TEACHING TIPS AND ASSIGNMENT IDEAS FOR ESL STUDENTS

Kathleen Vance
Dale Fitzpatrick
British Columbia Institute of Technology

ESL STUDENTS POSE a challenge in the classroom because teachers’ assumptions about the languages and cultural information in students’ heads may be wrong. Students’ assumptions about teachers, courses, and subjects may likewise be faulty (Beamer, 1994; Gilsdorf, 2002; Holmes, 2004; Silva, 1992; Steinman, 2003). Our teaching tips and assignments are designed to democratize and demystify the content and teaching practices of the business communication classroom by making both parties’ assumptions more explicit. By talking and writing about their assumptions, both teachers and students can spot comprehension problems and expose normally hidden cultural assumptions. By encouraging students to model thinking and communicating styles, teachers provide the guidance and scaffolding ESL students need, without singling them out as different from the class norm, and thus ensure these students’ inclusion in all classroom events.

Our polytechnic institute offers business, engineering, and health programs that merge academic and applied learning, maintain close ties with industry and employers, and conduct applied research. Diploma and degree students are required to take a 1-year, 105-hour business and technical communication course. Many students, one third in one program, already have undergraduate degrees but need applied skills for the job market. Many are ESL students. Because


Alison Kuiper, senior lecturer in communication at Lincoln University, New Zealand, has taught in Canada and Malaysia as well as in New Zealand. She publishes in both education and communication and has special interests in international students and intercultural communication. Address correspondence to Alison Kuiper, Environment, Society and Design, P.O. Box 84, Lincoln University, Lincoln 7647, New Zealand; email: kuiper@lincoln.ac.nz.
students benefit from earlier exposure to business and technical communication, we also developed a specialized preparatory program that includes an ESL language support course. Our strategies for our business and technical communication courses are effective with our ESL students because students are able to acquire language skills as they learn course content (Benesch, 1988; Mohan, 1986; Vance & Fitzpatrick, 1994).

The Mock Exam or Assignment
An example of how to make assumptions about classroom management and course evaluation more explicit is the mock exam or assignment, which is given to all students a week before the graded exam or assignment. Students complete the mock exam or assignment individually and receive individual or whole-class feedback. The purpose is to familiarize them with the directions, teacher’s expectations, and grading system; to provide guidance on what and how to study; and to build confidence. The mock exam helps prevent students accustomed to other educational systems from preparing for exams by memorizing the material.

Editing Activities in Mixed Groups or Teams and Supplemental Grammar Lessons
Assigning all students to mixed groups of varying skills and experience as recommended by Grant (2004) and Roebuck (1998) allows them to share information on course content as well as course management and evaluation. In addition, grouping non-ESL and ESL students together ensures greater inclusiveness.

Groups identify common errors from their written assignments and work on peer editing and revising. We provide checklists that focus on a full range of errors, including non-ESL grammatical errors, as well as problems in organization and format, to ensure that ESL errors do not monopolize the discussion. Having mixed ESL and non-ESL groups keeps the focus on global errors that impede sense-making rather than on minor errors that constitute a “slight foreign accent in writing” (Harris & Silva, 1993, p. 534). Because of ESL student pressure to have teachers identify and correct each error (Lee, 2005;
Oladejo, 1993), teachers need to explain to all students that learning how to learn from others in their groups and learning to find and correct their own errors are crucial skills for their future enculturation into the workplace. Finally, although non-ESL students may have more linguistic competence, ESL students may have extensive work experience and thus possess greater pragmatic competence and more insight into the appropriateness of a piece of writing for a particular business situation (Louhiala-Salminen, 1999).

Supplemental grammar lessons should attend equally to ESL and non-ESL errors. Our lessons, which proved to be an attractive online course component (Vance, 2003), cover spelling, comma splices, fragments, apostrophes, and the dropped s and d, as well as using the correct article and choosing the correct form of a word, both of which are common ESL problems (Harris & Silva, 1993). Grammar, as suggested by Featheringill, Fuller, and Vogt (1996), is taught in the context of business and technical documents.

**Activities to Cover All Four Skill Areas of Language Acquisition**

Classroom activities should be designed to cover reading, listening, speaking, and writing. ESL students’ language development may be uneven across the four areas, and covering all four allows them to use strength in one area to encourage and support them in another. Readings, either of models or descriptions of the communication task, allow teachers to focus students’ attention on vocabulary and grammatical structures, such as those used to express a recommendation in a report. Non-ESL students also benefit from an appreciation of the nuances that emerge through attending to every word. Having students, in pairs or small groups, speak before they write allows them to check one another’s comprehension and discover mistaken assumptions about audience and purpose.

