Four Steps to Support English Language Learners in an IR Classroom

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I often take for granted the advantages of being a native English speaker. When I'm struggling with a conference paper or can't seem to find the right words to express an idea in an article, I rarely stop to think about the difficulties of non-native speakers who struggle with these same tasks. The point, however, is often driven home when I see talented colleagues struggling with their own writing or organizing teaching materials.

Like many instructors, I've had to deal with classroom situations where students – even those who have passed the entrance requirements in TOEFL or IELTS – struggle to contribute in class discussions or to produce quality papers because of their language skills.

You may be a professor or graduate student who has extended a helping hand to a colleague who was struggling because of a language barrier. Certainly, empathy and courtesy go a long way. Anyone who has attempted to learn another language knows that achieving fluency can be an arduous process. Even those who have a high level of fluency may lack confidence in using their English in professional contexts. At the very least, they may feel a sense of vulnerability when talking to native speakers.

In an IR classroom, though, is there anything beyond empathy and courtesy that can help students who are struggling? More importantly, what efforts, considerations, or adjustments can be made for English language learners while maintaining a high standard of learning and classroom integrity (and not overwhelming instructors with extra work)?

Here are a few ideas:

1. Create incentives for peer help

Many professors often complain that correcting basic grammar and punctuation can take up a lot of teacher grading time. Typically, the worst papers take up the most time.For professors, time spent correcting basic grammar is not particularly valuable experience. However, for students with little or no tutoring experience, this activity can be rewarding, and may lead to fruitful part-time work.

Professors may be able to save themselves a lot of time and energy by scouting the talented writing students in class and giving them small incentives to spend their time helping their peers who are struggling with English. These incentives can take the form of extra-credit points, assignments that can be skipped, or letters of recommendation.

2. Make sure that students are familiar with all the resources available on campus

Make sure your students know where they can get tutoring help. Giving students incentives for using these resources may also be a good idea.

What aspect of English a student struggles with will often depend on their native language and culture. Some English

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learners will struggle with pronunciation; others will struggle with listening and vocabulary; cultural issues may create difficulties in understanding the nuances of plagiarism and proper citation. In coming to terms with these myriad problems, you need not struggle alone. Most campuses have some form of English-learner support and your bilingual colleagues can be a valuable resource.

3. A grading tip that preserves high standards while maintaining fairness

John Bean wrote an excellent book, on how to incorporate writing into the classroom. One of his tips is if a writer makes one mistake systematically – for example, comma splices or incorrect use of semicolons – then the mistake should only be counted against the student once.

As John Bean wrote,

Although at-risk students and second-language speakers have very different needs, they often manifest themselves to teachers in the same way–papers so loaded with errors or so underdeveloped or so off-target from the assignment that teachers throw up their hands in dismay…Because there is no magic solution for the problem of error…teachers can make more progress with at-risk and second-language students if they focus on content, organization, and development of papers, aiming to teach the kind of writing and critical thinking skills that instructors value

The message is clear and consistent: instructors should learn to look beyond the errors and acknowledge the person in the essay. Comments, feedback, and interventions should not only attempt to improve the paper but should also realize the dignity of the writer.

4. Provide some sheltering for English language learners in class discussions

Unless you want your students to be completely overwhelmed and exposed in classroom discussions, it might be necessary to provide students with some sheltering. True, in the real world these same students will be exposed to environments where there is no sheltering, but there is no good reason to completely destroy their confidence.

Sheltering can take several forms in class discussion environments:

- For students who are not participating, you might give the question that will be addressed to them ahead of time and inform them that they will be called on in class.
- You might have students rehearse an answer to a classroom question during office hours.
- You might allow more speaking time for students who are struggling with English and caution other students not to interrupt.
- You might help students respond by providing several model answers to choose from and asking them to choose the one that is closest to their answer. The teacher can then help students tailor the answer to fit what they want to say. In the most extreme situations, teachers can create exercises using pairs, where students are asked to make choices between competing answers.

About the author:

Daniel Clausen is a full-time special lecturer at Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies. His research has been published in *Asian Politics and Policy*, *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, and *East Asia Forum*, among other publications. His teaching experience includes over seven years of experience as a TESOL instructor. He has also written several novels and short story collections. You can learn more about his work on his Amazon page here or on his Goodreads page here.

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