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 HELP & FAQs

Challenges Teaching Lower-level Freshman English

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What are the special challenges of teaching lower-level Freshman English? The author provides answers to this question from two research projects conducted during two academic years. In the initial research, the author and his colleague conducted taped, oral interviews of the Visiting Faculty Members (VFMs) teaching Asia University's (AU) four lowest Freshman English (FE) levels in 2001. The interview questions covered student stumbling blocks, meeting student needs, summarizing the special challenges and advice to future teachers. Using these categories, the author updated the research employing a written questionnaire in 2003. The VFMs' written

answers, quoted verbatim, yield multi-faceted answers to the basic research question from a wealth of personal teaching experience.

下級レベルのフレッシュマン イングリッシュを教えることの特別な試みとは何だろうか。著者は、この質問の解答を2年間で行われた2つの調査企画から要約する。最初の調査では、著者とその同僚が2001年度亜細亜大学4つの下級レベルのフレッシュマン イングリッシュ教授委員会の訪問における口頭対談の録音テープによって導いた。彼らの論点は生徒のつまづく点、生徒の要求との出会い、要求された教科書の実用的な活用、特別な試みの要約や今後の先生方へのアドバイスなどである。これらの部門を活用することで、著者は2003年度雇用質問事項を最新のものにした。書面に記された言葉どおり回答は、豊富な個人の教職歴からこの基本的な調査議題に多くのしなやかな回答をもたらす。

Introduction

The Asia University Freshman English Program teaches all first-year students in 22 proficiency-based levels. FE is taught daily in two 13-week terms by VFMs through the AU Center for English Language Education (CELE). The FE classes cover the four skills and are also expected to meet departmental cross-cultural and critical thinking goals and objectives. During the 2000 academic year, colleague Genie Hughes and I sought to answer this question: What are the special challenges of teaching the lower levels of these FE classes?

We interviewed VFMs teaching the four lowest levels in the FE Program. We began with questions derived from our own experiences as teachers of the program's two lowest levels

We recorded the four roughly hour-long interviews on tape. The recorded interviews were vast and unwieldy to summarize. To publish our findings in our in-house *CELE Journal* we had to paraphrase the VFMs' answers. In our suggestions for further research we noted:

“Not all of the VFMs' answers to our interview questions fit neatly into a consensus summary. We are four different teachers, with four different backgrounds, and our differences of opinion add to, rather than detract from, the whole answer to our basic research question (Connolly & Hughes, p.167).”

After publication of this initial research, I was uneasy about our practice of paraphrasing from the recorded interviews, believing that paraphrasing diluted the wealth of personal teaching experience the VFMs had provided. Another one of our suggestions for further research was to periodically update the data. So, following the 2002 academic year, I took material from the initial research and formed a questionnaire to solicit written answers from the current VFMs teaching the lowest five levels of FE. I hoped that, by soliciting written answers this time, I could more accurately publish the VFMs' experience with the lower-level classes without the need to paraphrase. The written responses from the five VFMs formed a rich text of answers to the basic research question: What are the special challenges of teaching lower-level FE? Unable by space limitations to provide readers with the entire text in this article, I have selected the quotes that I hope convey the gist. I believe that my job with this research material was to organize, solicit and present the VFMs' answers in as accurate a manner as possible. I wanted to avoid as much as possible being a filter for their responses, paraphrasing or editing too much. The Comments and Solutions below are verbatim, edited for space.

The questionnaire

The 2003 questionnaire asked VFMs to Comment on, and offer Solutions to, the special challenges of teaching lower-level FE listed below under numerals I and II and to summarize and give advice in III respectively.

- I. Stumbling Blocks to effective teaching
 - A. Student unresponsiveness
 - B. Student problems with basic communicative abilities
 - C. Student motivation
 - D. Student attitude
 - E. Students unaccustomed to participation

- II. Student Needs
 - A. The need for structured language
 - B. The need to feel comfortable learning English
 - C. Students' ability to communicate their own needs in class

- III. Summarizing the special challenges

The VFMs' responses

Asia University FE levels are numbered from 21 at the lowest proficiency to 1 at the highest, and the Advanced class teaches students who are near-native speakers. The lower levels of FE, for the purposes of this study, were defined as levels 21 to 17. Providing the VFMs with anonymity, I have named them using their FE level, for example T21 is the teacher of level 21, T20 teaches level 20, etc. Here are some of the VFMs' responses.

I. Student stumbling blocks to effective teaching

A. Unresponsiveness (Examples: student quietness or lack of response; no body language or verbal language to let you know they understand or don't understand instructions)

Comments:

T20: This is generally only an issue in whole-class situations when asking a question of the whole class.

