

English Conversation Class: A Workshop for International Students at
Sam Houston State University

RATIONALE

Numerous studies have demonstrated that international students face many obstacles in addition to those faced by other students entering the university (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1984; Chavous, 2000; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Johnson, 1986; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000; Rodriguez, 1994; Rowley, 2000; Tinto, 1987). Many reasons have been given to explain why international and other minority students face a more difficult transition to college than other students. This transition may be complicated by the fact that they are, in many ways, entering a society modeled upon a white, western tradition (Fitzgerald, 1993; Tyack, 1976).

Though the research cited above has helped educators understand many of the unique challenges international students face when trying to find social and academic success at mainstream universities, it has largely ignored an important aspect of cultural transitions: specific uses of language (Gee, 1990, 1998; Vygotsky, 1999; Wertsch, 1991). Changes in cultures often bring with them, or require, changes in discursive and literate practices (Gee, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The university, like many other cultures, has its own unique and specialized discursive practices (Bizzell, 1982). Thus, to be accepted as a member of the university community, one must both know and practice the kinds of discursive characteristics expected therein (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Street, 1984). Fortunately, students lacking academic literacy may be able to learn it and have a better chance at academic success through college preparation programs, college-level student

academic services programs, pre-collegiate *bridge* programs, and college mentoring programs (White, 2004).

This paper proposes such a *bridge* for those international students at Sam Houston State University who wish to improve their everyday English communication skills or enhance their command of English for professional purposes. These *conversation classes* are non-credit and are designed for those who do not wish to enroll in a full course of study. Classes are small, with an average of five to six students per class. Students develop both fluency and accuracy in English communication skills in an interactive classroom setting. The classes which meet twice a week for one hour for a full semester are designed primarily to address speaking skills. The students meet for approximately 22 sessions during the semester.

Class Structure

Two objectives determine the structure of the classes: (a) one hundred percent of the students will participate during each class session, and (b) to ensure that each student has the opportunity to practice speaking English with a partner and/or individually to the group.

Procedure

The instructor (facilitator): (a) queries students regarding their expectations/needs for the sessions; (b) with input from the students, decides on the content/procedure for future sessions; and (c) allows students to determine discussion topics for ensuing sessions.

Intended Outcome

By encouraging the students to identify the areas in which he or she wished to improve, and focusing on those areas, all students will become more comfortable speaking in class.

Other University Models

This English conversation class is patterned after other English as a Second Language programs: (a) Rice University in Houston, TX; (b) Florida International University in Miami, FL; Farleigh Dickenson University in Hackensack, NJ; and Hunter College in New, NY.

Rice University

The Rice University Intensive English Program is open to non-native speakers of English who have a serious desire to improve their language skills. This program is useful to working professionals and to students preparing for university study or professional programs. Students from more than 40 countries attend the program.

This Intensive English Program offers six sessions each year; each session lasts seven 7 weeks, In one year students should be able to progress through the 3 level program: (1) Levels 1-4, (2) Levels 5-6; and (3) Advanced Level.

Levels 1-4. In levels 1-4, students concentrate on developing fundamental English skills in an interactive classroom setting. Course work emphasizes those skills necessary for effective oral and written communication. Instruction covers all areas of language development: (a) practical vocabulary; (b) basic language structures; (c) the essentials of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Levels 5-6. In levels 5-6, students continue to develop fluency and accuracy. Students enroll in one course focusing on comprehension skills, and a second class that enables them to expand their skills in academic or non-academic areas. University-bound students enroll in a course that emphasizes skill areas such as academic writing, note taking, and oral presentation skills such as academic writing, note-taking, and oral presentation skills. Students with a more general focus take a communication skills course that focuses on current issues or cultural aspects of American life.

Advanced Level. The advanced level is for students whose level of proficiency in English is beyond the 3 level core program. Courses at this level focus on diverse areas of interest such as current issues, cross-cultural concerns, vocabulary expansion, public speaking and pronunciation.

