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## **Empowering English Language Learners in Postsecondary Classrooms An Inquiry into Best Practices<sup>1</sup>**

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**Daniel Clausen, PhD** Florida International University / Coco Juku Language School

**Abstract:** *The normal difficulties of postsecondary study can be multiplied by the struggles of learning another language. What can instructors do to help meet the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs) in their classroom? What kinds of help and classroom modifications are most appropriate? This essay uses the author's own classroom experiences, a review of the academic literature, and surveys with experienced teachers to probe these questions. The essay covers such topics as ways to modify lectures, design learning aids, deal with ELL writing, provide reasonable testing accommodations, and build community in the classroom.*

**Key Words:** *English Language Learners; ELLs in mainstream classrooms; scaffolding; ESL learner needs; pragmatic instruction*

### **1. Introduction: English Language Learners in Postsecondary Institutions**

Postsecondary institutions -- whether universities, colleges, or technical schools -- are enrolling an increasing number of students who struggle with the English language. These students may be non-native speakers of the language, first-generation English speakers,

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the survey respondents (six in total) who answered a simple survey on best practices for teaching English Language Learners in the mainstream classroom. All but one (Lyle Shumate) of these survey respondents chose to remain anonymous. Dialogue with these respondents proved indispensable for grappling with the questions in this article.

or students who did not receive adequate instruction throughout their education. Regardless of what level the instructor teaches at, dealing with English Language Learners (ELL) can bring significant challenges. Depending on the learning background of the student, he or she may demonstrate: difficulty following lectures; a hesitancy to participate in class discussions; issues with writing; issues with testing; or an inability to integrate into university life.

The scope of the problem will often vary based on what type of issues the student is having and the degree to which a mastery of English is necessary to excel in the course. Past studies, however, demonstrate that the problem may be larger than instructors realize. A study by Mulligan & Kirkpatrick (2000), for example, found that a much larger than expected group of ELLs had trouble understanding lectures. In courses that included Architecture and Construction and Economics and Finance, it was found that less than one out of ten English learners understood the lectures well and perhaps one out of four students had not understood anything at all (Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000). This suggests that instructors need to be more thoughtful in how they construct their lectures and design their courses with ELLs in mind.

In this essay, I explore my own experiences helping ELLs in postsecondary classrooms. My insights come mostly from experiences helping ELLs in mainstream classrooms, but also draw on my experiences teaching learners in English language classes overseas. Many of the techniques for English as foreign language teaching can also be adapted for mainstream classes. When appropriate I have also supplemented my own insights with an exploration of the academic literature and survey research with other instructors.

The essay finds few panaceas for the struggles of ELLs in the mainstream classroom. However, for each significant issue, there is also a wealth of ideas on how to address it.

## **2. Scope and Methods**

*Scope.* This article focuses on a specific subset of English language teaching situations: ELLs in mainstream classrooms in postsecondary institutions such as universities, colleges, technical schools, and other education programs beyond high school. I have chosen the term English Language Learner (ELL) to refer to the student populations in question. As several authors point out, the various terms used to label students -- English Language Learner (ELL), English as a Second Language Learner, L2, Limited English Proficient (LEP), non-native speaker, Generation 1.5 Learner -- are fraught with difficulties (Matsuda et al, 2003; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008). Some students will actively resist these categories because they refer to a deficit or something that is lacked (Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008, p. 392). Other students may embrace one or more of the labels in order to gain access to much-needed assistance to pass their courses. The labeling of students can be even trickier because some “native” speakers of the language, due to various environmental factors, may have language deficits that exceed non-native speakers. Thus, I have used the term “ELL” because it is the broadest possible term and incorporates many different kinds of English language learners.

