TEACHING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AN AUSTRALIAN HIGH SCHOOL SETUP: PRACTICAL TEACHING/LEARNING ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

“I THINK YOU BELIEVE YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I SAID BUT I’M NOT SURE WHAT YOU HEARD IS WHAT I THINK I SAID.”

“STUDENTS DO NOT LEARN WHAT WE TEACH.”

CLARIFICATION OF TERMINOLOGY

For the purpose of this section of the paper, practical teaching issues from the perspective of the mainstream high school teacher will be discussed, as well as learning issues from the perspective of the international student. By international student is meant ELICOS student as opposed to exchange students, migrants or refugees. Although these different categories of overseas students are not necessarily mutually exclusive in learning problems and behaviours, the setup at HVGS is specifically geared towards ELICOS students. Strategies for the mainstream high school teacher will be explained. By mainstream high school teacher is meant teachers who teach and are trained to teach high school subjects other than ESL (or in the ELICOS context, EFL). These strategies are by no means exhaustive. Again, the categories language learner of high school age/younger learner/very young learner as used in EFL jargon overlap and are not mutually exclusive. However, the focus of the ELICOS setup at HVGS is on high school students (which is a market-driven issue).

It may also be necessary to point out the possibility that this paper may be preaching to the converted. The converted may include teachers without a professional ESL qualification or training, but with a lively interest in ESL who may have attended a preliminary or refresher course or workshops in ESL, or teachers with less training but who have been experimenting with imagination and flair with these techniques for some time.

By issues is also meant problems or perceived problems. I avoid the term problem intentionally, though – difficulty is probably more appropriate.

Finally, although the focus of the ELICOS centre on the HVGS campus is to teach English as a Foreign Language to international students wishing to continue their high school studies at HVGS, the term ESL is used in the paper.

GENERAL ISSUES

- Students enter the mainstream classes at different levels of ability ranging from reasonable to very good. They have different levels of ability, as well as different learning styles and background. Their learning background is often more formal and more text based.
- Some students are not good language learners. Their lack of language learning ability may often mask good aptitude at Maths or Science, for example, or even a more practical subject like Design and Technology. Some students may have good artistic ability, but find the subject jargon in Visual Art very difficult.
- Teachers without teaching experience of international students often simply do not understand their pronunciation. This makes it hard for students to express themselves, and embarrassing for both parties.
- There are affective issues to keep in mind, too. Students and their parents often have unrealistic expectations of the school and their teachers. Some students may not have been able to cope effectively in their home countries – there are no guarantees that they will be able to cope here. Some students get homesick. Also, students are very sensitive to issues of conformity at school. They do not usually mix readily with the Australian students, and prefer to stick together. Students lack confidence and fear making mistakes. Also, studying in an English-only environment all day is not easy.
Teachers may feel that they do not want to spend too much time focussing in class on one or a few ESL students who may not understand the task or language. On the other hand, they feel guilty about continuing the work knowing that these students do not understand. Given that most teachers are not ESL trained, they also do not know how much of the EFL/ESL methodology is useful or adaptable to a mainstream class. Time is a factor, as always – can a mainstream teacher be readily expected to change their teaching methodology and adapt their teaching materials to a more ESL user-friendly format for the sake of one or two students. They are also not sure whether the majority of other students in the class would really benefit from this.

