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Strategies for Success for English as a Second Language (ESL) Students in the Post-Secondary Setting

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Abstract

English as a Second Language (ESL) students in the college setting have a higher rate of attrition than non-ESL students due, in part, to communication barriers. Retention and graduation rates of these students impact cultural diversity in practice settings for professionals who work with diverse populations. Colleges and universities must seek ways to assist ESL students with communication barriers in order to lower the attrition rate for this segment of the population and, ultimately, to improve the diversity needed in these professions. This article seeks to explore communication barriers for ESL students and offer strategies for overcoming these challenges in the academic setting.

A student sits in nursing class every day, always attentive and never questioning the content being discussed. Imagine the surprise when, after the first exam, the student made an appointment to discuss the exam grade. The student had not passed the exam, and the failure was unexpected. While the other students in the class at times seem to lack focus and possibly be looking at Facebook on their laptops or cell phones, this student always seems to be totally focused on the discussion or lecture. During the appointment, we discuss preparation for the exam-- the student knows the material and is able to recite facts about the topics tested on the exam. However, the student made a statement that finally highlighted what the problem could be: "I don't always understand what is being said in class. Sometimes, I don't know what the words mean so I write them down so I can look them up later." As an English as a Second Language (ESL) student, the student is getting lost in the "language" of the lecture instead of being able to easily relate to the content that is being taught. Because of this, the student is then left to his/her own study techniques to try and figure out the meaning of the language but is unable to go beyond this to relate the content to clinical situations- an important part of how information is taught in nursing.

When lecturing, the use of case studies and past clinical experiences helps demonstrate the application of the material. The ability to apply information is important to anyone who is in a "practice profession". This student, as an ESL student, is exhibiting some of the common problems with communication in listening, reading, writing, and speaking (Phillips & Hartley, 1990). The purpose of this article is to describe the common problems that ESL students have with communication, and provide strategies that faculty can use to help ESL students with these communication problems. These strategies include use of mentorship, assistance with writing assignments, creation of an open

learning environment, and assignment of collaborative activities.

ESL Students' Problems with Communication

According to Scheele, Pruitt, Johnson, and Xu (2011), ESL students are defined as students who attended grade school outside the United States and use a language other than English in daily functions. ESL students can also be students raised in a non-English-speaking environment who continue to use their native language in the home while using English in environments where the native language is not used. When international students and students for whom English is a second language enroll in a college or university, most of these institutions require the student to demonstrate competence in English, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) are required for entrance. Competence on the TOEFL or IELTS is expected to be a predictor of academic success. These tests are similar in terms of testing in that they both require proficiency in reading, writing, and listening. The IELTS also tests verbal communication in an interview process.

However, in a study by Hill, Storch, and Lynch (2001), neither the TOEFL nor IELTS was a true predictor of academic success. Factors that were cited in this qualitative study included difficulty with English language proficiency and other non-linguistic factors. English language proficiency factors include: understanding written and spoken communication with native speaking students, listening and note taking, reading (including reading speed), and writing (including problems with expression, style and organization). Non-linguistic factors include: learning a new educational environment, determining what each lecturer's requirements for the class

were, adjusting to living in a new environment, time management, difficulty with problem-solving and critical thinking skills, and a lack of assumed background knowledge. Thus, these exams only provided limited predictors on whether these students would be successful in the higher academic setting.

ESL students can have difficulty with understanding lecture material. Each lecturer has a different style. Students are expected to pre-read the material prior to lecture to ensure comprehension prior to this material being presented in the classroom. Many lecturers provide handouts or copies of PowerPoints prior to class to help narrow the student's focus in the textbook. The ESL student, who may have difficulty with speed of reading and comprehension, must then correlate the material to the spoken words by the lecturer. The ESL student must also interpret the colloquialisms that are used; this is particularly important with the English language because there are many words that sound alike (e.g., way or weigh) (McAdams-Jones & Williams-Schulz, 2008). Another issue that has been noted with live lecture is that the ESL student, while attentive, is not taking notes due to difficulty with comprehension. Therefore, their comprehension is limited to reading the material. Reading the material presents difficulty for the ESL student when the lecturer does not strictly teach from the readings but instead has brought new material to the class to help the students understand concepts (Donnelly, McKiel & Jwang, 2009).

Depending on the discipline, ESL students have to be proficient in two or three types of communication in the academic setting. One type is basic interpersonal communication used in social interaction that utilizes general English. This is used with peers as well as faculty. If students are in a practice profession where they must

participate in experiences outside of the academic setting, they will use this type of communication. The other type of communication involves cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) that is used specifically in analyzing, evaluating, and interpreting concepts that are abstract. In addition, if students are learning a practice profession which has its own language, such as medical terminology in healthcare settings, the student must learn this language (Guhde, 2003).