*Design.* The research design for this essay incorporates personal reflections on my own teaching practices, exploratory analysis of the academic literature, and a small sample of surveys (six surveys) from experienced instructors. The purpose of this essay is to provide exploratory analysis and question-posing rather than trying to prove or falsify hypotheses. This type of writing is based on the idea that

the classroom “is a complex, situation-specific, and dilemma-ridden endeavor” (Mohlman & Bernstein, 1991, p. 37). Thus, best practices that apply to one educational space may not apply to another. However, ideas that have repeatedly proven useful may be adapted in ways that make them relevant to new challenges.

More important than any one solution, however, may be the habits of mind that produce pragmatic solutions. Reflective writing is one such habit. Reflective writing has long been a staple of teacher education (Lyons, 1998; Mohlman & Colton, 1991). The process of writing and interrogating teaching experiences has been shown to have a beneficial impact on individual instructors (Lyons, 1998, p. 126).

In addition to a survey of the scholarly literature, the author also asked instructors to fill out surveys regarding their own best practices. Instructors who have taught and are currently teaching at postsecondary institutions were given a written survey. The subjects were recruited from an English-language teaching social media group and through opportunities to converse with past colleagues. There were six respondents to this survey. For the purpose of this study, these surveys have been treated like “texts” the same way scholarly articles have been treated as texts. This approach seemed appropriate because the questions in the survey were open-ended and allowed respondents to write freely on the topics of concern. The purpose was to probe for good ideas to practical teaching problems, not to prove or disprove hypotheses.

Based on this research, the remainder of the essays has been divided into five sections:

- (1) Reducing Language Burdens - Visuals and Organizers
- (2) Reducing Language Burdens - Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

- (3) Dealing with ELL Writing - Seeing Beyond the Errors
- (4) Testing Accommodations for ELLs
- (5) Building Community - Judgement-Free Zones, Peer Help, and Campus Resources

The conclusion discusses the findings of this essay and offers some ideas for further reflection.

### **Reducing Language Burdens - Visuals and Organizers**

If students are struggling to understand course content, there are a number of ways to reduce cognitive and language burdens. In the scholarly literature on English language learning, learning aids and support are frequently referred to as “scaffolds” (see Bradley & Bradley, 2004; Solomon et al, 2006; Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000; Young, 1996, p. 20-21). Scaffolds are described as “thoughtful ways of assisting students in experiencing successful task completion” (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000, p. 261). Some important examples of scaffolding include outlines and dynamic visuals, and the modeling of activities for students.

*Outlines.* An outline which organizes the key points of the lecture can significantly reduce the amount of new language a student has to process. These outlines can be created with gaps so that students simply need to fill in information or supplement them with important details. The instructor may also pass out the outline a day prior to the lecture to allow students to mentally prepare.

*Dynamic Visuals (Charts, Graphs, and Pictures).* It is often said that a well-chosen picture is worth a thousand words. For students struggling to understand key concepts, dynamic visuals not only help to give context and meaning to what they are hearing in class, but can also provide motivation and spark interest in the topic. A

dynamic visual that conveys important information can also allow instructors to elicit key information from the students, thus decreasing instructor talk-time.

A few key concepts regarding visuals bear mentioning.

- *Use of color.* One key concept is that instructors should make the most of color schemes to help clarify concepts.
- *Allow for viewer interaction.* The second key concept is that visuals can be used as interactive tools. They can be designed so that students can fill in missing pieces of information, add information, or speculate about possible answers.
- *Maximize the data-to-ink ratio.* The third point refers to best practices regarding representing data visually. When an instructor presents data in the form of a chart or graph, he or she should make sure that the data are easily understood and that there is no unnecessary clutter in the graph. In other words, the audience gets the most data for the amount of ink used.

*Modeling Activities.* Another important form of scaffolding is modeling activities to students. As key studies of ELLs in mainstream classrooms have found (see Solomon et al, 2006), students like examples, not wordy explanations. In my own experience, this extends not only to ELLs but to students who might find the practices of the university classroom arcane. Thus, before initiating a project or classroom activity it might be helpful to model the activity with a teaching assistant or stronger student.

