

Teaching Business Communication to LEP Students

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Learning problems of limited English proficiency (LEP) students and strategies to deal with them have been well documented in the literature. However, not much attention has been devoted to how classroom practitioners teach an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course to this group of students. Drawing from my experience in teaching a business communication course in a private institute in Hong Kong I will provide readers with some specific strategies to instruct LEP students in a content course.

Background

In Hong Kong, if a person (who has attained level of Form 5 but without a university degree) aspires to become a professional accountant, he/she should first register as a student member of the Hong Kong Association of Accounting Technicians (HKAAT). Business Communication (BC) is one of the qualifying papers for which they need to sit in order to progress forward. The BC course in the Hong Kong School of Commerce consisted of 14 lessons covering both theoretical concepts and practical skills in writing business correspondences. I was mainly responsible for teaching the latter component on a part-time basis, which involved 20 hours of contact spread over a period of two months. Supposedly all students had academically attained the level of Form 5, but it turned out that the majority of them had very limited English proficiency. One student categorically mentioned in her email to me that:

"I failed in the English Language of HKCEE (a public examination) three times with grade F. I encounter difficulties in listening, writing, speaking and reading."

A Dilemma: Content vs Language Concern

Students with LEP undoubtedly augmented the complexity in terms of decisions and choices of lecture content, not to mention posing unique challenges to mainstream teachers (see for example <http://www.glencoe.com/sec/teachingtoday/educationupclose.phtml/print/24>). Students themselves were at a time learning new knowledge of business communication while synchronously, grappling with various grammatical items and rules. As a teacher, I was confronted with a dilemma:

"Should I only focus on teaching the genre of Business Writing without addressing other peripheral concern like grammatical issues, which are not mentioned in the syllabus?" The answer to me is no.

Although I had to cover the whole BC syllabus within a limited timeframe, I supplemented with grammatical review related to the topic being discussed. For example, when I was teaching my students the ways to write business minutes, I did not stop short at the venue of teaching the format but reminding them the use of "Reported Speech", which is very frequently used in writing minutes. On top of this, I provided my students with a "Sentence Transformation" task for which they have to rewrite the given sentences using Reported Speech. This exercise proved to be very successful not only in terms of reinforcing their memory of such sentence structure but also consciousness-raising, which allowed me to make sense of what particular problems my students had. Take the following as an example:

- Her brother said, 'I will give you a call as soon as I get there this evening.' (Original)
- Her brother said that I'd give you a call as soon as I get there that evening. (Student A's answer)

Apart from errors in tense (eg. get), student A demonstrated a problem in referencing pronouns / relationships (i.e. mistakably using "I" instead of "he"). It was little wonder that she would encounter difficulties in reporting matters discussed among several conferees. Having identified the problems, I went through a few examples with my students in class, which involved several persons and instructed them how to "visualize" the "relationship" in their mind. This effectively helps students minimize the chance of making such

mistakes in the near future.

Apart from reported speech, the use of modals (e.g. shall, should, could, would), conditional sentences (e.g. If you do not settle the payment within the next seven days, we shall be forced to) and other grammatical items were addressed in the similar ways.

Mode of Exchanges and Online Support

Since the Internet has become more and more popular, I encouraged my students to send me their problems encountered and tasks they did through email. It was particularly useful for a course of such type where physical contact was impossible outside the classroom. One of the characteristics of LEP students is that they are less motivated to talk in class and so individual problems are usually not fully addressed or detected. A virtual classroom can help remedy the situation. With the help of this cyber platform students were found to be more eager to raise their questions, which helped me to refine my lecture content so that it could well cover the problems posed. Although most of the tasks given were what I labeled "optional tasks" (which were aimed for practice instead of assessment), they were enthusiastic in sending me assignments electronically for comments. This kind of online support can greatly enhance the communication between the teacher and student. One student did mention in the evaluation form that "I appreciated very much the contact outside the classroom."

One-to-one Mentoring

In addition to written feedback, I would take some time to talk with the LEP students individually on their problems encountered before or during the break of the lesson. This kind of mentoring was helpful in providing individualized feedback and the students themselves could clarify their problems and my written feedback on the spot. At times I would leave them with a chance to make changes to the errors themselves. The mentoring session provided my students with an opportunity to think critically and at the same time I could receive feedback on whether they had made the appropriate corrections.

Use of Sample Texts and Model Sentences

An evaluation was conducted during the last session of the course. Two related questions were asked.

- What difficulties were encountered during revision?
- What kind of pedagogies are deemed important?

