PREPARING AN ENGLISH REMEDIAL COURSE FOR TERTIARY STUDENTS

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One should be aware of how essential remedial work is at first year tertiary level and even later. The staff of other departments should not begrudge the English Department ample time for this work. In developing countries students are often so enthusiastic about their work - and well they might be since the rewards are so great - that they give the impression of being more advanced in the language than they actually are. A few years ago I administered some diagnostic tests to over two hundred African students who had been through five years of secondary schooling with English as the medium of instruction. 72% of these students did not know the meaning of the word 'tenant', 58% 'mail', and 29% 'frontier'. And yet these students were at the beginning of a course intended to turn them into secondary school teachers a few years later. In class they appeared keen and responsive: it was at examination time that one realised that these bright, hardworking students suffered the great disadvantage of inadequate English. Studies carried out by Professor James A. Lee at Haile Selassie I University, Addis Ababa in 1967 showed that the reading comprehension of Ethiopian freshman students corresponded to that of seventh grade pupils in the United States; and he pointed out that the situation should not be considered peculiar to Ethiopia since he had found a similar problem existed in Pakistan.[1] My impression is that the situation is only a little better in Papua - New Guinea.

Devising an effective English course which will enable students to follow courses in other departments with ease is, I would suggest, one of the major educational problems of countries which have chosen English as the medium of instruction at tertiary level. How the time allocated to English is spent is of vital importance. Very often too much time is spent on aspects of the language which in fact cause little difficulty or are of no great consequence. For this reason, in planning a remedial course one should be guided

by the results of an exhaustive error analysis. In a country like Papua-New Guinea a language course based on contrastive analysis is not feasible, since there are hundreds of languages with which one would have to contrast English. However, there are many areas of difficulty apparently common to the majority of students. These should be given considerable emphasis in the remedial course.

Although our starting- point might be an error analysis, we should beware in preparing a remedial course of paying too much attention to correctness at the expense of fluency. We are still suffering from a severe hangover from the days of prescriptive grammar. Our ultimate aim is, of course, to eliminate all errors, but our first and chief concern must surely be to improve our students' ability to make themselves understood in speaking and writing and to understand what is spoken and written.

A great deal can be conveyed by English which lacks polish and contains a number of grammar mistakes. The trouble with a lot of courses is a wrong order of priorities - attention to the minutiae of structure at the expense of an increase in the students' working knowledge of the language. Over-emphasis on correctness tends to inhibit fluency.

Nor should we ever try to make our students speak exactly as we speak. The aim in pronunciation work must be what L.A. Hill calls 'international intelligibility'[2]. There should be no attempt to inculcate an Australian, a British, an American or any other variety of pronunciation. A Papua-New Guinea English pronunciation is now evolving and must be recognised as having equal status with other pronunciations - providing, of course, that it can be understood internationally.

If we accept that our basic aim is fluency rather than correctness, we must examine our students' English to ascertain why it is communication sometimes breaks down. In an error analysis I am at present carrying out at Goroka Teachers' College I have not been at all surprised to find that one of the main problems is inadequate vocabulary - the main problem in nearly every country where English is studied as a second language. If this problem is particularly noticeable in Papua-New Guinea it may very well be due to insufficient exposure to simplified readers in secondary schools. At tertiary level more

work should be done by TESL specialists on the content of word lists; most of the work done on this most important topic has been limited to lists of a few thousands words,[3] and much longer lists are necessary for work with advanced students. Vocabulary work must be controlled in the sense that maximum exposure must be arranged to the most essential words. The difficulty in drawing up a word list at tertiary level is not just its length: attention has to be paid to special registers that the student will need in both his studies and his future career. If such a list is to be compiled thoroughly the English Department must collaborate with other departments. Indeed, not only vocabulary problems but also structure problems seem to vary from department to department (as an error analysis undertaken in the University of Khartoum in the Sudan showed.)

A very important part of the remedial course at tertiary level is training in faster reading. Some students arrive at colleges or universities with very bad reading habits and these have to be got rid of if higher studies are to be pursued effectively. The vast amount of reading required of a tertiary level student cannot be done if he reads at a rate of only 200 words per minute, as many students do. I have found that some students read even more slowly than they speak! A sustained attempt has therefore to be made to increase reading speeds.

Other study skills also need attention. Few students - even those who speak English as their first language - do not need some improvement in their ability to take notes. Old style precis is not very helpful here and is in any case beyond the ability of nearly every student working in a language other than his own. What is essential is training in selecting the salient points of a passage, as recommended in the Grieve Report.[4]

At tertiary level there is sometimes resistance to an English course because the students believe they know the language well enough and because the content of such a course is often dull in the extreme. After diagnostic tests have been given - and the results issued to the students to let them know how great their need of a remedial course is - they should not be expected to embark on a year of arid, uncontextualised drills. Any remedial course in English given to tertiary students should, in my opinion, be at

the same time a course in something else. There is a place for drill work, of course, but the basis of the course should be a series of passages which are related in some way and contain material of intrinsic interest. For example, there might be twenty or so passages all of which deal with some aspect of popular science - the problem of the use of insecticides, the amount of sleep we need, the process of ageing, predicting earthquakes, and so on.

Finally, it should be borne in mind that if the remedial course can be given intensively over a short period much more is likely to be achieved than if the course consists of the same number of hours spread over a year or two. The staffing problems for short, intensive courses are, unfortunately, enormous. Perhaps some day there will be itinerant teams of English teachers, provided by an organisation like the British Council, which will give courses of this kind suitably adapted to meet the needs of each country.

References

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