The final point that needs to be made about scaffolding is that instructors should not overuse them. As Watt-Taffe & Truscott (2000) point out, the level of support students need should decrease over time. In a similar vein, David Nunan (2003) has argued that one

of the goals of education should be to encourage students to be more autonomous and independent learners. If we are doing our jobs correctly, then the amount of support our students need should decrease over time.

### **Reducing Language Burdens - Reduce, Reuse, Recycle**

Instructors can also assist students by thinking carefully about the language they use for instruction, introducing small pauses in lectures, slowing down the pace of the class, and thinking carefully about how to reduce teacher talk time. We might think of this in short as -- reduce, reuse, and recycle.

*Choose your words carefully.* Many instructors intuitively understand when their students need concepts simplified and broken up into smaller, more digestible chunks. This same technique can be taken a step further to help ELLs. The instructor can think carefully about how to avoid wordiness in explanations and how to use simpler language to convey ideas.

*Reduce Teacher Talk Time.* The instructor may also wish to reduce teacher talk time and give students more opportunities to participate in class. This allows students to shape the contents of the class, increases student attentiveness, and reduces the amount of new language that needs to be processed. In reducing teacher talk time, the instructor should use *elicitation* and promote a *communicative classroom*.

- *Elicitation* refers to the process of getting students to explain key concepts through carefully targeted prompts and questions. An instructor, for example, might write key words from the chapter on the board and ask students to explain what they know.

- A *communicative classroom* is a classroom where students have ample opportunities to use their language skills in meaningful contexts. This might include debates, discussions, presentations, or group activities.

*Pacing, Small Pauses, and Reviewing Information.* Instructors can also help their ELLs by slowing down the pace of the class, using small pauses in speech, and by reviewing key concepts periodically.

- *Pacing.* In some situations, instructors might not be able to control the pace of a course. Perhaps there is a specified amount of material that must be covered over a certain period of time. However, when an instructor does have control over the pacing of the course, a slower pace usually works better for ELLs. Often, I have found that it is merely a matter of taking out unimportant content and replacing it with opportunities for student-generated content, activities, or review.
- *Small Pauses.* Some English language instructors have made it a habit of talking slower for their ELLs. I find that ELLs adjust well to native speakers' rate of speech, but that they struggle with extensive listening. The longer a speech goes on without a pause, break, or activity, the less likely a student is to retain what he or she has heard. For this reason, I have developed a habit of introducing small pauses in between key ideas. As discussed earlier, decreasing the complexity of your sentences also allows students to process what you are saying more thoroughly. A combination of small pauses and simpler sentence patterns and vocabulary usually does wonders for student comprehension.
- *Review and Recycle.* Another way to reduce both cognitive and language burdens for students is to repeat key points and



activities. Periodic review will help students to refresh and confirm important information.

### **Dealing with ELL Writing - Seeing Beyond the Errors**

ELL writing can be an enormous challenge for instructors because issues in writing occur at so many different levels. In order to succeed as writers, ELLs must learn how to: master the writing process; discover appropriate morphology, syntax, and rhetorical strategies; master academic conventions of paraphrasing, citation, and thesis development; and understand cultural features of the community they are learning in (Barkaoui, 2007, p. 35-37). Even for native speakers, these skills can be difficult, but for ELLs the difficulties may be compounded in ways that reflect the varying circumstances of the learner's background and education (Harklau, 2001; Matsuda et al, 2003, p. 154).

As a result, ELL learners:

- May have done the assignment incorrectly because they didn't understand the directions.
- May have developed a draft that is incomprehensible because it was developed in their native language first and then translated into English.
- May have plagiarized their work from the internet or developed a draft with many uncited references.
- May have developed a draft with spelling and grammatical errors so numerous that it interferes with reader comprehension.

