

It was long past midnight, but I was still laboring with the stack of essays on my desk. My head throbbed, and my eyes smarted from trying to decipher the sentences in the papers. It was my first year of teaching English as a Second Language to Chinese college students. We were fast approaching the end of the year, but despite my efforts, the students appeared to have made little headway. Each piece of their writing had numerous errors in grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary.

A scene flashed through my mind. I was in conversation class, where students were giving oral reports. The first few presentations were poorly done—hardly comprehensible—but these were not given by my best students. When Lily stood up, however, I sighed with relief, expecting a good report. Lily had always achieved top scores on her grammar tests. However, to my chagrin, her sentences were filled with grammatical errors. All the rules she had learned seemed to have fled from her memory. From what I could make out, she was speaking “Ching-lish”—not English!

*Just where did I go wrong?* I asked myself wearily. Suddenly, it hit me like a bolt of lightning. The students had acquired a variety of skills, but they had not mastered English! In designing the ESL program, I had planned courses in reading, conversation, grammar, and writing. Although the students appeared to have acquired the skills, they perceived them as disjointed segments rather than parts of an integrated whole. They had not learned to combine the various components of English to achieve proficiency. It finally dawned on me that unless the students could integrate these skills and bridge the gap between theory and application, they would never produce acceptable spoken or written language.

To remedy the situation, I planned activities that would integrate the skills developed in the various courses. Here are some activities I found to be effective.

For students at the beginning level, I began with conversation class. I selected textbooks that included sample conversational situations, e.g. shopping

not have supermarkets. They go to a farm market or wet market (a Far Eastern market where poultry and fresh produce are sold). Students were required to adapt their conversation to situations at such a market, translating local terms and using local currency in purchasing the items. Such assignments helped the students to be flexible, adaptable, and

creative, and encouraged them to integrate their speech skills with conversational skills. Their vocabulary and writing skills developed as they composed short conversational sentences. This increased their interest in the lesson and enhanced the learning experience.

I then assigned the students to prepare skits based on situations other than the ones assigned for their conversational class. Even students with a limited knowledge of English amazed me with their creativity and initiative. They often went to great lengths to make their skits realistic and appealing.

As an added incentive for them to develop their language skills, I scheduled an annual program by the ESL students. The program included skits—often selected from conversational situations the students had presented in

class—and songs, along with drama based on familiar stories such as “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” “Snow White,” and works from literature such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*.

Surprisingly, the ESL students looked forward to this program with a great deal of anticipation and enthusiasm. They expressed feelings of accomplishment at being able to present all the items in English and were motivated to continue improving their skills. Moreover, their language capabilities evoked respect and envy in their fellow students, who then would sign up for ESL classes. Long after they had graduated, the participants inevitably re-

# Integrating English Language Skills in the ESL Classroom

BY MARY WONG

at a market, making introductions at a party, meeting business clients. I paired off the students or organized them into groups, asking them to memorize the dialogue for each conversational situation. They then dramatized the situations through role playing in class. I encouraged the students to use careful enunciation of words, intonation, and dramatic effects to make their role plays more real, interesting, and effective. They even dressed up and created appropriate backdrops. This made the activity enjoyable for them.

After these presentations, I asked the students to create original situations based on the local setting. For example, in some rural areas, the people do

ferred to these programs as one of the highlights in their college experience.

For intermediate and advanced students, I found that doing research helped them integrate their English skills. Students were assigned to interview native speakers of English on topics such as "Factors That Contribute to High Divorce Rates," or "What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Watching TV?" Prior to setting out, the students learned interviewing techniques, e.g. how to make appointments, phrase the questions, and take notes. Then, armed with a tape recorder, they went out in groups to interview individuals. (Group interviews protected the few native speakers of the English language on campus from being overwhelmed by having 20 or more students interview them singly). The group interview format also provided moral support for the timid students.

Although the students went out in groups, they had to give individual oral presentations on the interview. At least two class periods were set aside for their reports. Each student received a feedback sheet on which I had corrected the errors he or she had made in the oral report. The students were later assigned to write an essay on the same topic. Before they began, we discussed the difference between written and spoken language. The pre-writing activities and feedback from the oral presentation helped the students to earn a better grade in their writing assignment and gain a greater sense of achievement. And, grading the essays became a much less tedious task!

For some oral reports, students obtained information from newspapers, periodicals, and books. This helped them to combine their reading, speaking, and writing skills. To help them integrate their listening comprehension skills, I occasionally asked them to get information from TV and radio programs. Using real-life materials helped them bridge the gap between the artificial situation in the classroom and the real world. For example, while students might have memorized some English idioms, only after seeing them in print did they understand how such



phrases are used in real-life situations.

Each oral report was followed by an assigned essay on the same topic.

What was the outcome of such activities? I still remember with satisfaction the improved quality of my students' writing and their radiant faces as they bowed to the thunderous applause of the audience at their annual program at the end of the second and subsequent years.

It is important to help students develop skills in reading, listening comprehension, speaking, and writing. However, English teachers must help

students understand that these skills are only components of successful language usage. Unless they can integrate these skills, they have not mastered the language. Activities such as the ones described above will help students to achieve this end while making the language learning experience more pleasant and profitable for them. ☞

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