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Changing Times

Mt. San Antonio College, a member of the California Community College system, has two instructional programs for non-native English speakers: (a) American Language, a credit program that serves to transition students to academic credit courses, and (b) English as a Second Language (ESL), a non-credit program that meets the various needs of over two thousand learners per semester.

The ESL non-credit component has changed significantly in recent times. "Survival" English (or life skills) needed at the beginning levels of instruction has become largely inappropriate at the more advanced levels due to a sizeable influx of educated students seeking English for business purposes, career enhancement, and high-level communication necessary to transition to four-year-college and university programs, both undergraduate and graduate. Clearly, it was time for us to make some changes and develop a non-credit adult education class for this new population of advanced students.

Student Population and Their Needs

In the past few years, the ESL department at Mt. San Antonio has had a significant influx of learners from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Korea. The education of these students has resulted in substantial gaps between their capabilities and the expectations of the U.S. educational system. In addition to these gaps, many have studied in teacher-centered, grammar-based classrooms where real communication has never been required.

Course Description

To serve this new population of advanced students, a course entitled Applied Communication was created. During the registration period, students received information about the differences between Applied Communication and a regular Level 5 or Level 6 advanced class, allowing them to choose the appropriate course for themselves. Since students were self-selecting, we predicted that their satisfaction with the course would be greater.

Initially designed as an intensive, 20-hour-per-week course, Applied Communication included three components: a speaking component, a writing component, and an elective component. The original elective choices were music, travel, and television. These choices were intended as both a

break from the demands of the other two components and as a source of U.S. cultural input. These electives were dropped after the first semester due to lack of student interest and replaced with a combination of pronunciation and editing practice. This too has since been modified as the class now has the same 15-hour-per-week schedule as all of the daytime level classes (reduced from 20 hours per week). As a result, the pronunciation component has been eliminated entirely and the editing sessions, which are tied to students' production efforts, have been restricted to global errors made by more than one student in the group. In place of the pronunciation and editing practice, more focus is now placed on cooperative learning, problem-solving activities, and on the writing workshop.

During the first week of Applied Communication, students work on articulating why they are in the class (i.e., they connect their present study to their future goals) and collectively work on a class purpose statement utilizing Quality Learning Tools (Langford, 1997) common to business environments (see Appendixes A through D for examples of Quality Learning Tools used in the course).¹ Learners must speak and write as a daily requirement, with emphasis placed on expressing opinions, sending messages, and presenting research and observational findings. The class activities serve the double purpose of increasing both student motivation and learning retention.

Keeping in mind language-acquisition theory, student goals, department requirements, and skills necessary to be "successful" in the workplace, as outlined in the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS)² report (1991)—instructors Donna Burns, Laura Herrin, and I began the 1997-98 academic year developing and adapting curriculum on a weekly basis and meeting daily to discuss plans, lessons, and outcomes. We included elements of learning strategies, learning styles, cultural themes and comparisons, research, formal presentation styles, and Quality Learning techniques that peripherally incorporate SCANS competencies, promote collaborative processes, and enhance critical thinking capabilities. In addition, we encouraged outside experiences and observations, workshop-based writing, and music or video as weekly "fun" activities. Students now also contribute information gained from small group visits to a class web-site.³ The following components ensure the success of the class: (a) team teaching, allowing students to benefit from two teaching styles and two voices in the classroom; (b) student-centered activities in which the students encounter real communication by focusing on the message, not the form of the message; (c) a class environment conducive to discussion and collaboration (e.g., long tables *not* facing the instructor, chairs, flipcharts, post-it notes); (d) regular reinforcement of educational principles ("People learn in different ways." "Yes, you *are* getting grammar."); (e) regular teacher meetings to discuss curriculum development, lesson planning, and outcomes;⁴ (f) teacher monitoring of table discussions and activities to keep groups and individuals on task; (g) explicit delivery, in writing, of student responsibilities and instructor expectations; (h) consistent monitoring of native-language usage along with demonstration and discussion of how target-language use positively influences English

acquisition; and (i) time set aside to answer students' burning questions about the class at the end of the first week and periodically thereafter.