Another area of potential weakness for ESL students is with academic writing. Having proficiency in academic writing is a fundamental skill expected in higher education. It demonstrates scholarship and is particularly helpful in practice professions requiring good communication skills. ESL students particularly have difficulty with this communication method in biological sciences where students must understand and process complex concepts (Salamonson, Koch, Weaver, Everett & Jackson, 2009). One issue for faculty teaching ESL students has been plagiarism. In other cultures, it may be acceptable to use other people's work without referencing it; plagiarism in the educational settings is a concept with which ESL students must be familiarized. In addition, they must become proficient in other aspects of formal writing such as with style procedures and formats (e.g. American Psychological Association or Modern Language Association).

Strategies to Help ESL Students with Communication

Through literature review and personal experience, we have identified several strategies to help decrease the attrition of ESL students. One strategy that can begin as soon as the student enters the discipline-specific program involves having a faculty mentor. One-on-one interaction between the faculty member and student in scheduled

meeting times is very important and aids in establishing a working relationship with the student. The student can address issues and/or concerns related to study habits, test taking strategies, and comprehension of lecture content and exam questions. The instructor can discuss these issues and refer the student to available resources.

Another method commonly used with ESL students and one-on-one mentoring is assigning all ESL students to one mentor. The mentor can be a faculty member or a member of the community, such as a professional in the field of study. This approach helps maximize the ESL students' potential for success by providing them with a sense of continuity with on-going individual and small group mentoring (Kilsch, 2000).

An additional mentor program that can be used is with ESL faculty on the college campus. According to Beacham, Askew, & Williams (2009), the purpose of this relationship is twofold. One purpose is to teach students about the challenges and barriers that they may encounter as they progress in the academic setting and then into the professional world post-graduation. The other is to instill confidence in the student, which motivates and sustains their enthusiasm for the practice profession that has been chosen. The faculty mentor may be from the same native country and may be within or outside the student's degree program. The ESL faculty will need to provide the student with resources and strategies that help them make a smoother transition into the higher education setting. The faculty and the student should meet periodically throughout the semester to evaluate the student's progress. Also, the faculty mentor should make contact with the student's department of study and discuss progress and resources.

The University of Southern California developed a program called "Learn for

Success" (LFS), a program that addresses student mentoring and identifies it as necessary for the retention of racial/ethnic minority students. In the LFS program, at risk students were paired with faculty mentors to work on various areas (i.e., writing and test taking skills). At the completion of the program, it was found that at-risk students were successful in passing their courses at the same rate as non at-risk students (Peter, 2005).

Writing skills can be improved by one-on-one writing consultation, tutoring, or through an academic support unit (Salamonson et al., 2009). Strategies that support academic writing that are discipline specific can be more effective in the improvement of academic writing skills. For example, students can submit graded writing assignments from a previous course prior to a one-on-one session with faculty in order to identify areas of concern (Weaver & Jackson, 2011). The student can then be given practice assignments that are related to coursework that can be reviewed and edited by the faculty. Faculty who do not have formal preparation in writing can have difficulty with editing assignments. Therefore, the use of academic writing that is discipline specific could involve collaboration between content and writing experts in supporting these students' academic writing skills. This collaboration could be an intensive workshop where students are given discipline-specific assignments that will be written, edited, and revised by the student to improve their academic writing skills.

An open learning environment involves exploring ESL students' participation in both the classroom and campus settings. One strategy that can be used is involvement of the ESL student in campus organizations. Participating in campus organizations will give the student a sense of belonging and allow him or her to meet other students across the campus, whether ESL or non-ESL. The students can share experiences and let the ESL students know they are not alone. Throughout the semester, students can meet together to discuss issues or concerns in order to help them better deal with different situations they may encounter. In the classroom setting, having a "Culture Day" allows the students to share cultural practices with faculty and peers. Students are able to share foods and wear clothing that is specific to their native country. Students who are from the United States also bring regional specific food dishes. The students provide music that is popular in their own country. Having a "Culture Day" allows the students to identify other students from similar and different cultures in their degree programs. This day also opens up dialogue between students which allows for a better understanding of the ESL students' unique perspectives that arise from their culture and challenges of college life.

To improve learning in the academic setting, ESL students can be encouraged to tape lectures and listen to them multiple times. The students can make notes based on lecture material, and the faculty member or a peer could review the notes for accuracy and completeness. Students can be encouraged to participate in classroom discussions by having the faculty ask the ESL students questions directly; in this way, the ESL students can be involved and have an opportunity to communicate with their peers and faculty members. Collaborative assignments with peers can also give students the opportunity to interact with others from diverse backgrounds, which students report gives them a better understanding of diversity.

Conclusion

The presence of ESL students provides diversity in the academic setting that is important and necessary as our society

changes toward a more global one. Faculty members need to seek out strategies that will help ESL students be more successful despite communication barriers that may exist, such as with listening, reading, writing, and speaking. ESL students can be supported through the use of mentor programs that are faculty and peer driven, assistance with academic writing, and creation of an open learning environment. Educators have a responsibility to acculturate students into the discipline-specific profession that has been chosen; faculty can accomplish this through considering unique approaches to meet the needs of the diverse learner.

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