Two major difficulties mentioned were "unable to use business jargons flexibly" (19.4%) and "unable to write grammatical sentences" (16.7%). This reverberated what I had discovered when marking the LEP students' first assignments. In light of this, I revised my next lecture contents and teaching strategies by supplying my students with several sample texts, each of which was further disintegrated into paragraphs. The majority of students considered this beneficial to their study by looking at various examples.

The following is a part of my handout on writing a Letter of Application:

First Paragraph

Having spent the last five years as Junior Accountant of ABC Company, I would like to apply for the post of Senior Accountant which you advertised in the DE Post dated 20 Jan 2003.

With a degree in Accountancy and the experience I have gained in the last five years in Accounting and Auditing field, I believe I am sufficiently qualified to apply for the position of Senior Accountant that was advertised in the SD Post dated 28 Jan.

Second Paragraph

My experience of doing presentations to clients would definitely be an asset to the post I am applying for.

The past five years' experience as a Junior Accountant has made me realize that it is important to be methodical and precise when dealing with paperwork.

Third Paragraph

I look forward to having the opportunity to answer any questions you may have regarding my application. I am free for an interview at any time.

I should welcome the chance to discuss with you personally how I can contribute to your company's success. I can be contacted easily for an interview by my mobile number listed in the resume attached (or enclosed).

(Some of the examples are extracted from Bilbow's Business Writing for Hong Kong)

The reason why BC is teachable and learnable is attributed to its comparatively rigid in nature. Unlike other genres such as argumentative or free writing, students are not given much room for creativity. Their writings have to be bound by certain form, tone and sentence structures. I therefore suggested to LEP students that they should try to imitate those model sentences during the course of writing as far as possible. According to literature of cognitive psychology, imitation dries for fluency and that it facilitates language learning (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). This was proved by the improvement made in their later writings of the course.

Task Design - Encouraging Participations

Not surprisingly LEP students are reluctant to participate in class and different strategies have been suggested by a few classroom practitioners / researchers to deal with the scenario. For me, I encouraged their participation by inviting them to design tasks collaboratively. Before they were given a task on writing Resume and Covering Letter, I asked them to design a job advertisement for that task in groups themselves. This activity required them to think about the nature of the job, and other requirements thoroughly and carefully, and at the same time, it helped them get familiar with the language of a job ad. They were required to give a verbal report on their decisions made by group members; while as a teacher, I was responsible for probing and clarifying the details like "Why does your group consider proficiency in Mandarin necessary for this job?"

Another successful means of boosting participation is through hands-on activity, which allows the students to apply their theory into practice. For example, there are only a few lines in the textbook mentioning how to take notes in a meeting. I found this inadequate and so I incorporated an authentic note-taking practice session. It was a 3-step approach:

Step 1: Active Listening

I read a newspaper article in Cantonese (students' native language) and they were not allowed to jot down anything. Each student was then asked to report bits of what I had read. It was found that most of them could grab the gist of the matter discussed, which was considered to be an essential skill in note-taking.

Step 2: Note-taking I

I read another more complicated newspaper article in Cantonese while students could feel free to jot down anything. Similarly, they needed to report on the details. Intriguingly this activity showed that they were novice in taking notes. Some of the students were very aggressive in trying to record every detail (eg. including a lot function words) in their notes but they missed out on a lot of other more crucial issues. There were other students who was able to filter out insignificant words but unfortunately what they jotted down was not recognizable, even to themselves. A student even cried out desperately, "I didn't know what I had jotted down". They either took notes with poor handwriting or jotted down things which they actually had not understood. In order to illustrate more clearly an effective note-taking method, I undertook a demonstration and gave practical advice to my students.

Step 3: Note-taking II

After seeing my demonstration, students were asked to try it out themselves on hearing a simple English memo. Although their note-taking skills still needed time to polish, they were found to be accurate in terms of reporting numerical data and spatial dimensions like the venue of the meeting, which I think were good enough.

This activity not only succeeded in encouraging participations from LEP students but also let them know that taking notes was not all that difficult to do.

Conclusion

It is by no means easy to deal with limited English Proficiency ESL students and more strikingly; it is challenging to teach them content courses like Business Communication, which demands a high level of English proficiency. The mismatch between the language competence of students and the language requirement of the course has to be dealt with by, yet not exclusively, adjusting the teaching strategies. Some of the thoughts I share in this paper were drawn from my own experience in teaching BC in a private institute where resources are limited and so not all thoughts are applicable to that of traditional schools. However, hopefully these thoughts will shed light on teaching and accommodating the needs of other LEP students in terms of decisions on lecture contents, activities and beyond.

References

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