Outcomes

At the end of the course, students receive completion certificates and vocational English as a second language (VESL) recommendations based upon certificate guidelines stated in the course outline. We had over 60 students at the beginning of our first fall semester in 1997 and gave out only 12 certificates. We concluded that project work and a communicative environment may scare students who lack collaborative learning in their experiential background. As a result, we modified the project work after the first semester to increase student retention. The result of this modification was that the next semester we had 36 regularly attending students until the last three weeks and handed out 23 completion certificates. During the spring 1999 semester, due to student enthusiasm and positive word of mouth from past successes, enrollment held strong and we awarded 36 certificates. Learners in subsequent classes have been similarly successful.

The department administers an end-of-semester, grammar-based final test for the purposes of continuing student placement. During the 1998-99 academic year, a listening component was added to the final test. Since the final exam primarily tests contextual grammar, classes at many levels focus on grammar study and exercises. In the Applied Communication class, however, students do not have grammar exercises. Instead, we focus on editing, concentrating on student production.

Despite the different approach to grammar in the Applied Communication class, test results in our class have averaged a 70% to 80% passing rate on the final examination.⁵ At the end of the spring 1998 semester, we gave our students the same final exam that a Level 5 or Level 6 student would take. The expected passing rate on the final exam is around 70%. The success rate in our course was 85%. At the end of the spring 1999 semester, most of our students opted to take the Level 6 final exam, though many of the students came to us from Level 4 classes. The results were that 88% passed, indicating preparedness for the VESL program or for exit from the ESL department. In fall of 1999, the pass rate was somewhat lower (65%). We attributed this to the overall student entry proficiency being lower and to the fact that several students who took the test didn't attend regularly and didn't accept the program goals to the extent necessary to do well in the class. This lower pass rate was offset in spring 2000 by the somewhat higher pass rate of 72%.⁶ Finally, in the fall of 2000 all advanced ESL students as well as the Applied Communication students were given the placement exam that incoming students take for placement into credit classes. The results showed that 40% of the Applied Communication students qualified to bypass further ESL instruction and to proceed into English classes for native English speakers.

Overall, we are encouraged by these passing rates on the tests, which reinforce our confidence that the program has helped students to improve

their overall oral communicative abilities as well as enabled them to give oral presentations with visual accompaniment and to write essays. Though exams do not measure all of the outcomes we strive for in Applied Communication, they do indicate the development of an intuitive sense of the language in addition to improvements in speaking and writing capacity. Encouraged by our success, in fall 1999 we added an intermediate Applied Communication class and an advanced night version modified to meet the needs of students who cannot attend during the day.

Lessons Learned

New programs need to be encouraged, evaluated, and modified to meet the needs of the student populations they serve. Many of our students express an interest in transferring to four-year colleges and universities and in pursuing graduate work in the U.S. They will have to think critically—not simply regurgitate information. As White (1998) has written, “...proving proficiency for the purpose of taking exams is seldom related to learning how to interact with native English speakers” (p. 13), and we could not agree more.

In conclusion, although the lack of initial student support for the class was a concern, we believe we have succeeded in turning the program around. This turnaround has occurred for several reasons: (a) Students learned that they still pass midterms, finals, and other tests without direct instruction in grammar, at least at the advanced levels of instruction; (b) students are introduced to learning styles and learning strategies near the beginning of the course to reinforce the notions that people learn in different ways and that there is more than one way to learn; (c) those students who are hesitant at first, tend to participate more as they see other students interacting actively; and (d) new students enroll because they listen to what other students say about the class; this word-of-mouth publicity, fortunately, has been quite positive.

Therefore, the risks involved in creating a new course to meet the needs for a more communicative curriculum were worth taking even though we knew we would need administrative support during the time it would take for the class to develop a following. Clearly, programs need to be careful how they incorporate new ideas, activities, and courses into their department, otherwise considerable student opposition may be encountered. Our course would have been cancelled after its first semester if we had not had the full support of our department to experiment, fail, change, and grow. The opportunity to try something different has been a gift.