In addition to the technical issues of dealing with these manuscripts, there are also a number of ethical issues. For example, should an instructor have different standards of grading for ELLs

and non-ELLs? Since the difference between the two is often blurry, can an instructor even make this distinction? In addition, how does an instructor balance the differing demands of -- on the one hand, maintaining high standards in the classroom, and on the other hand, not destroying a student's confidence? In the specific instance of plagiarism, there is also the question of whether the instructor should make special allowances when considering the cultural background of the student. Many students, for example, have been educated in cultures that have different viewpoints on what constitutes plagiarism.

The four main points I would like to make in regard to student writing are that instructors should attempt to: (1) build cultural awareness with the students as they teach; (2) provide direct, easy-to-understand feedback and error-correction; (3) emphasize the dignity and humanity of the writing process over simple error-correction; and (4) keep in mind the emotional needs of students.

*Build Awareness with the Student.* Cultural traditions might be an important factor impacting a writer's ability to communicate in English. For example, Chinese students often make their points in roundabout ways, delaying the use of subjects and instead using suppositions; this reflects a rhetorical tradition of shunning individuality in Chinese rhetoric (Ji, 2008). While teachers cannot learn all the ways culture impacts writing, they can be sensitive to the fact that culture *does* impact writing and that it will take time for students to adjust to new rhetorical communities. Thus, they should try to build awareness of cultural factors as they teach.

*Provide Direct Feedback and Error-Correction.* Feedback and error-correction should be direct and easy to understand for ELLs. Sometimes vague feedback comes from the best of intentions. What Hyland & Hyland (2001) call "mitigation" strategies in feedback --

the mix of praise and criticism to soften the criticism -- can often lead to confusion with ELLs. As the authors write, “teachers may sometimes forget that students are reading their feedback in a foreign language and that being more indirect and “subtle” may actually result in significant misunderstandings.” (Hyland & Hyland, 2001, p. 203). For this reason, instructors might want to use clear rubrics or feedback sheets that demonstrate what constitutes praise and what constitutes criticism. When possible, it might also be appropriate to confirm with students whether they understand the feedback.

*Emphasize Process over Counting Errors.* The issue of how to eliminate student errors in writing is a topic that has become extremely controversial. However, when it comes to ELLs, it is important to remember that they benefit more from learning about the writing process in its entirety than they do from a strict emphasis on eliminating errors, a process that will take much longer and likely last throughout their professional careers (Bean, 2001; Cumming, 2001). In some institutional settings, there may be pressure for writing instructors to focus on error correction above all else. This pressure might manifest itself as complaints that graduates are embarrassing the institution by making simple mistakes on resumes and cover letters. However, research (and my own experience) has found that feedback on the writing process and the content of the essay helps with both learning and motivation (see also, Bean, 2001; Barkaoui, 2007; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2002). Students tend to have more motivation to do good work when instructors demonstrate a genuine interest in the writer’s ideas. In addition, a focus on the writing process helps the students reflect and refine the way they approach their writing, including correcting errors.

*Keep in Mind the Emotional Needs of Students.* An excessive amount of criticism can easily destroy student motivation and

confidence (see Connors & Lunsford, 1993), especially if they have put a lot of effort and emotional energy into their work. When approaching student writing strictly from a technical perspective, some of the humanity and dignity of the process is lost. Thus, instructors should always remember that there is a person behind the writing trying to communicate something. Whenever possible, instructors should emphasize the humanity and dignity of the writing process.

### **Testing Accommodations for ELLs**

Another controversial issue is whether to give ELLs testing accommodations. Again, the instructor is faced with a tradeoff between maintaining the rigor of the course and extending help to those who might need it. Possible accommodations for learners include more time to take the test, the use of frequent breaks, allowing the use of a bilingual dictionary, the use of a translated test, the use of a sheltered (easier) English version of the test, and/or reviewing difficult vocabulary before a test (Abedi, Hofstetter, & Lord, 2004; Fregeau & Leier, 2008). In many postsecondary settings, some of these approaches may not be feasible for reasons of fairness. In addition, some of these accommodations may limit the motivation of students to learn and use English.

