher-generated materials, included vocabulary exercises (such as odd-man-out), listening cloze passages, short dictations, and scrambled sentences. Pair and group work were essential features of these learning experiences.

Each lesson for this class began with a brief five point quiz based on the material presented during the previous day. The rationale for this testing was: a) to encourage students to attend to and reflect on the content of their lessons; b) to offer regular feedback on individual linguistic progress; and c) to encourage prompt and regular attendance. A review of these daily quiz scores reveals a steady growth in student performance (see table 1).

**Table 1. Daily Quiz Averages**

Quiz#	Average Score	Participants
1	1.42	9
5	2.38	15
10	3.11	17
15	3.44	18
20	3.50	14
25	3.56	18
30	3.75	20
35	3.13	16

Results of this daily monitoring suggest that: (1) regular exposure to guided

language training facilitates learning in adult learners of English as a second language and (2) the MHCC ESL Program had a positive effect on the language competency of non-native speakers within the community.

### Conclusion

Although many language programs operate under conditions that are less favorable than instructors and administrators might hope for, linguistic progress may still be achieved. Even though personal and professional obligations of adult learners sometimes intrude and interfere with language instruction, the cultural diversity, maturity and dedication of these adult learners can play an important role in promoting their linguistic progress. Contextual materials with immediate relevance to students' lives and a variety of instructional techniques help maintain the interest of adult learners. Finally, regular feedback on individual progress has a positive effect in stimulating student progress.

### Notes

1. The college also offered ESL training in the evenings, but because I was not a member of that teaching team, my observations are limited to the morning sections.
2. For a much fuller discussion of the distinction between ESL and EFL, see the following sources:

Helgesen, M. (1978). "The EFL/ESL Distinction," *The Language Teacher*, 11 (9), 13-16.

Helgesen, M. and S. Brown (1987). "The EFL/ESL Distinction: Three Opinions—Christina Bratt-Paulston, JoAnn Crandall and Mario Rinvoluceri," *The Language Teacher*, 11 (9), 19-21.

LoCastro, V. (1987). "Teaching ESL Internationally?" *The Language Teacher*, 11 (9), 10-13.

Maple, R. (1987). "TESL Versus TEFL: What's the Difference?" *TESOL Newsletter*, 21 (2), 35-36.

Martin, A.V. (1986). "Expectations and Reality: Teaching ESL Internationally," *TESOL Newsletter*, 20 (2), 1, 4.

Wardell, D. (1988). "English as a Foreign Language/English as a Second Language," *Silver Jubilee Souvenir, Regional Institute of English at Bangalore, India*, 10-12.

### About the Author

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