

Micro-ESL: Vocabulary, Grammar . . . AND Communication

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If one were to glance through the tables of contents of the numerous ESL textbooks on the market today, one would see a fascinating variety of approaches to the teaching of English. For example, a few chapters of one book might look like this:

1. The Verb *be*
2. The Simple Present
3. The Present Continuous

Another text might contain:

1. Making Requests
2. Expressing Disagreement
3. Giving Advice

And still another could contain:

1. At the Airport
2. At a Restaurant
3. At the Employment Office

Discussions of the merits of the structural (first example), functional/notional (second example), and situational (third example) approaches to the teaching of ESL continue while teachers search in earnest for "the ideal" approach to use with their students and the most effective learning activities to implement that approach.

Until recently, the structural approach has been the most widely used in the United States. This approach focuses on the forms of the language to be mastered - its grammatical and lexical units, and the rules for combining these units appropriately. Its basic premise is that forms should be practiced and "learned" before the learner attempts to use them for real communication. Both theoreticians and practitioners have argued, however, that the structural approach places too much focus on language and too little on using the language . . . for communication. Wilkins (1976:10) notes, for example, that

Once the grammatical and lexical meaning of a sentence have been described, application of the potential communica-

tive aspects of the utterances are often ignored in favor of further grammar and structure.

Hatch (1978:404) also summarizes this concern and suggests an alternative view:

In second language learning the basic assumption has been . . . that one first learns how to manipulate structures, that one gradually builds up a repertoire of structures and then, somehow, learns how to put the structures to use in discourse. We would like to consider the possibility that just the reverse happens. One learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction, syntactic structures are developed.

Although structural approaches are still very much in practice today, both functional/notional and situational approaches are also gaining recognition in our ESL classrooms. In an attempt to respond to the problems raised with the structural approach, emphasizes content rather than form. McKay (1980:179) describes its primary aim as ensuring that students, ". . . know how to express different types of meanings (e.g. disagreements, compliments, disbelief, etc.)." Although this approach was intended to develop communicative competence, Widdowson (1978) notes that it still presents language as a collection of units, notional rather than syntactic.

In another attempt to provide ESL students with an approach which would enable them to learn to communicate, the situational approach was introduced. This approach emphasizes the social function of language and presents language to students in terms of social situations (e.g. ordering food in a restaurant, making airline reservations, etc.). Harlow, Smith, and Garfinkel (1980) argue, however, that this approach is too limiting in that students cannot apply what they learn in one situation to other situations.

It seems clear that experts can find fault with virtually any approach to the teaching of a second language. We would like to suggest that perhaps the learning activities adopted by an instructor will contribute more to student success than will a particular syllabus or approach.

Developing Effective Learning Activities

By considering the emphases of the three approaches described above, we can safely conclude that language classes should contain the following three components: 1) vocabulary practice, 2) grammatical structure practice, and 3) culturally appropriate social verbal behavior (communication) practice.

Although numerous learning activities have been developed to provide ESL students with opportunities to practice vocabulary and grammatical structure, we have not yet developed effective techniques to provide students with opportunities to practice communicating.

Farid (1976:300) provides five criteria that can be used both to develop and to evaluate communication learning activities.

- a) The topic is interesting.
- b) The topic does not lie outside their (the learners') semantic skills.
- c) The students engaged in the dialogue participate more or less equally.
- d) The participating students experience a feeling of success, regardless of the correctness of their English.
- e) The non-participating students are motivated to listen to content rather than to form.

ESL learning activities should include the essential three practice components and meet Farid's criteria. A somewhat modified microcounseling approach is one such activity which is readily available to the ESL teacher.

Microcounseling

Microcounseling is a form of microtraining. The generic term, microtraining, refers to a general training format which is characterized by the development of specific, concrete skills through observation, practice, and feedback in a psychologically safe learning environment. Positive super-

vision is also an essential component of microtraining. Microtraining exists in a number of forms such as microteaching (Allen 1967), which is used to help pre- and in-service teachers-in-training develop specific teaching skills. Microsupervision (Chase, Coty, and Cotrel 1971) uses the microtraining format to teach supervisory conference skills. Microcoordination (Harrington 1970) uses the microtraining format to teach job placement skills to cooperative vocational education coordinators. Of interest to the ESL teacher is microcounseling (Ivey, et al., 1968), which extends the microtraining format to the development of a large variety of effective interpersonal skills.

