
Preparing Indonesians for Graduate Study in Canada

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Preparing Indonesians for graduate study in Canada starts with English language instruction, of course, but it is coming to be appreciated that language instruction by itself is not sufficient preparation (see Benesch, 1988). Because of differences among educational systems, overseas students also must be prepared for the approach to knowledge and the conduct of inquiry which characterizes the Western university. I would like to discuss a few issues which arise in this regard.

Teaching About Canada

The first need is to prepare students for Canada itself. A typical predeparture ESL or EAP program incorporates a communication component, often including cross-cultural communication. Usually, there is some treatment of the target culture itself as well. A number of textbooks designed for ESL-speakers with this goal in mind are available. As sources of information about the culture, some of them can certainly be recommended. Most, however, deal only with the culture of the host society, rather than with the contemporary society itself.

To fill this gap, the Canada-Indonesia Predeparture Program¹ uses a university-level Canadian sociology textbook (Richardson & Tepperman, 1987) in its Canadian Academic Program, a language-content course offered to students

who are nearing the TOEFL 550 level. This serves two purposes simultaneously: it provides a systematic, conceptually-based treatment of Canadian society; and it offers students the chance to use real, native-speaker materials. Since this is a native-speaker text, it avoids depicting Canada primarily in terms of its differences from other countries, and approaches Canadian society in the way that native members would be prepared to see it. This undoubtedly involves certain losses, from the standpoint of its use overseas, but the gains in authenticity and native-member point of view more than make up for the losses.

Distinguishing Canada from the United States

Although Canada is playing an important role in language training in Indonesia, its population is only one-tenth that of the United States', and the mass media in Indonesia present little information about Canada. Since Canada's culture and social structure are basically similar to American culture and society, it is important to help students distinguish between the two countries. Students might be satisfied with the explanation that 'Canada is basically just like the United States,' since that assurance would allow them some sense of security, but that would be merely a way to escape the responsibility of teaching them about

Canada and preparing them for life there. In the case of cross-cultural communication textbooks, of course, there is no real alternative, since there are no Canadian substitutes. But when it comes to teaching about the contemporary society itself, there are choices. It seems, then, that to prepare students specifically for Canadian society, sociology offers an answer.

Realism versus Idealization

The treatment of American culture and American society in the many cross-cultural communication and ESL textbooks currently available varies along the dimension of realism-idealization. My view is that it is inappropriate to present learners with an inaccurate picture of life in the country in which they plan to spend two or more years of their lives, yet there are those who seem to feel that students should not be given anything which approaches a "negative" picture. In sociology, this is not really an issue at all, since the science of sociology studies—must study—what is. (For example, a sociologist would not teach criminology by summarizing the criminal law, but rather would describe and try to explain what it is that people actually do.)

Students need to know, and are entitled to know, what their new environment will be like, including the contemporary issues which are of importance to people who live in the target society. Students who are adults will also be adults in Canada, and it would be a grave disservice to send them to Canada with a child's view of life. In seeking to enter a foreign speech community, students have already given up some of the security which they have earned by virtue of having become

educated adults in their own society. There is no need for them to give up their social competence along with their linguistic competence.

Orientation to Knowledge

In addition to preparing students for life in Canada in general, the Canada-Indonesia Predeparture Program tries to prepare them to be graduate students. One of the most important areas here is that of the orientation to knowledge. Though this is a topic which is rarely, if ever, dealt with in either ESL textbooks or cross-cultural communication textbooks designed for ESL-speakers, it is something with which students must be familiar. From my own experiences with students in Indonesia, I have concluded that we need to emphasize the "open" character of knowledge in the West. Students at first seem slightly uncomfortable with the existence of competing theories. Which one is correct? In the Canadian society course, students are repeatedly exposed to the application of theories or theoretical paradigms in various situations, and gradually come to appreciate that often there is no official correct answer to problems of significance. (I explain to them that if such an answer did exist, it would certainly not be part of their graduate course, but would be entered into the encyclopedia or statistical yearbook.) Students must come to terms with indeterminacy and the continuing process of creating new theories and hypotheses. Though this may be unsettling in the beginning, they will not be prepared for graduate study in Canada without understanding this aspect of the Western orientation to knowledge.

One part of the orientation to knowledge is that of being ready to look for

opportunities to apply academic theories to actual situations and, conversely, to identify theories already in use in real life. In the case of sociology, this is easy, for the mass media are full of useful examples. Students, then, must come to appreciate the connections between theory-building and practical application, and between the classroom and the real world. In the present case—preparation for living and studying in Canada—exercises of this sort help give students the ability to live in the world as adults.

Answering Essay Questions

Essay questions on examinations pose many of the same challenges encountered in ESL writing classes—making notes first, making a rough outline, managing time, and so on. In addition to teaching these aspects of answering essay questions, in the Canada-Indonesia Predeparture Program we devote some time to the expectations inherent (but usually not explicated) in the typical essay question. Students' tendency is to approach the question in terms of what they think is the "right" or most appropriate answer. In some cases, this will lead to disaster: "answer not responsive to the question." How disappointing it must be to find that phrase scrawled across your examination paper. In this case, I like to use "shock treatment." For example, I caution the student beforehand that I might well ask him to explain why he himself should not be sent to Canada for graduate study. The look of shock and horror is just what you would imagine it to be. Yet when I offer an admittedly extreme example such as that, along with some possible answers or reasons, the student can begin to appreciate the existence of the underlying dimension involved. Your job, I reiterate,

is to do your best with whatever question your instructor has given you. It is not necessarily the answer you eventually choose to give that counts the most, I continue, but rather your ability to apply some type of procedure or perform some type of analysis within the terms of reference given. Shocking? Definitely. Useful? I think so.

The "What" and the "How" of Teaching

What we teach in the Canada-Indonesia Predeparture Program is the sociology of Canadian life, but how we teach is also part of what we teach. It is a fundamental principle in the Canadian Academic Program that learning how to learn—a tired phrase, of course—is essential. One general strategy I use is that of pausing from time to time to draw attention to the learning process itself, for example, focusing on issues rather than facts, or comparing competing theories rather than simply voting for the theory of choice. If we were teaching Canadians, we might not have the responsibility of doing this. Here in Indonesia, we do have that responsibility. Ideally, we would teach the students everything they will have to know and will have to be able to do as graduate students in Canada. It would be rather naive to presume that we can attain a goal as lofty as that, of course, but having the correct goal in mind is at least half the battle in this particular case.

The Concept of Cross-Cultural Academic Communication

From our experiences with the Canadian Academic Program, and those of other Western teachers working in Indonesia (see, for example, Fisher, 1988), we have

come to see that the business of *being a student* in Canada is itself an instance of cross-cultural communication, and it needs to be approached in a systematic way. Certainly, if predeparture programs can pay attention to everyday culture such as shaking hands, maintaining eye contact, and making appointments, they should deal with being a graduate student. That, after all, is what predeparture programs are all about. The course on Canadian society both gives students an authentic viewpoint on Canada and provides the opportunity to learn in the way that Canadians learn.

Note

1. This program is managed by World University Service of Canada (WUSC)

and sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). It accepts students sponsored by government ministries from all parts of Indonesia.

About the Author

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