

Implementing a Listening and Speaking Curriculum in a Linguistically Homogenous English for Academic Purposes Program

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Abstract

Linguistic homogeneity in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs can be a challenge to curriculum design and implementation. In university EAP programs where the majority of students share an L1 with classmates, instructors sometimes struggle to balance the use of the L1 and L2 in class. Despite the potential for immersion, students in these settings may also socialize primarily in their L1 rather than English, the target language. These factors demand special consideration in courses focused on oral production and comprehension where sustained interaction and negotiation of meaning is crucial. Ninety percent of the students in the Intensive English as a Second Language Program at Michigan Technological University come from China and share an L1. In this context, the classroom provides important opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning in the target language. The program recently redesigned, piloted, and evaluated a new curriculum. Using examples from the curriculum and the classroom to present this case, I argue that linguistically homogeneous classrooms focusing on oral and aural communication require different curricula than more diverse EAP settings. Examples from the development and delivery of the new listening and speaking curriculum are potentially applicable in both ESL and EFL settings.

Keywords: Curriculum development, EAP, EFL, oral communication, higher education

Introduction

In the United States, 64% of students in Intensive English Programs (IEP) came from the top four sending countries: Saudi Arabia (29.9%), China (15.9%), South Korea (9.4%), Japan (9.1%). In American universities more than 28% of international students came from China in 2012, a 21.4% increase from the previous year (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2013). In this context, it is not uncommon for university IEPs

to have large groups of students who share a first language. Linguistic homogeneity in IEPs can be a challenge to curriculum design and implementation.

For many IEP students, the stakes of language learning are high, with admission to and success in degree programs hinging on their ability to communicate in English. Concerns over money and time may be distracting stressors that can influence students in and out of the classroom (Yang & Berliner, 2013). Despite the immersion setting of an American university campus, students with networks of friends who share their L1 may get their primary exposure to English in the classroom. For their instructors, negotiating the use of L1 and L2 in the classroom can be challenging.

The Intensive English as a Second Language Program (IESL) at Michigan Technological University (MTU) serves international students conditionally admitted to degree programs. Ninety percent of the students in the program between 2011 and 2014 came from China. The faculty recently redesigned, piloted, and evaluated a new curriculum. The listening and speaking courses in this new curriculum were developed to address the specific needs of linguistically homogenous classes that are typical in the program. This case is an illustration of how linguistically homogenous classrooms focusing on oral and aural communication skills require curricula designed specifically with the role of interaction in mind.

Mackey (2012) suggests that the connections between instructors and researchers studying interaction are strong and encourages engagement between the two groups. This paper will explore some of the ways that interaction research has informed the design and delivery of the curriculum. The examples of activities and assessment tools from the new listening and speaking curriculum could be adapted to fit both EFL and other ESL settings.

IESL at Michigan Technological University

Students in the IESL program at MTU are required to study English and meet standardized testing benchmarks before they can enroll exclusively in academic courses. Internal needs analyses have shown that to succeed in academic classes, students must be able to use English to write academic research essays, read extensively, understand lectures, and actively collaborate as group members. As a pipeline program, students are under pressure from family-members and peers to complete English training as quickly as possible in order to move on to academic classes to save money. Instructors are seen as gatekeepers and their decisions to pass a student out of the IESL program indicates that he/she has a high enough level of English proficiency to begin academic classes.

During the 2013-2014 academic year 97% of IESL students were from China and over the last three years 90% of all students in the program were Chinese. In most cases students share Mandarin Chinese as an L1.¹ The linguistic homogeneity in this setting is similar to many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. As in some EFL settings, the students' learning goals are usually not oriented towards community integration as they might be in other North American ESL settings (Nayar, 1997). While some students hope to work in the United States after graduation, many plan to return to China with their degrees. In other ways the situation is unique. While EFL instructors often grapple with the challenge of finding authentic language, real-world applications, and opportunities for students to interact with English speakers, most students in an IESL program in the United States are surrounded by campus communities who use English daily. Despite these opportunities for immersion, not all students seek them out. At MTU students spend 18-24 hours each week in a classroom with other IESL students and often form friendships within this group. For students who socialize and study in their L1, the IESL classroom can be their primary opportunity for sustained interaction in the target language.