Acknowledgments

ESL Assistant Director Liza Becker’s graduate program project work at California State University Fullerton and a department survey of advanced students provided the initial impetus for the course. ESL Director Carol Ryerson encouraged us and anticipated an interim period of low retention while the class caught on. Instructor Laura Herrin provided first semester cur-

riculum development and insight from her teaching experience in Mainland China. Instructor Donna Burns is the final member of this curriculum development team and remains my thoughtful, creative, open-minded, and philosophically compatible teaching partner. Many thanks to these colleagues who truly understand what it means to be part of a learning community.

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Endnotes

¹ For further information on Quality Teaching and Quality Learning, contact Langford International, Inc., 12742 Canyon Creek Road, Molt, MT 59057. Phone: 406-628-2227. For a comprehensive online resource visit <http://www.langfordlearning.com>.

² See also Kappra (2000).

³ See <http://www.vclass@mtsac.edu/APPCOM>.

⁴ The need for these lessens as the program continues.

⁵ Pass rate is used here to refer specifically to the passing rate on the final exam (70% = passing). These data are collected for classroom research purposes and are used to evaluate the model itself. Students pass the class based on their cumulative work for the entire semester, a large bulk of which consists of their writing portfolio. Other considerations taken into account in determining whether students pass the class are the oral evaluations by departmental tutors, student work on group projects, and student oral presentations.

⁶ Three students in this group missed a legitimate passing score by one point, which would have brought the pass rate to 79%. In the group that took the Level 6 test, 78% passed. The three students that took the Level 5 test scored 69%, 69%, and 61% respectively, thus lowering the average pass rate significantly.

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Appendix A

Five Whys

- What is it? A process of asking "Why?" five times in a row to get at a root cause, meaning, or reason.
Example: "Why are you studying English?"
- Why use this? The Five Whys process is useful for several reasons:
1. It fosters critical thinking skills.
2. It encourages deeper understanding.
3. It reviews question formation.
- Uses
1. Make students do the thinking (paradigm shift).
2. Force students to think at a deeper level.
3. Use it before studying a topic (e.g., culture) and ask students, "Why are we studying this?" to increase interest and motivation.

The process:

1. Identify a topic to study or a question or problem to solve.
2. Ask a "Why?" question in relation to the task.
3. After each answer to the "Why?" question, ask another question.
4. Continue to ask questions five times or until everyone involved is satisfied that they have come up with a root cause.

Example: (from the *Applied Communication* class)

Q: Why are you in this class?

A: I want to learn grammar.

Q: Why do I want to learn grammar?

A: Because I want to improve my English.

- Q: Why do I want to improve my English?
 A: Because my family came to the United States.
 Q: Why did my family come to the United States?
 A: We want to have more opportunities.
 Q: Why do we want more opportunities?
 A: We want to have a better life.

Caveat: The student has now made a connection between being in the class and possible future benefits. This increases learner motivation, participation, and attendance. Without the Five Whys process, many students would not get beyond their initial response.

Note. From *Tool Time: Choosing and implementing quality improvement tools* (p. 40-41), by D. Langford, 1997, Molt, MT: Langford. Copyright 1997 by Langford International, Inc. Adapted with permission.

Appendix B

Force-Field Analysis

- What is it?** A visual representation of positive and negative factors that influence a particular problem or task.
- Why use this?** The Force Field Analysis process is useful for several reasons:
1. It helps learners work and think together.
 2. It encourages critical and creative thinking.
 3. It helps students understand their classroom behavior in relation to their desire to learn English.
 4. It encourages active participation and collaborative processes.
 5. It promotes categorization skills for writing.
- Uses**
1. Determine a class code of conduct.
 2. Help students reflect on their learning habits and behavior.
 3. Assist students in developing critical thinking and opinions by seeing both sides of a problem or issue.
 4. Hang an example on the wall to refer to when or if a student is behaving in a manner that is not conducive to learning.
- The process:**
1. Use a flip chart or a piece of poster paper.
 2. Draw a vertical line down the middle of the paper.
 3. Draw a horizontal line across the top of the paper.
 4. Entitle the left column “Helps” (or “Positive” or “Driving”)
 5. Entitle the right column “Hindrances” (or “Negative” or “Preventing”)

6. Brainstorm as many ideas as you can for each column. Do not get slowed down with discussion at this point. At this point, all ideas are valid and respected. Learners can discuss specific items later in groups or as a class.