The cooperative learning “T chart” (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991, pp. 3-10), whereby students list to the left side of the T what a given desired behaviour looks like and to the right of the T what it sounds like, focuses students’ attention on both verbal and nonverbal language. For example, students are asked what an effective presentation before an audience looks and sounds like. They are also
asked what the audience can be expected to look and sound like. Explicitly discussing these expectations ensures a common set of assumptions regarding the communication task while helping build the classroom community.

Graphic organizers are also used to provide structure and prompts for writing and speaking tasks. Graphic organizers, also known as key visuals, advance or post organizers, and concept maps, are visual representations of the organization or structure of knowledge and of the complex relationships among concepts. Graphic organizers have been shown to help students at all levels to comprehend and produce the discourse of their disciplines (Early & Tang, 1991). Examples of graphic organizers are classification charts, Venn diagrams, organization charts, T charts, comparison tables, and cause-and-effect diagrams (see Appendix). Students, who construct the graphic organizers on the basis of their readings and notes, are instructed to refer only to the organizers when preparing their written or spoken assignments. Thus graphic organizers are useful for preventing students from copying from texts and notes when writing and from memorizing a text before speaking. For oral presentations, graphic organizers can form the basis for slides.

Skill areas are covered in a graduated approach. For example, having students regularly report the results of group activities to the class allows them to practice the speaking skills they will need for oral presentations at course end. For group reports, the teacher can instruct students to focus on a single aspect, such as making eye contact, previewing main points, or using transitional words and phrases. Breaking down language and communication tasks into more easily manageable steps is called scaffolding or laddering because it helps build students’ confidence by letting the students see themselves developing skills one rung (stage) at a time.

**Teacher’s Role and Classroom Leadership**

Course material should reflect the background, skills, and interests of all students in the class. With permission, students’ names can be used in case studies, or names can be taken from the business pages of any major newspaper, because these now reflect the diversity of
the workforce more accurately. The courage and perseverance of students who are working in other languages and cultures should be recognized, along with that of other students who have overcome different obstacles. Employment topics such as the résumé, job application letter, and job interview should not be discussed without also covering the topic of human rights. A way to engage all students is to have them apply their critical-thinking and problem-solving skills in the following group activity. The class is first given or researches the facts of local human rights legislation. Each group then receives a one-page summary of an actual human rights complaint. The group discusses and makes a ruling on the complaint and is then given the actual decision, so they can compare their thinking with that of the adjudicator.

Because ESL students bring a wide variety of experience and skills to the business communication classroom and cannot be identified as “ESL” or as “posing any special challenge” by looking at them or even by a diagnostic administered in the first meeting of the course, the business communication classroom needs to provide space for all students to display their competencies and express their doubts and frustrations. Group work allows students to assume leadership positions while removing the teacher from the front-and-center role as sole classroom authority (Curry, 1996; Vance, Fitzpatrick, & Sackville, 1997). Online course components offer the advantage of using the computer skills of students, which may be at an even higher level than their language skills, and of lending them a more anonymous identity. Journaling assignments are useful for allowing students to communicate their thoughts and feelings about their communication tasks and for making it easier for teachers to know each student individually and thus avoid stereotyping.

**Conclusion**

ESL students provide an opportunity for business communication teachers to develop materials and activities to make the language and culture of the course more explicit. The results are a demystifying of business communication and a democratizing of the classroom community that benefit all students.
## APPENDIX
### Example of a Graphic Organizer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brief Definition</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Direct order: conclusions and recommendations are placed before the body of the report | - Main idea of the report is up front → reader gets to the main idea immediately without wasting any time.  
- Reader sees where the report is headed → reader finds the report easier to follow.  
- Reader can choose to accept the conclusions and recommendations immediately → reader doesn’t have to read the rest of the report. | - Reader may feel the report was already aimed at the conclusions and recommendations before the writer considered the facts → report appears biased and not based on facts.  
- Reader may immediately disagree with the conclusions and recommendations → reader doesn’t read the rest of the report or reads it with hostility. |

NOTE: The arrows represent cause and effect.

## References


*Kathleen Vance, PhD, is the coauthor (with Dale Fitzpatrick) of Writing for Success (ERPI/Pearson Longman) and four English textbooks for the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education and has published in the field of ESL since 1982. Dale Fitzpatrick, MA, is the founding program head of a specialized program for intermediate-to advanced-level ESL students in technology and business programs. Address correspondence to Kathleen Vance, British Columbia Institute of Technology, Communication Department, 3700 Willingdon Avenue, Burnaby BC V5G 3H2, Canada; email: kathy_vance@bcit.ca.*

**POSTGRADUATE DIPLOMA COLLABORATIVE ASSIGNMENT**

Terri Grant
*University of Cape Town*

The good thing about this course, you learn so many new things and it also introduces you to the business world.

Especially it was good for me as a foreigner to work with locals—we have a nice relationship in our workshop and the more you do, the more comfortable you feel.

Daunting and stressful at first but very helpful and inspiring in the end.