Despite the drawbacks of accommodating ELLs, there are a number of approaches that can be both fair and effective.

*Review the Instructions.* One easy way to prepare ELLs is to review the instructions of the test sections ahead of time and demonstrate how to answer example questions with the students. This helps ensure that students don't need to think about the test too much during testing and can concentrate on the content of the exam. This step also helps relieve test anxiety for all students.

*Model Test-Taking Skills.* Modeling test-taking is a good technique for helping all students, not just ELLs. Many students manage to enter university without honing their test-taking skills. Modeling how to take a test, however, may be especially useful to students from countries where the culture of test-taking is different.

*Avoid Wordiness.* Accommodating ELLs means paying closer attention to word choice and usage. Do you use acronyms instead of full terms? Will the students understand the acronym or be confused by it? Are your questions excessively wordy? Can the questions be simplified without compromising the rigor of the test?

*Some Ideas for Reasonable Accommodations for Essay Questions.* Perhaps one of the most controversial aspects of giving tests to ELLs is how to address essay questions. ELLs will typically do better on multiple choice, true/false, and short-answer questions, but will often fail entirely on in-class essay questions. In a few cases, I have even had ELLs fail to write anything. This brings up some interesting dilemmas.

Should ELLs be allowed to finish the essay question at home (see Fregeau & Leier, 2008, n.p.)? Should ELLs be given extra time in class to write their essays? Should the instructor devote significant time to coaching students prior to the test?

While there is no right answer to these questions, I have found that the best answer is to use some ambiguity in the instructions to maximize flexibility. This may sound counterintuitive, but it is especially useful if you don't know how well ELLs will do on your essay questions.

In my classes, I have told students prior to the test that they should do their best on the essay questions. No effort whatsoever will result in a zero, but leniency will be given to students who make a good faith effort to answer the questions. In the past, I have left this “leniency” rather vague. I have found, though, that this approach eliminates some of the anxiety regarding the written portion of the test. When I have tried this approach, not only ELLs but other vulnerable student populations usually gave a better effort. My follow-on “leniency” policy has differed from situation to situation, but one approach I frequently take is to leave essay questions that scored below an 80 percent ungraded and unmarked. I then give the student a chance to revise the essay after a short conference with me.

This approach stresses that education is about collaboration and support, not punishment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the students who make the most of this support are usually students who are already excelling in the course. In several cases, students who had scored above an 80 percent asked for a conference to revise their essay, even though no extra points were to be awarded.

However, there are other ways to give accommodations on the essay portion of the test. Perhaps the easiest and best way to give fair accommodation to all students is to provide examples of essay questions and answers and demonstrate to students how you would grade them.

### **Building Community - Judgement-Free Zones, Peer Help, and Campus Resources**

Perhaps the best way to help ELLs and other vulnerable students is to encourage them to become part of the wider school community. As Booth (2009) found in her study of ESL students in community colleges, students who were engaged and part of the community

were more likely to benefit from the college experience. As an instructor, you can help to build community by fostering judgement-free zones, encouraging peer help, and familiarizing students with campus resources.

*Judgement-Free Zones.* In my experience, I have found that the constant atmosphere of grading, ranking, and critique can sometimes erode a student's confidence. This is especially true of ELLs who feel they are constantly at a disadvantage. A key question addressed in Booth's study is how to create "safe havens" and judgement-free zones for learning (Booth, 2009, p. 31). On occasion, instructors can help create these judgement-free zones by making assignments pass/fail participation grades and by creating classroom time and spaces where criticism and critique are withheld. In an assignment where student motivation might already be high (for example in a short two-page essay on how to improve the learning environment at the school), the instructor could focus exclusively on the ideas and not on correctness issues.

