

SUPPORTING YOUR STUDENTS' LANGUAGE LEARNING



For most of us, learning a second language as an adult is an uphill battle. It has its moments of exhilaration when you find yourself communicating fluently but also has many moments of frustration, helplessness, and even humiliation. ESL students at university are grappling not just with their course content and with all the challenges students normally face, but also with a significant additional drag on their mental energy. Even students who have been in Canada for a number of years and who are fluent in a conversational context will find that using English in an academic context makes new demands.

Language learning is rarely a nice, smooth incline – advanced learners often hit a plateau where language learning is stalled or even seems to backslide temporarily. This is likely to happen to your students at some point. So lack of apparent progress does not necessarily mean lack of effort. Learning can be slow and the result, even after years of practice, is rarely perfection. For most of us who live, work, or study in our second language, fluency does come with time. But vocabulary building is always a work in progress and perfection in grammar and pronunciation are rare. Most of the ESL students in your classes, even as their fluency improves, will continue to make small grammatical errors in their writing (such as dropping articles – “the” and “a”). These can be viewed as the written equivalent of a spoken accent.

These small errors don't necessarily mean they are not equipped for the working world. Like the very many second language speakers in academia and other fields in Canada, they may simply need to have someone look over their written work.

Becoming fluent in a second language is often compared to learning a musical instrument. It is a skill that is acquired rather than explicitly learned.¹ For a fluent speaker, native or non-native, the vast majority of rules we use to produce utterances in our language are unconscious. They are typically acquired through use, rather than in a second language classroom. Most ESL students have had years of ESL grammar and writing classes. What most need is to practice using the language in meaningful ways.

Some language can be picked up by passive exposure, but the biggest leaps come when the learner is engaged in active communication. It also happens best when the level of language is just beyond the learner's comfort zone – so they have to stretch for it – but not completely beyond their grasp. You can help create these conditions in your class by engaging ESL students in your class (see “The Participatory Classroom”). You can

also bring the class within their grasp by making your lecture and course material more accessible (see “Designing Accessible Lectures”).

As you get to know your students, you may have opportunities to give them advice on what they can do to improve their English outside of class. Here are some suggestions you can make:

Get rid of bilingual translating dictionaries. Words in different languages rarely “map” one-to-one, and translating dictionaries typically give little information on actual word usage—hence the rather odd word choice you may see in your students' writing. Instead they should be encouraged to use an English only dictionary. There are special advanced learner dictionaries (the library or the Writing & Learning Centre can recommend one) that give information on usage, connotations, and level of formality.

Keep a journal of new vocabulary. This can include the students' own examples, helping them bring new words into their active vocabulary. They can also be illustrated.

Increase passive exposure to the language. Encourage students to just leave the radio or television on – this can lead to some learning through osmosis.

Find low pressure ways to use the language actively. They should be encouraged to find some activity they enjoy where they are communicating with native speakers but the emphasis isn't on language learning. This could be a club or campus group, a sports team, or simply an English language “buddy.” They can also practice their written English in low pressure online forums such as chat groups and wikis.

Increase interaction with native speakers. One good way is to include native speakers in their team for course projects.

Read for pleasure. Students should be encouraged to find something enjoyable and accessible to read a little from each day – for example a popular magazine.

¹ A key work arguing for this distinction is: Krashen, Stephen D. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1981.

FAQ

How long does it take to learn a second language?

How long it takes to learn a language depends to some extent on the learner but also to a large extent on the context in which the language is being learned and used. Jim Cummins, a researcher in Second Language Acquisition at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education makes a distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (the language our students need to converse in the halls) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (the language they need to keep up with their classes). Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency requires an ability to understand specialized vocabulary and complex grammatical structures, and to understand written texts that are stripped of all the interpersonal cues that help us understand spoken language. His work suggests that an immigrant student typically requires five to seven years to acquire this level of language proficiency. This implies that even an immigrant student who has spent several years in a Canadian high school will still be in the process of acquiring the skills and fluency they need for their university studies.¹



¹ See Cummins, J. "Age on Arrival and Immigrant Second Language Learning in Canada: A Reassessment." *Applied Linguistics*, 2, 132-149, 1981.

FACULTY STORIES

In my first-year Design Process class, I ask students to present their project ideas verbally. I had one student whose first language wasn't English who was so nervous. She was reading her description but even the reading was hard to understand. I stopped the presentation and asked her to present in Korean. I asked one of the students to translate. She all of a sudden became extremely confident, poetic, competent. She really nailed that assignment.

Bruce Hinds, *Design*



I have worked with many ESL students and students with particular learning challenges. One thing I learned is that the payoffs are rarely immediate and often come in unexpected ways and from unexpected students. I had one student who was struggling with English in first-year. She had to take her first-year courses twice in order to move on to second year, and even then only marginally. A couple of years later I encountered the same student in her third year. Her writing had become much stronger, her ideas clearer and more eloquently represented. It was as if she was a completely different student. I do not take any of the credit for this transformation, but what it made me realize is that what we do for students in first-year is critical. And throughout their studies, ESL students need teachers who do not give up on them, who encourage them, challenge them and do

whatever they can to make their education an invaluable experience.

Lori Riva, *Liberal Studies*

STUDENT STORY



I remember a moment I became more comfortable speaking English. It was last semester in jewellery critique. Usually I don't have confidence. That's

why it's like a vicious cycle... I'm not confident and that's why my voice and tone is very small and nobody can listen to me and people are uncomfortable and so I am uncomfortable too. It's a very vicious cycle. On that day I felt like giving up improving my English. So I think, "It's okay... I'm from a different country, English is not my first language. It's okay to speak weirdly." And so on that day I could speak confidently, clearly, and with a loud voice. I felt it was very good and people could understand what I said. At the moment I felt very comfortable speaking in English.

Setsuko Sanagawa,
Material Art and Design