Microcounseling evolved from attempts to de-mystify the counselor education process. Counselor educators had for years been attempting to teach counselor trainees essential but elusive concepts such as "warmth" and "empathy." Success

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was limited because although everyone "knew" what was meant by these terms, it was difficult to define them operationally. That is, it was easy to identify a counselor who was being warm and empathetic, but difficult to identify exactly why. It was therefore exceedingly difficult to help trainees learn and use these elusive concepts. Ivey and his colleagues (1968) applied a component-skills approach to the interviewing process. This behavioral analysis of one of the important aspects of counseling resulted in the identification and definition in performance terms of a number of discrete behaviors which are component skills of effective interpersonal communication. From this initial research, a conceptual framework and technology

evolved that has enabled Ivey and others to extend microcounseling far beyond counselor education and to behaviorally define other useful interpersonal skills.

Other applications of microcounseling include using it to improve the interpersonal skills of psychiatric nursing personnel (Hearn 1976), medical students (Authier and Gustafson 1974), and as media therapy with hospitalized psychiatric patients (Ivey 1973). Aldridge and Ivey (1975) demonstrated that junior high school students could be taught specific microcounseling

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skills as easily as adults. Bradley (1977) used microcounseling training as a direct, systematic interpersonal skills development program for inner-city youth. A variety of other applications can be found in Ivey and Authier (1978).

Although originally designed for trainers to work on a one-to-one basis with trainees, this method proved to be impractical for those with large numbers of students. Consequently, a second approach was developed which treats students/trainees on a group-wide basis.

The Group Microcounseling Format

There are five parts to a group microcounseling exercise. The topic for the following exercise is "The Job Interview".

1. Introduction by the teacher. The students are informed that they are working on how to participate in a job interview. An important part of a successful interview is listening to the interviewer and conveying to the interviewer that you are listening. Students are told that only that aspect of interpersonal communication should be considered, and not to worry about other dimensions for the time being. Their only goal then is to convey to someone that they are listening.

2. Training. The teacher asks for volunteers to role-play an employment interview. The job applicant is to "ham it up" and do everything wrong in terms of listening. By requiring the student to act as inappropriately as possible, she/he is placed in a no-lose situation. That is, if the student conveys very well that she/he is not listening the student will be successful in terms of the exercise. If, on the other hand, the student does not convey this well, it will only show that the student is too good a listener. In addition, a good deal of humor is injected into the exercise by having students first act inappropriately. The interviewer is to "play it straight" and be as business-like as possible. The class is divided into groups of six each. They observe the role-played interaction (3 to 5 minutes is suitable for making the point), and then make lists of what the job applicant "did wrong." They then discuss and share their lists with the entire class.

3. Reinforcement. A mini-lecture by the teacher follows, which emphasizes the key points of listening as demonstrated and discussed in the role-playing session above (e.g. eye contact, relaxed posture, and verbal following—no topic jump). The microcounseling manual, *Attending Behavior*, is sometimes used to supplement the lecture.

4. Develop the model. Another role-play is held in which the job applicant does a more effective job (acts correctly). The other students observe and note the differences between the two sessions.

5. Practice. Students then practice this exercise in pairs within their groups so that the concept of attending behavior (listening) is experientially learned. Sometimes students practice in triads with the third person acting as observer/evaluator.

The Skills of Microcounseling

Numerous skills have been identified and field-tested within the microcounseling framework. These skills have been organized into a number of broad categories or clusters. First are the beginning skills of effective interpersonal communication: attending behavior, open questions, and minimal encouragement to talk. These skills help the learner to convey interest as well as to get the other person to talk and express

him- or herself more fully. They enable the learner to avoid disastrous early attempts at interpersonal communication. Although basic, these skills are essential for every person who wants to communicate with others. Indeed, experienced professionals, including teachers, also benefit from and welcome systematic microcounseling training in these basic skills.

Another cluster consists of selective listening skills, including reflection of feeling, paraphrasing, and summarization. These skills enable the learner to communicate understanding of affect as well as content of the other person's words. They also assure that both parties have the same understanding of what is being said. The need for these skills in numerous situations is obvious.

Some of the advanced skills include giving directions, expression of content, expression of feeling, self disclosure, interpretation, and direct mutual communication. Each of these microcounseling skills is described in a brief manual (Ivey and Authier 1978). These manuals are invaluable tools for the teacher who wants to describe microcounseling skills operationally to students.

The ESL teacher may not consider every microcounseling skill appropriate to the needs of ESL students. That is as it should be. Microcounseling is an open system. One ESL teacher might consider attending behavior as a critical need for all ESL students and incorporate attending behavior into the curriculum via microcounseling. Another teacher might determine to include selective listening skills as well as attending behavior. Each teacher could also elect to modify the existing microcounseling manuals to identify her/his own style. Each would have an individualized, yet systematic approach to teaching the concrete behavior that she/he has identified as essential. The ESL teacher is encouraged to select those skills considered to be most important in a particular setting, or even develop definitions of new skills. Regardless of the specific skills considered most appropriate for effective functioning, the systematic technology of microcounseling may be utilized efficiently.

