Second-Language Learners at the University of Regina

Kathleen Wall and Ashley Quark

Both the Faculty of Arts and the University as a whole have committed themselves to internationalization for two reasons: the first is the largely practical need to increase the size of our student body in the face of a static population in the province; the second is a more philosophical commitment to internationalization. This commitment arises out of the recognition that we must prepare our students to participate with good sense and compassion in a world where national borders are becoming less meaningful, as well as out of our belief that the dissipation of such borders enriches us all.

At the same time, these idealistic but sensible goals have tangible effects on our pedagogy and our classrooms, where we often find students whose English language skills are not quite ready for university work. Sometimes this occurs because students are eager to move from ESL classes to “real” coursework—an eagerness perhaps motivated by limited financial resources. In other cases, test results were not reliable predictors of students’ readiness. Most importantly, however, we should remember that it takes between five and seven years of hard work to achieve proficiency in a new language (Cummins). A report from the Office of Research Planning suggests that the grades of second-language learners often remain in the average range. In other words, they graduate, but they do not thrive.

I was prompted to undertake this research by my own sense that there had to be more effective ways of helping my second-language learners be successful in my classroom. The University of Regina “as one who serves” ethic was also an influence: it is not enough that we profit from the tuition fees of second-language learners, without in some way addressing their needs as learners. With the help of a grant from the Teaching and Learning Scholars program, I was able to employ a research assistant who gathered a large body of material which we both read and discussed. The suggestions below flow out of that research.

Socio-Cultural Adjustment

Living in a foreign culture can be a lonely and isolating experience. While international students will face the same pressures as Canadian students—such as problems with finances, accommodation, relationships, and academics—international students often do not have support systems in place to help them deal with these problems. At the same time, these students may be dealing with culture shock, homesickness, and loneliness.

An on-line publication from the University of South Australia uses an intriguing analogy that allows us to imaginatively understand second-language learners’ additional challenge: the culture of the North American academy can be quite different from that of their country of origin. We are asked to imagine that our international students have been asked to play a game they think they are familiar with—a poker game, if you will. They think they’re good at this game because they have been playing it quite successfully in their home country. But after some significant losses, they come to the realization that the rules in Canada are vastly different and that no one will stop playing long enough to articulate these rules for them.

Both second-language learners¹ and English speakers have difficulties adapting to the “rules” of the university environment, difficulties with lecture comprehension, participation in class, and academic writing. The suggestions we make below, while geared to the challenges of second-language learners, will

¹ There are numerous terms for students whose first language is not English. We often refer to them as ESL students, an expression that has come to highlight their lack of English. A report from the University of Alberta identified them as LOE—language other than English—learners, which is a rather English-centric way of describing their status. In Australia, the acronym is NESB—non-English-speaking background. I have used second-language learners partly because it seems less fraught with connotations of failure or lack, and reminds us that they are primarily learners, although they are doing it in their second—or third or fourth—language.
help all your students. What we are largely suggesting is that we all be more forthcoming about both our practices and our expectations.

Below you will find two “Top Ten” lists for making second-language learners’ experience in your classroom more fruitful and for helping them with their written work. Following these two lists, you’ll find lengthier explanations of why these strategies are important and how they can be put to use.

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Top Ten Classroom Strategies
for Teaching Second Language Learners

Ashley Quark

Facilitate Lecture Comprehension
1) Write key concepts on the board throughout the lecture.

2) Print instead of using cursive when writing on the board and on student assignments.

3) Use visuals: pictures, graphic organizers, charts, photos, and video.

4) Structure your lecture in a clear 3-stage format: Beginning, Body, Conclusion. Display these three stages and the lesson overview on an overhead, use PowerPoint, or print them on the board.

5) Provide students with a copy of the main points of the lecture on a website or as a handout. This may simply be general notes that will act as a roadmap for students as they review their lecture notes.

6) Use everyday English in your lecture. When using larger words, clarify the term or concept. Be aware that you may need to explain metaphors, puns or jokes.

7) Encourage students to tape your class so they may review it later.

Facilitate Class Discussion & Participation
8) Create an atmosphere where questions and comments are welcome and set the tone for participation.

9) Provide “think time” before inviting second language learners to participate.

10) Be aware of cultural issues when assigning group work.

See page 5 for a fuller discussion of these principles
**Top Ten Strategies for Helping Second-Language Learners Write Successful Essays**

Kathleen Wall

1. Foreground the critical thinking process in your lectures.

2. Make sure your students are familiar with the conventions for writing essays in your discipline. Make sample essays available.

3. Be explicit about the purpose of your assignments and your expectations.

4. Use rubrics that make explicit what your expectations are.

5. Ensure that all your students know the conventions in your discipline for documenting and citing sources.

6. Encourage second-language learners to edit as they draft.

7. Print your comments on student essays, rather than using cursive.

8. When you comment on essays, find a balance between indicating how unclear the writing is or how many grammatical errors compromise the essay’s meaning and giving students so much commentary that reading it is overwhelming.