T17: Students don't let you know they don't understand

Solutions:

T18: I spend a lot of time at the beginning of the semester working with my students on Helpful/Classroom English. By teaching fixed responses and questions and using them consistently during class, students who are initially unable to communicate their needs, to ask for clarification, or to signal that they don't understand something, learn to respond in an appropriate way to have their needs addressed.

B. Problems with basic communicative abilities (Example: students can't communicate questions to the teacher about important classroom procedures)

Comments:

T20: This is a big problem particularly when the students don't indicate that they don't understand the task while appearing to the instructor to be working on it.

T18: Again this can prove a real problem at the lower levels unless you arm the students with language and create an environment in which questions from the students are encouraged.

Solutions:

T21: I drilled classroom help language (What does ___ mean? Etc) a lot.

T20: Ultimately, having a teacher who speaks Japanese is the best solution for solving procedural communication issues.

T19: Another student usually could translate.

T18: Provide Helpful/Classroom English. Teach it and expect the students to use it. Second, by teaching these questions early on and rewarding students when they use them, or attempt to do so, the teacher sets the tone of the class.

T17: I put classroom language up on the walls so that students have a reference, to which I constantly refer. Generally, I praise any attempt to communicate, poor grammar and all.

C. Student motivation (Examples: students chronically late or tardy; not doing homework; basic lack of initiative)

Comments:

T20: One problem is that high absenteeism rates effect continuity in lessons: when students miss classes which form the base for a unit or series of lessons, or which have material that spans two or more lessons, they are out-of-step with the rest of the class and often cannot participate or work effectively with the other students.

T18: Lack of motivation manifests itself in all sorts of student behaviors that negatively affect the class if they aren't dealt with.

Solutions:

T21: I set really low standards in terms of how much English my students were to learn. So I gave them ridiculously easy language tasks and found that some of them would get this look of surprise on their

faces like they were thinking, “Weird, I think I might actually know the answer to this one.” I thought it was important that they felt learning some English was possible, before I started challenging them.

T18: The best way to deal with this is to spell out the attendance policy early. I cover the policy and reiterate it often. I also give the students a Japanese translation of the policy.

T17: I like to keep students up to date on the areas in which they are slipping. I do this by bringing in reports that act as a visual, letting them see what they are missing, how many lates/absences they have. I also nag the students in real trouble.

D. Attitude (Examples: students not being responsible for work they have missed; students’ disrespectfulness)

Comments:

T20: I identify two areas in which these factors are problems: a) students talking while I am talking and they should be listening and so they are disrupting others who are trying to listen; and b) students habitually not completing assignments

Solutions:

T20: I make it clear that behavior that interferes with other students’ learning is not acceptable and I will tell students to stop talking and in extreme (and infrequent) cases have them leave the classroom. For b), for those students who have missed a lot of class work, I give extra homework assignments that the students must complete if they want to pass the class (this is communicated to them in written Japanese as well as English). These extra assignments involve a minimum of grading effort from me, so that I am not penalizing myself.

T19: Generally speaking, if attitude becomes an issue I discuss it with the individual students. As I see issues begin to

come up in class, I may try to diffuse them by joking with the student.

T18: I make my expectations explicit on my policy sheet at the beginning of the year.

T17: I’ve tried to stress that absent Ss need to find out what homework was assigned by contacting another student or by coming to see me. I think nagging is the best solution.

E. Unaccustomed to participation (Example: students unaccustomed to the active participation style used in FE)

Comments:

T18: When I first arrived at AU four years ago, I thought that the students were having more trouble with the idea of active participation than I now believe they do. I really think that the majority of my students are eager to participate. They are, however, initially reluctant to do so. I think this is because of the emphasis placed on accuracy.

Solutions:

T21: Competitive group activities brought out a lot of active participation.

T20: Of course, tasks have to be suitably leveled for the students’ ability level or they can’t perform the task regardless of willingness. Also, the tasks have to be of enough interest to them to engage them and cannot be too artificial or purposeless.

T18: As a general rule, if students are capable of getting their point across to their partners, I am satisfied. I am more critical of accuracy when responding to students writing, though.

T17: I play up, almost chortle over, any volunteerism. On the other end, I frequently wait in silence for an extended period

of time, sometimes asking the question over, until someone finally feels more uncomfortable than me and answers, which I play up and chortle over.

II. Student needs

A. *The need for structured language* (Examples: students with little or no basic communicative ability)

Comments:

T18: Lower-level students struggle when they are not given language models to work from. Open-ended language activities can only be done at this level after a lot of structured practice with given forms and functions have preceded it.

Solutions:

T21: Some students needed to feel 100% certain that they were right before they would try to speak. I tried to give them that certainty. I also try to create an atmosphere in the class in which errors were acceptable. I also rewarded effort lavishly, even if the student was wrong.

T20: I mentioned giving students classroom language they can use to communicate at least some of their classroom needs *and* providing a classroom environment in which they feel like they can use those phrases and questions without fear of embarrassment, losing face, etc.