Micro-ESL

Because ESL students often lack the lexical, syntactic, and sociolinguistic skills necessary to carry out adequate conversations in English, the microcounseling approach will be modified to include three preliminary language and culture components. There are, then, eight parts to a group "micro-ESL" exercise. The topic will again be "The Job Interview," and the interpersonal skill to be emphasized will again be attending behavior.

1. Vocabulary practice. The teacher analyzes the situation to be practiced (a job interview) and identifies the vocabulary and idioms necessary to carry out an adequate conversation. These are presented to the students.

Examples: Application, interview, employer, employee, personnel, qualifications, hired, fired, laid off, resume, references, position, opening, salary, over-time, union dues, a-month, an-hour, wage, to earn, to make, sick-leave, to bring home, after taxes, etc.

2. Grammatical structure practice. The teacher again analyzes the situation to be practiced and identifies the major grammatical structures necessary to comprehend and converse in a job interview situation. For example, an employer would commonly ask questions like:

"Have you ever been a cook before?"

"Where else have you been a cook?"

"How long have you been a cook?"

The teacher then knows that the students should have good aural comprehension of yes/no and WH-questions in the present perfect. For other examples, the employee would probably respond with,

"Yes, I have." or, "No, I haven't."

"I've cooked in several restaurants," or, "I was a cook at Golden Arches for two years."

"I've been a cook for two years," or,

"I was a cook in Cuba for two years."

Again, the teacher knows that it would be important for students to be able to orally produce the present perfect (affirmative and negative) and the simple past. Other structures the teacher may wish to review are simple future (e.g. "Will I work weekends?" "You'll be bringing home about \$480 a-

month.") The number of structures to be covered within one lesson depends upon how advanced the students are, and on whether the grammatical structures being presented are new to them or a review.

3. Culture training. The teacher identifies the appropriate behavior in a job interview situation. It is important not to overwhelm the students with information, since they already have linguistic skills to worry about. Since it has been deemed important in our culture to demonstrate attending behavior during a job interview, the students are explicitly told how to show to an employer that they are listening. The teacher may find it useful to contrast any behavioral differences between the U.S. and the student's home culture. The teacher may also wish to use the students' native language here since the focus now is on cultural information and not language.

Example:

Appropriate Attending Behavior

- a. Sitting with relaxed but attentive posture
- b. Head facing interviewer
- c. Looking at employer's eyes occasionally
- d. Sticking to the topic, recognizing cues to respond

Inappropriate Attending Behavior

- a. Slouching, bending over or sitting too rigidly
- b. Head down, away, or toward ceiling
- c. Never/always looking in employer's eyes
- d. Topic jumping, interrupting

4. Introduction. The teacher explains to the students that they are going to practice participating in a job interview, and that it is important for them to convey to the interviewer that they are listening. This introduction may be carried out in English or in the students' home language. The teacher may wish to quickly review some of the characteristics of appropriate attending behavior.

5. Training. The teacher selects volunteers to role-play an employment interview. The student playing the part of the applicant is told to play his/her role as inappro-

priately as possible. The class is divided into small groups. After observing the role-playing session for three to five minutes each group is to come up with a list of everything the job applicant "did wrong." The students should be encouraged to listen for content and previously identified kinesic behavior, not grammatical perfection.

6. Reinforcement. The teacher presents a brief review of the key points of listening as demonstrated and discussed in the role-playing session above (e.g., eye contact, posture, and verbal following). Although use of English should be strongly encouraged, the teacher may wish to use the students' native language on occasion to make a point clear.

7. Developing the model. Another role-play is held in which the job applicant performs correctly. The other students observe and note the differences between the two sessions. Although this microcounseling exercise is intended to be carried out orally, if the teacher wanted to add a reading component, language-experience approach could be based on the dialogue used in the second role-play session.

8. Practice. Students are told to practice this exercise in pairs within their groups so that the concept of attending behavior is experientially learned. Students may practice in threesomes, with the third party acting as observer/evaluator. Perhaps the third person would be someone who lacked the linguistic skills or confidence to participate in the beginning.

Conclusion

Microcounseling is an approach to developing interpersonal communication skills which is used in many fields. By adapting the microcounseling format to include vocabulary, structure, and culture components, we too can use this approach to help our ESL students communicate effectively. "Micro-ESL" is a systematic means by which to develop communicative competence. It is humanistic, does not require literacy, and it not only teaches language but also teaches about culture, basic survival, and vocational skills. The role-playing dialogues are interesting and will not lie outside the students' semantic skills. Students will participate equally and will experience success regard-

less of their degree of grammatical correctness. Micro-ESL can go hand-in-hand with any approach--be it structural, functional/notional, or situational, and it is an effective and enjoyable way to learn English as a second language.

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