Examples: What helps you learn English?

What prevents you from learning English?

8. Group ideas can be consolidated into a final Force Field.

Note. From *Tool Time: Choosing and implementing quality improvement tools* (p. 46-47), by D. Langford, 1997, Molt, MT: Langford. Copyright 1997 by Langford International, Inc. Adapted with permission.

Appendix C

Parking Lot

What is it? A wall chart or poster where students can place notes (“Post-its”) in order to provide ongoing class feedback, give suggestions, or ask questions.

Why use one? The Parking Lot process is useful for several reasons:

1. It gives students a means by which they can communicate anonymously with instructors.
2. It gives shy students a way to ask questions they might not ask during class.
3. It provides an ongoing forum for “sensitive” questions or topics.
4. It provides a classroom area specifically for student ideas without losing slips of paper.
5. It shows students that their ideas are respected.

Uses

1. Encourage students to express their ideas.
2. Obtain student feedback for lesson planning.
3. Provide a forum where you can address student concerns and/ or questions on an ongoing basis.
4. Provide feedback to instructors on how the class is going from the students’ point of view.

The process:

1. Place a sheet of flip-chart paper or poster paper on a classroom wall or bulletin board.
2. Divide the chart into four equal sections.

3. Give a label to each section.

- + What is going well? or What do you like about the class?
- Δ What needs improvement? or What can we change to make the class better?
- ? What questions do you have (about the class/the lesson)?
- I Issues and General Comments

Caveat: Make certain that learners understand that all ideas, questions, and suggestions will be respected and addressed assuming that they are phrased in a positive manner.

Note. From *Tool Time: Choosing and implementing quality improvement tools* (p. 82-83), by D. Langford, 1997, Molt, MT: Langford. Copyright 1997 by Langford International, Inc. Adapted with permission.

Appendix D

Purpose and Vision Statement

What is it? A short, clear, written statement that identifies students' reasons for attending a particular class and links these reasons to future outcomes or opportunities or both.

Why make one? A Purpose and Vision statement is practical for several reasons:

1. It helps students identify with the group.
2. It encourages them to think more deeply about the reasons they are in class.
3. It improves learner motivation.
4. It helps students begin to see the importance of their input.
5. It involves all class members in the process of creating the statement.
6. It makes students think about their classroom behavior and habits in relation to their goals and objectives.

Uses

1. Start building a sense of community from the outset.
2. Review and revise the statement periodically to check on learner motivation and commitment to the course.

The process:

1. Have students take their responses from a previous “Five Whys” activity. The fifth why is essentially an individual purpose statement.
2. Groups of four to seven students pass the statements to one person to the right (or left). Have each person in the group underline a key word or phrase.
3. Continue passing the statements around until the students have their original statements.
4. A group recorder writes all of the most-underlined words or statements on a piece of flip-chart paper (or chalkboard) so each group member can see the significant ideas.
5. Have someone from the group read them aloud.
6. Choose from one of the following two options:
 - Have each group generate a small group statement.
 - Generate a class statement utilizing as many key ideas as possible. A basic format can be given like, “We are in this class...in order to...”
7. Read the final version out loud and make any necessary changes.
 - Example (from *Applied Communication*): “We are here to learn English and communicate with others so that we can get opportunities, be successful in our work, and have a better, more enjoyable life.”
8. Have a student write up the final version on a sheet of poster paper.
9. Hang it up in class for everyone to see.
10. Have all students who agree with the statement sign it.

Note. From *Tool Time: Choosing and implementing quality improvement tools* (p. 96-97), by D. Langford, 1997, Molt, MT: Langford. Copyright 1997 by Langford International, Inc. Adapted with permission.