T18: I have created many conversation routines that I have students jot down in their notebooks and practice with their partners. These routines are often related to the textbook themes, but not always. Additionally, I have students perform what I call Structured Role-play. Students enjoy the creative aspects of role-play, but lower-level students can't pull them off impromptu. So

I provide general guidelines and specific language functions that the students should use in their skits.

B. *The need to feel comfortable learning English* (Examples: students need to be comfortable in order to learn; to overcome their fear of speaking English)

Comments:

T18: I think this is one of the central roles of the lower-level FE teachers at AU. As mentioned above, there are a lot of initially quiet students who blossom in the communicative classroom. I think the challenge for the teacher is getting the students to see English as a means of communication, not just another test item to be mastered.

Solutions:

T20: It is very important to acknowledge students' attempts to answer or perform a task, even when they have the wrong answer or perform poorly. I give a lot of positive feedback in that regard. Lots of modeling of a task and providing on the board essential language for performing a task are also helpful in supporting the students' attempts to communicate. Obviously, it is also important that whatever is being asked of the students to perform is close enough to their ability level that they can make a reasonable attempt at it.

T18: Especially, early on in the year, I have the students work in pairs/groups and play a lot of language games. I think this really sets the tone for the class and it sends a strong signal to the students that English takes some work to learn, but it is also quite fun.

T17: I think it's extremely important to establish rapport from the beginning. Be friendly, patient, and sensitive. I like to be enthusiastic and animated. I ham things up to look silly myself, hoping that students' fear of looking silly will be eased a bit.

C. Students' ability to communicate their own needs in class

(Examples: difficulty with basic communicative English; including communicating their needs in class; simple things like, "I don't have a paper," "Do we have homework? What is it? How do you do it?")

Comments:

T21: My students weren't shy, but they often could not express their needs in English.

T18: Again, this is a potentially huge problem, but it can be minimized or made moot by doing some of the things above: making the class communicative, making grammatical accuracy less important, creating a fun classroom environment. Additionally, spell out the student responsibilities in your policy sheet. Armed with clear policies and Classroom English, I have had almost no students who just couldn't communicate their needs to me.

Solutions:

T21: If I taught this level again I would either give students a list of helpful phrases or expand the amount of classroom help language I taught them.

T19: At times, it was difficult to understand exactly what a student needed or wanted, but we always seemed to reach an understanding through basic words/phrases, gestures or translators.

T17: I think that the teacher needs to do his best to explain tasks clearly, as well as stress to students that if they don't understand something, they must either talk to a classmate or the teacher.

III. Summarizing the special challenges

T21: A few students seemed to be suffering from serious learning disabilities that I was not qualified to deal with.

T20: Particular challenges at this level:

Communicating to the students what they will/should be doing. Because of their low level even very simple instructions are often not understood. A lot of time is wasted in class because of this.

Getting students to speak up in class.

Continuity problems day to day for activities that span one or more days or even simply new tasks that build on what was covered the previous day because of high levels of absenteeism.

T19: Motivating low-level students.

T18: Many lower-level students have a perception of English as something unattainable and downright boring. The great thing is that most of my student love to chat, albeit in Japanese. Take advantage of that impulse to communicate. Show the students that English is just another powerful avenue for doing so.

T17: Getting Ss to realize that participation is not only OK, but expected.

Getting Ss to be responsible learners.

Getting Ss to realize that mistakes ARE OK.

Conclusion

The research provides comments on and solutions to the special challenges of teaching lower-level FE in our program, in the teachers' own words. I believe this research model – written answers to the survey questions – is an improvement over the initial research method in which the authors had to paraphrase the teachers' answers from recorded interviews and so “filtered” the responses through their eyes. The results of the current method allow readers to take the responses directly from the sources, and so glean a truer account of the teachers' opinions.

Their opinions demonstrate the frustrations, hard work and ultimately the rewards of teaching low-proficiency students whose difficulties can be compounded by lack of motivation, lack of previous success studying English, and difficulties understanding basic classroom instructions. I hope teachers at the lower levels, by identifying the special work they do with these students, understand the importance of their work in the FE program with students whose progress in any academic year may seem small. By helping these students to learn how to learn English, and to learn that they can learn English, these VFMs serve the students and FE program in classes where some EFL teachers fear to tread.

My suggestions for further research on this topic carry over yet again from the initial research: I hope CELE VFMs occasionally update this research by interviewing the program's current teachers, and thereby add to the breadth and depth of comments on and solutions to the special challenges of teaching these classes.

References

- Connolly, M., & Hughes, G. (2001). The Special Challenges of Teaching Lower-level Freshman English. *CELE Journal*, 9, (pp.145-174). Tokyo; Asia University.