Research has shown that English only policies in the classroom do not necessarily enhance language learning and that attempting to eliminate L1 from the classroom would be ineffective (Auerbach, 1993; Levine, 2003). At the same time, there is strong evidence that L2 interactions support language learning (Mackey, 2012). The IESL program at MTU does not have an English only policy and each instructor balances L1 and L2 differently to achieve the program mission of preparing students for academic success. Along with tasks like essay writing and extensive reading, some of that success is based upon their ability to interact in English with both NS and NNS. Listening and speaking instruction in the program seeks to prepare students for communicative academic tasks in the target language and as a result, some classroom tasks, particularly those focused on interaction, require the use of L2. It is in this context that the faculty redesigned and implemented the new curriculum during the 2013-2014 academic year.

The Curriculum: Task design and the Role of Interaction

Before the curriculum was redesigned, the faculty conducted a needs analysis to determine what skills students would need to use in academic classes after exiting the IESL program. Long and Norris (2009) categorized needs analysis to identify “*target tasks*” as the first step in task-based language teaching program design, writing that

¹ There have been some exceptions, with a handful of students identifying Cantonese or Tibetan as their first language. However, these students typically speak Mandarin Chinese in addition to their L1 and English.

these tasks are “the real-world things people *do* in everyday life” (p. 137). Course goals, objectives, and outcomes were written with these real-world tasks in mind. In the case of MTU students, everyday life is focused on the university. In surveys of university faculty, one of several skills identified as important was the ability to communicate and collaborate with members of a group. For this reason, one of the exit outcomes for students leaving the IESL program was dedicated to this skill: Students will be able to participate actively and mediate communication breakdown in classroom discussions and small group settings. All listening and speaking curriculum documents include objectives and outcomes related to group work and/or the negotiation of meaning.

Research and the Curriculum in the Classroom

Like many EAP curricula, the listening and speaking courses at MTU include a focus on listening comprehension, particularly academic lectures. The role of input in these courses is an important part of curriculum and classroom activity design. To prepare students for lectures and lab courses, the IESL program includes listening practice ranging from simple modified texts through complex authentic oral texts. But listening comprehension is only one aspect of the course and Long (1996) asserts that “comprehensible input alone is *insufficient*” (p.422).

Research shows that interaction in the target language is crucial for learners and plays an important role in the ESL classroom (Mackey, 2012; Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987). Interaction and the negotiation of meaning cause the learner to make “*interactional* adjustments” and draw their attention to form (Long, 1996 p. 451). The type and context of the interaction is also important and can be adapted to fit learner needs (Mackey, 2012). In the IESL program interaction plays an important role in the listening and speaking curriculum and in classroom work. One factor influencing the design of interactive tasks is the cultural background of students. Some research suggests that students coming from educational systems that do not focus on communicative classroom techniques can be skeptical of interactive activities (Rao, 2002). Our experience at MTU has been that some students do struggle to adapt to a more interactive classroom environment, but that most of them come to see the interaction as an important part of their learning. In an anonymous program evaluation survey conducted in fall 2013, students identified positive results from interactive activities. Students commented that they can speak more confidently, better comprehend NS, and that they “liked communications with teachers and classmates.” A key to getting learners to accept student-centered interaction is to design activities that they find engaging and to explain the purpose and goals of interactive tasks. The best examples of are graded formal student discussions.

Formal Student-led Discussions

At all levels of listening and speaking, students participate in graded classroom discussions. These are designed to motivate students to interact and negotiate meaning in the target language. Sustaining discourse in the TL can be difficult in linguistically homogenous classrooms, especially at lower proficiency levels, but students have responded well to these activities. Students prepare a text – oral or written – before class. In class they hold a discussion on that text with little or no input from the instructor. How the discussion is organized depends on the level. Early on, code-switching is common. As students build confidence they are better able to maintain interaction in English. At the intermediate level, discussion questions are “crowd-sourced” from the group. All students submit questions for discussion which the instructor organizes and distributes at the beginning of the activity. At the advanced and transitional levels, one student is responsible for preparing and leading the discussion but the complexity of the text is differentiated. Students are graded on their participation, ability to make connections to the text, turn-taking and negotiation, and their production of comprehensible output.