9. Be aware that the dictionaries students use to translate their ideas from their native language into English are often not very nuanced.

10. Help students develop vocabularies in your discipline.

    See page 8 for a fuller discussion of these principles
Facilitating Lecture Comprehension

Listening is the most frequently used skill in the classroom, and it is a skill necessary for academic success. Research shows that native speakers of English often have problems with lecture comprehension and note taking; these tasks are even more challenging for second-language learners who struggle to keep up with us and perhaps have difficulties getting past our accents. While the English language itself can cause problems for second-language learners, unfamiliar pronunciations, complex sentence structures, loose lecture organization, and the cultural context may cause further difficulties (Huang, 2005). There are many strategies that university lecturers can implement in their classes to facilitate lecture comprehension:

Write Key Concepts on the Board
Comprehending lectures is highly demanding for listeners, as they are required to concentrate for long periods of time and distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information. When lecturers print key terms and concepts on the board throughout the lecture, it provides a focal point, helping listeners determine the most relevant ideas. As well, if students are having difficulty understanding the lecture, they can write these key concepts in their notes and do further reading on them outside of class (Huang, 2005).

Print instead of using Cursive
Many second-language learners’ native languages use different alphabets and scripts than English. While these students are familiar with the English alphabet, most of their exposure to it has been through printed text. Consequently, students may not be able to decipher words written in cursive. When writing key words or phrases on the blackboard or when making comments on students’ papers, it is best print neatly rather than using cursive (Virginia Department of Education).

Use Visuals
Whenever possible, use visuals such as pictures, video clips, charts, or photos to supplement the lecture. Such resources provide them with non-linguistic ways of relating to and mastering ideas. (Huang, 2005; Kim, 2007)

Structure Lectures in a 3-Stage Format
Western classes and lectures may be quite different from the classroom environments in international students’ home countries. In particular, the way lectures are structured may be unfamiliar to students, hampering their ability to fully comprehend the lecture. An effective and explicit lecture organization may assist students in gaining a solid understanding of the content. A 3-stage format is recommended:

1) Introduction
In the introduction, instructors can create a link to previous class material, provide background on the current lecture, and give an overview of what will be covered in the day’s lesson. Writing this overview on the board or displaying it with an overhead or PowerPoint will allow students to refer to the organizational structure and content of the lecture throughout the class.
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2) Body
In the body, the instructor has the freedom to organize the lecture as appropriate. The instructor may choose to highlight key points and then explain each point to the class. As well, the lecture may be organized in some logical order such as “cause-and-effect” or “time-sequential.” Throughout the lecture, it is useful to ask students questions to check for understanding.

3) Closing
During the closing, the instructor may summarize the content of the lecture and reemphasize what the students should have learned from the lecture.

Not only is it important to organize lectures in a clear format, it is also imperative that students are explicitly told how the lecture will be organized. The “logical” organization of a lecture may be different in Canada than it is in students’ home countries (Huang, 2005).

Provide Handouts and/or Web Resources
Students who are developing their academic listening skills may be missing key points of lectures or may not grasp all the minute details presented by the instructor. Giving students a glossary of terms in advance may help them familiarize themselves with vocabulary and subject-specific jargon before attending a lecture. Furthermore, providing students with an overview of the lecture can allow them to fill in gaps in their notes. These notes do not have to be highly detailed, but they act as a roadmap to help direct their studying (Teaching International and Non-English speaking background (NESB) students in lectures and tutorials).

Speak Slowly and Use Plain English
Accents are a challenge for students and instructors alike. During lectures, speak clearly, and focus on pronouncing the last consonant of your words. Face students while speaking to them. When you use metaphors, puns or jokes, gauge the audience response to see whether an explanation would be helpful. When using subject-specific jargon, clarify the meaning for all students. Further, silence can not only help emphasize an important point but can also allow students time to think and take notes (Carroll, 2002; Kim, 2007; Teaching NESB and international students at the University of South Australia).