*Peer Help* provides a number of important benefits. At the most basic level, instructors can use peer help as a way to save time and focus on more pressing activities. More importantly, peer help fosters a sense of community and belonging for both mentors and the mentored. Mentors often feel more motivated as a result of the process, taking pride in their contributions to their learning community; the process of tutoring also helps mentors review and solidify key concepts. On the other hand, the students being mentored often report feeling that their peers understood their difficulties better than the instructor.

*Campus Resources.* Sometimes students are unaware of the school resources available to them. This ignorance can also extend to instructors. Important campus resources at your institution may

include a writing center, a student tutoring center, an ESL center, or even members of your faculty who are bilingual or multilingual. Familiarizing yourself and your students with campus resources can benefit both you and your students in the long run.

### **3. Conclusion - Empathy, Flexibility, Design, and Reflection**

More than one respondent to my survey wrote that there is no one solution to the problem of English Language Learners, and thus, that we should not be afraid to embrace adaptation and change. Experienced instructors often find pragmatic solutions to classroom problems that involve give and takes. They usually know how to create solutions that balance student accountability with appropriate levels of support.

There are few panaceas for helping ELLs succeed in the classroom. Nevertheless, I have found that the most important traits a teacher can have are empathy and flexibility. Often we can cultivate our own empathy towards students by engaging in language study or trying to learn a skill that makes us feel uncomfortable.

Besides empathy and flexibility, experience has also taught me that a critical eye toward “design” in all aspects of course planning can save a lot of effort and heartbreak. As this essay has demonstrated, instructors can design ELL-friendly courses by building scaffolding into their lesson plans, simplifying lectures, giving ample opportunities for ELLs to participate, and providing opportunities for review.

It is well-known that the art of teaching typically isn’t as strong in postsecondary institutions, where subject-matter knowledge is often privileged over pedagogy. However, we can make up for these



deficits by being sensitive to our own methods and by engaging in reflection about how our teaching practices are meeting our students' needs. Just as I have surveyed instructors to learn more about what practices are working in the classroom, an important source of information for instructors is their own students. Instructors might wish to survey their students regularly to see what is working and what is not. One university instructor of mine did a mid-course, informal survey to understand how best to modify her class for the final half of the course.

The message of her mid-class survey was simple - assessment, reflection, and learning should never cease, even for teachers.

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## **Appendix - Survey - Helping English Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom**

### **Summary of Research**

This survey research will be used in the preparation of an article on the topic of **Best Practices for English Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom**. The study is primarily interested in examining experiences from instructors working in postsecondary institutions -- universities, colleges, trade schools, and other post-high school training. The study is interested in how instructors with and without training in English as a Second Language instruction deal with English Language Learners (ELLs) in the classroom.

The data collected in this survey will be used for presentations at academic conferences and for publications in academic journals.

### **Consent**

Please check or highlight all that apply:

- I agree to allow the author to use my answers as part of his study.

Please check or highlight the option you would prefer:

- I request that the author anonymize my answers.
- I request that the author use my name when referencing answers to this survey.

## **Survey**

**What kind of post-secondary institutions have you taught at?**

- University (number of years \_\_\_\_\_)
- Community College (number of years \_\_\_\_\_)
- Technical College (number of years \_\_\_\_\_)
- Other ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) (number of years \_\_\_\_\_)

**Is English the primary language of instruction at your institution?**

- Yes
- No

**Please describe how often and in what role you deal with English Language Learners?**

**Do you offer any special accommodations to English Language Learners?**

**Have you faced any special difficulties when teaching English Language Learners?**

**Are there any special practices you have developed over time to help you instruct English Language Learners?**

**What kinds of research do you believe would lead to better accommodation for English Language Learners in the Classroom?**

**Are there any other questions you would like to see on future versions of this survey?**

**Would you be willing to answer follow up questions either by email or by other means? (please check all that apply)**

- No thank you.
- Yes, I would be willing to answer follow up emails.
- Yes, I would be willing to answer a skype call.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_.