In these student-led discussions the task is open; consensus is not necessary (Mackey 2012). Open tasks give students the chance to spend time exploring a topic and controlling discourse (Willis, 2004). Willis points out that SLA researchers have typically favored closed tasks, but that open tasks may have their place:

When planning a TBI program, teachers would need to decide which kinds of tasks best reflect target language use or which kinds best help students achieve an established language-acquisition goal. In the case of language for academic purposes, this is certainly likely to involve open tasks. (p. 24)

Gass, Behney & Plonsky (2013) emphasize that “conversational interaction in an L2 forms the basis for the development of language, rather than being only a forum for practice of specific language features” (p.378). Graded formal classroom discussions engage students in the L2 rather than L1, which can benefit their language development while strengthening their ability to navigate American classroom culture. The kind of task and interaction in the classroom matters not only to the students’ learning but also their perception of the learning experience. In the fall 2013 surveys students again gave positive feedback on classroom discussion and identified personal language development related to fluency and comprehension.

Interaction with Native Speakers

Student-led discussions focus on NNS-NNS interactions, but research has shown that interactions with a NS can be even more valuable for student noticing and modification (Gass&Varonis, 1994). In a study by Gass and Varonis (1994) NNS who were allowed to interact were able to give clearer directions, especially after interacting with a NS. Interaction with NSs must be incorporated into classroom activities and teacher-fronted work sometimes plays a role. In addition to student-led discussions, teachers may lead discussions, especially when the focus is on form or when consensus is necessary. Teachers also interact with students in one-on-one conferences for formative assessment purposes. These conferences are typically designed around a task like editing a presentation, but also provide students opportunities to interact with a NS.

Another setting for program-organized interaction is the Conversation Partners Program. Each semester, IESL faculty match volunteers from the campus community with an IESL student or small group. They are required to meet for a minimum of ten hours each semester and their participation counts as part of their listening and speaking course grade. This interaction is typically between a NS and a NNS. The guidelines encourage participants to avoid doing using the time as a tutoring session. Instead, the goal of the program is for students to practice authentic interaction with a native speaker.

Presentational skills also play an important role in the curriculum. The presentations themselves are primarily a performance rather than interactive task, but it is possible to design the requirements for a presentation to involve interaction. Group presentations can provide an opportunity for L2 interaction with partners to accomplish a series of tasks in preparation for a presentation, but if all students share an L1 they are unlikely to primarily use English to accomplish the tasks. One way to ensure interaction in the L1 is to require students to conduct interviews as part of their research for a presentation. In Intermediate Listening and Speaking, students give informational presentations about either their academic major or introducing the audience to the local community. If they choose to present on their major they are required to interview one professor or two students who do not share their L1. Those giving a presentation about the local community conduct interviews with employees of local businesses, students, or other community members. This turns out to be a motivational experience for many students who have reported that they felt better prepared to communicate with native speakers after the project.

Conclusion

Interaction is an important part of language learning and should play a central role in the design of EAP curricula, particularly in courses where the focus is on listening

and speaking. This is especially important, and potentially challenging, in linguistically homogenous classrooms where students can interact easily in their shared L1. Through carefully designed interactive tasks like those described in this paper, instructors can provide learners with authentic opportunities for L2 interaction.

Several issues have come up in this case study that cannot be addressed adequately in this forum. More research into the trend towards Chinese majority EAP programs in the U.S. and how this influences curriculum design and classroom practice will be important for program administrators and faculty. Further research into roles of motivation and social integration in linguistically homogenous EAP programs could also contribute to a better understanding of student learning. The more accessible and relevant that interaction research is the more likely instructors will be to incorporate findings into their curriculum and their classrooms.

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