Encourage Students to Tape Lectures
For some students, the pace, use of language, and content of the lecture make it difficult to fully grasp all concepts presented during class time. Encouraging students to tape the lecture will allow them to review it later in the week so they can review concepts and clarify their lecture notes (Teaching NESB and international students at the University of South Australia).
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Facilitating Class Discussion and Participation
Second language learners are often reluctant to participate in class discussion. Some students are naturally shy and quiet, while others do not feel confident enough with their skills in English and are afraid of making mistakes. As well, some students feel that they will be wasting the lecturers’ and their classmates’ time because they think and speak too slowly. Many second-language learners find it difficult to speak out in class discussions because their classmates’ discussion style may be fast and involve many interruptions. It is also important to note that some students may not be accustomed to class discussion as an instructional strategy as it may not be practiced in their home country (see Campbell, 2007). Since class discussion and active participation is valued in our Canadian education system, and since such discussions help students master the material of the class, it will help our second language learners if lecturers explicitly share these expectations with them. There are several strategies lecturers can use to in the classroom to help make classroom participation less intimidating for all students:

Create an Open Atmosphere where Questions and Comments are Welcome
Many students feel too intimidated to ask questions or make comments during class. In response, lecturers can foster an open, welcoming environment in many ways:

- **Introductions:** On the first day of class, set the tone for participation. Have students interview one another and then introduce each other. Even if the class is large, encouraging students to converse will make them more comfortable, and they will be more willing to take risks. This ensures that all students know at least one person in class if they ever need to borrow lecture notes or ask questions.

- **Get to know your students and increase your cross-cultural sensitivity.** Because it is impossible for you to become an “expert” in dozens of cultures, and because every individual’s experience is different, you need to ask about their educational background and culture. Asking questions and listening to the answers will allow students to teach you, and will help you meet students’ needs without your relying on assumptions and generalizations (Carroll, 2002; *Teaching International and Non-English speaking background (NESB) students in lectures and tutorials*).

Provide “Think Time”
Speaking out in class to make a comment or ask a question can be daunting for any student and even more menacing for second-language learners. While it may be difficult for them to speak out in class, research shows they believe that participating in class discussion will enhance their learning and they are keen to participate if they have time to prepare. By providing “think-time” for students before they will asked to speak out in front of the class, lecturers will help students become more confident and willing to participate (Huang, 2005; Carroll, 2002). There are various ways that lecturers can integrate “think-time” into their classes:
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- Write the discussion question/topic on the board and give students 5-10 minutes to write down their ideas, thoughts and opinions. Once students have had a chance to think about the topic, they may feel more comfortable participating.
- Think-Pair-Share: Pose a question to students and ask them to turn to the person sitting beside them and talk about the question for 5 minutes. Then students can share their ideas with the class.
- Out-of-Class Preparation: The lecturer can tell students that next class a discussion will be led on a certain topic. Then, the lecturer can be specific about how the students should prepare for the discussion, such as writing a question to pose to the class or sharing their opinion on the issue.
- Question Cards: Distribute index cards to students and ask them to write down a question about the topic at hand. The lecturer can address these questions in that lesson or subsequent lessons.
- Online, Asynchronous Discussion: The lecturer can develop discussion groups using WebCT. This will allow all students to share their thoughts and opinions while allowing students ample “think-time” before participating in the discussion (Kim, 2007; Carroll, 2002; Tani, 2005; Campbell, 2007)

Assigning Group Work
When you assign group work and put students in mixed culture groups, there can be some tension between participants over the issue of assessment. First language learners often see the presence of second-language learners in their group as disadvantageous to their final grade. There is much to gain for all students when working in cross-cultural groups, but the lecturer can facilitate this learning by structuring the assignment so all students’ experiences and skills will be valued. Design group projects so that intercultural competence and cross-cultural skills are an asset and assess students on their intercultural competence and communication. This will take the focus off the final product and stress to students that the process is important as well. Furthermore, research shows that it often takes considerably longer for multicultural groups to complete and assigned task because it takes time to adjust to each others’ norms and learn to communicate effectively with one another. Take this into consideration when setting deadlines (Carroll, 2002).
Helping Second-Language Learners Write Successful Essays

**Foreground the critical thinking process in your lectures.**
Rather than simply presenting your conclusions about or critiques of existing scholarship, allow students to see how you came to your position, particularly how you used (and questioned) evidence to draw your conclusions. When we are concerned about our students’ lack of critical thinking skills, what we are really observing is their lack of practice at critical thinking. While all of our students will benefit from this practice, students from China, Japan, and Korea will benefit most. There, one of the “rules” by which they have played is that mastery of existing knowledge is their most important accomplishment. They have not been taught they are in university to create knowledge or to question that which has already been created. It is incumbent upon us, then, to explicitly model one of the skills that we deem most important (Teaching NESB and international students at the University of South Australia).

**Make sure you students know the conventions of writing in your discipline.**
Help them understand the language they find in assignments. “How is ‘evaluate’ different from ‘justify’ or from ‘analyse’?” Think of writing essays for history or sociology classes, for instance, as exercises in genre. Just as detective fiction must have a dead body somewhere, so essays written for some disciplines need an introductory abstract. Some disciplines prefer arguments to unfold inductively, while others want the writer’s conclusions announced immediately. Many of us have been writing in this style so long that we no longer see these conventions, but it’s wise to review them for students.