Florida International University

The Intensive English Conversation Program at Florida International University is a non-academic immersion program in English conversation. During this 3-4 week course, the students *talk, talk, talk* in English all day. This program includes: (a) extensive conversation practice, (b) small classes of 10 to 15 students to ensure full student participation, (c) language laboratory experience, (d) daily lunch with teachers during which only English is spoken, and (e) educational field trips and excursions during which only English is spoken. Table 1 depicts the course schedule for the 4 week Intensive Conversation Program, and Table 1 shows the program's 3 week schedule.

*Table 1**4 Week Intensive Conversation Program*

Course Schedule		
Time	Monday-Thursday	Friday
9:00-11:30	Conversation	Field Trips
11:30-12:30	Lunch for instructors & Students	Field Trips
12:30-3:30	Conversation	Field Trips

*Table 2**3 Week Intensive Conversation Program*

Course Schedule	
Time	Monday-Friday
9:00-11:30	Conversation
11:30-12:30	Lunch for Instructors & Students
12:30-3:30	Conversation

Farleigh Dickenson University

The English Language Institute (ELI) at the Teaneck-Hackensack, NJ campus of Farleigh Dickenson University provides international students with the language, academic and cultural skills necessary for successful study at the University. To enhance the academic experience, a Conversation Partners Program provides students with a native speaking companion for an hour per week of casual conversational practice.

Hunter College Intensive English Language Instruction Program

The Intensive English Language Instruction Program (IELIP) at Hunter College in New York offers numerous elective courses for students who wish to improve their oral skills from simple speaking skills to conversational and academic contexts. These classes include: (a) Listening and Conversation through Film, (b) Idioms and conversation, (c) Acting Workshop, (d) Special Guests, (e) Accent Reduction, (f) College Prep 101, (g) English Through Art, and (h) TOEFL Listening and Grammar.

Listening Conversation Through Film. This is a course to improve listening comprehension and speaking skills. Students do a detailed study of a feature film, scene by scene, and practice conversation through film-related activities such as role-play and discussion designed to improve vocabulary, pronunciation, and use of colloquial language.

Idioms and Conversation. In this class, students learn idioms in the context in which they are used – natural speech. Learning idioms helps students feel more comfortable understanding conversations in films and personal discussions with Americans.

Acting Workshop. In this workshop, students learn and use English through dramatic and comic dialogues, monologues, and improvisations. This is a dynamic and creative way to speak and respond spontaneously with confidence and expression. **NO PRIOR ACTING EXPERIENCE IS REQUIRED!**

Special Guests. In this session, students practice their listening and speaking skills in English by conducting interviews with, holding discussions with, and listening to

presentations by a variety of people from the community such as actors, police officers, businessmen and women, and graduate students invited to visit the class.

Accent Reduction. The accent reduction session includes a study of the organs of speech, individual sounds, and the intonation system of English. Participants develop an awareness of the sound system of English, and how to listen for and reproduce sounds.

College Prep 101. In this class, students learn a different skill each week that will help them make a smooth transition to college level classes in the United States. Some of these skills help prepare students for the undergraduate life which include: (a) improving active listening skills, (b) learning how to summarize, and (c) learning how to paraphrase.

English Through Art. This class features short discussions about artists and their works, and where appropriate, read and discuss art reviews. Field trips are taken to local museums and galleries to discover modern and contemporary artists.

TOEFL Listening and Grammar. This session provides advanced students of English as a Second Language (ESL) a review of the grammar and listening emphasized on the TOEFL test.

Conclusion

As the number of international students who enroll in our colleges and universities continues to increase, it is imperative that we become more cognizant of the unique challenges facing them. One of those virtually ignored challenges is that of language proficiency and the relationship of language discourse, and literacy to college success. Because the university comprises its own *discourse community*, with its own way with words, those wishing to help international students in their transition to college should not ignore students' levels of academic literacy. By providing students the

opportunity to converse in English in a non-threatening atmosphere, as evidenced by the studies cited here, we can contribute to their academic success furthering their transition into the *discourse community* of the university.

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