In addition, second-language learners may come from cultures with their own conventions, conventions that are antithetical to ours. Students from Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea tend to use what is called the “essential rule,” which dictates that the student write “from surface to core….One ought to reach a topic gradually and ‘systematically’ instead of abruptly,” a style which is very different from our common expectation that students reveal the main points of their topic in their opening paragraph (Crowe and Peterson 31). Similarly, Japanese readers like to ‘discover’ the meaning of a text through subtle hints, and enjoy the process of doing so. “The Asian idea of making the reader responsible for discovering the meaning of a text is what most likely leads to [the accusation of] ‘wandering,’ or what American [and Canadian] teachers might consider a lack of unity and cohesion” (Crowe and Peterson 31).

Making sample papers available will help students see what conventions underlie the North American practice of academic writing.

**Be explicit about the purpose of your assignments and about your expectations.**
It is often helpful to begin the assignment by indicating what students are learning by undertaking this particular task. Students do their best work when they see there’s a point to the task before them. Being explicit about your expectations not only helps students understand that this is not an arbitrary (and perhaps demoralizing) exercise, but an
intrinsic part of their educational development. Similarly, if students know what they are to achieve, they find it easier to figure out how to do the task well. If you value a solid and inventive argument above the exhaustive collection of evidence (or vice versa), say so.

Use rubrics that make explicit what your expectations are.
Many of us feel that an essay is a complex and integrated whole that is best served by a holistic evaluation; consequently, we view rubrics as mechanical shortcuts. Drawing up a rubric, however, can be good for you, insofar as it will make you conscious of what you value—whether an innovative argument, a solid structure that provides a reader with a clear road map to the essays’ ideas, clear and elegant expression (not to mention grammatical correctness), or careful and judicious use of evidence. Your rubric, by describing what you expect, can make clear how these facets of the complex task of academic writing work together in your discipline. In turn, if you can say to a student, through your use of a rubric, that their ideas are clearly expressed but are not adequately supported by evidence, you make your evaluation seem less arbitrary. If you hand your rubric out with the assignment, you give students a sense of what they are aiming for.

Ensure that all your students know the conventions in your discipline for documenting and citing sources.
This is particularly crucial for second-language learners coming from Confucian backgrounds: their previous education may have taught them that to quote someone verbatim is more respectful than trying to be original, and they are often unaware of the consequences of doing this in a North American context. Plagiarism, in short, is sometimes a cultural issue; often it’s not committed because students are terrified or lazy, but because this was common practice in their home country (Shi and Beckett).

Encourage second-language learners to edit as they draft.
Generally speaking, we suggest that native English speakers wait to edit their essays until they have a final draft. We recommend putting off editing because we assume that content will be added or subtracted as students work towards a coherent, well-organized and well-developed argument with sufficient detail to convince a reader. This strategy doesn’t serve second-language learners well; by the time they have a full draft, there are simply too many problems to fix. Rather, second-language learners should be encouraged to edit as they go, as much for practice of editing as to fix the particular errors in the essay (Shih).

Print your comments on student essays, rather than using cursive.
Those second-language learners coming from countries that do not use an alphabet like ours, and who probably have not undergone the drill to learn cursive writing in grade 3, have probably read English only in print and have no way of interpreting our cursive scrawls.
Strategies for Successful Writing

Find a balanced commenting style.
When second-language learners are faced with margins that are filled with commentary on their grammar and usage (not to mention on paragraph unity and coherence, or the essay’s structure), they can be overwhelmed and may feel that there is no way to address all your concerns. You might correct all the errors in a paragraph or two to show that the quantity of errors sabotages the writer’s thought. Then choose a recurring problem (subject/verb agreement or mistaking word forms—“choice” for “choose”) to circle throughout the essay. Students can then go through their essay with you or a writing tutor; because you’ve only circled the errors, they have an opportunity to learn from fixing them.

Be aware that the dictionaries students use to translate their ideas from their native language into English are often not very nuanced.
The result is that students often choose words close to what they mean, but may mistake a noun for a verb form (Gonzalez). Students’ choice of words that do not fit the syntax of their sentences are one of the most persistent difficulties we find. We can help somewhat by using the specialized vocabulary of our discipline in sentences and putting those sentences on the board (Gonzalez).

Help students develop vocabularies in your discipline.
Effective readers can “tolerate a high degree of ambiguity, up to 15% of a passage” (Johnson and Steele 349), but second-language learners are less confident and tend to look up too many words. Help them to identify crucial terms for your discipline—often words in headings or leading sentences—and provide them with definitions. In smaller classes, you might have all the students choose a single word to explore each week, asking that they justify their choice of words by indicating why they think it’s important, try to define the word from its context, and then look the word up to see how good their guess is. This will more generally address both inadequate student vocabularies and help students become sensitive to those moments when the use of a dictionary is crucial to their understanding (Johnson and Steele).

Bibliography