GENERAL STRATEGIES

- Get to know your students. Talk to them about their day, their progress, their friends, family back home.
- Structure tasks so that the students have a sense of achievement at the end. This is normally achieved through task-based activities which are manageable. Examples of task-based activities are jigsaw activities, dictogloss, peer teaching, information gaps, etc.
- Dictation exercises are good listening practice, but students find them difficult. Sometimes working with a buddy helps. Dictogloss activities are good, and are good practice also for native speakers. Simplified dictogloss: read at normal speed a passage of a few sentences (up to 5) to students. With 1st reading, students only listen. During next 2 or 3 or 4 readings at normal speed, students take down notes of key words. The next step is for the students in pairs or threes to reconstruct the passage as closely as possible to the original meaning (not necessarily sentence structure). This activity could be used to convey key information in any subject. Example of a passage for dictogloss in Science (topic Energy Transformations): Energy from the Sun is trapped by green plants and phytoplankton, ie microscopic plants that float in the oceans. The energy is used to power the process of photosynthesis in which carbon dioxide and water are converted into oxygen and food molecules such as glucose.
- Succeeding in simple tasks provide students with a sense of achievement, which encourages and motivates them.
- Enhancing learner independence is important. Give manageable tasks or assignments with clear aims, and help students to help themselves by providing adequate self-access resources.
- Hooks are important – “something to remember me by” (Saul Bellow). Teach and use metalanguage and subject-specific jargon – also nouns, verbs, modal verbs, singular, plural, etc.
- Give students thinking time.
- Work on pace, variety of activities, classroom management. A buddy system may work well in the class setting. Sometimes it is good to change the buddies from time to time (or more frequently if necessary). Pair work and group work is important – the smaller the group, the more pressure on the individual student to perform or produce an outcome. This needs monitoring and sometimes gentle nudging to ensure the ESL student contributes a little bit. As with the buddy system, change the groups and pairs for different tasks.
- State the aims of a lesson or activity clearly – a practice that all students will benefit from.

VOCABULARY

- Students are overly reliant on their bilingual electronic dictionaries. This poses a few problems. Not all bilingual dictionaries are good or even reasonably good. No context is provided for the vocabulary items, and students do not know which word is the closest in meaning. In the case of younger, less experienced or less able students, they often do not understand the word in their own language!
- It is not always the best solution to substitute bilingual dictionaries with monolingual ones. Students often do not understand the English explanations in the monolingual dictionary.
- Depending on their language learning background, students often find it difficult to distinguish register (formal/informal) words, or useful words. There is a Korean publication with 10 000 useless items of TOEFL vocabulary which some students study verbatim. There is also a tendency among some students to study their dictionaries.
• There are too many words in the language for students to learn and they do not know where to start.
• When students start their mainstream classes, teachers do not know how much vocabulary their students know or understand. Teachers also do not know how to teach new vocabulary.

STRATEGIES
• The best strategy is to enhance learner independence, i.e. teach the student how to learn. Dictionary training is useful: teach them that there is a time and place for dictionary use. Providing 10 minutes (or 5) at the beginning of an activity or a writing exercise to look up unfamiliar vocabulary may help, with another few minutes at the end of the activity. Teach them the conventions and terminology associated with dictionary use, e.g. abbreviations for parts of speech, the meaning of *transitive* and *intransitive*, etc. Develop their referencing skills so that they are able to use their monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in conjunction.
• Teach strategies to ask for clarification. This sounds simple, but is really important. Example: “Excuse me, what does *clarification* mean?”
• Teach them ways to remember vocabulary, e.g. mind maps, revision exercises, testing themselves.
• Always encourage them to write down new vocabulary from the board. It is useful to set aside a part of the whiteboard for new terminology and vocabulary. Make sure that the student knows which word you are writing down – pronounce it, get the students to repeat. If a student does not know the spelling of a word, they can’t look up the meaning.
• Teach verbs, too – we tend to teach lots of nouns. Collocations and language chunks or phrases are very useful e.g. *descending order*; *concurrent lines*; *highest common factor*.
• Glossaries are invaluable. Although this may seem like yet another word list, it is given within the context of the subject taught. The advantage of a glossary is that the students can look up the vocabulary at home, and come to class prepared. The students are then able to contextualise the lesson more easily. More often than not they may have studied the concepts before – once they recognise and understand the English jargon, they find the work easy.

LISTENING
• Students expect to hear English spoken phonetically – a big problem, since English is so unphonetic.
• English sounds very fast to our students.
• They are not used to a variety of accents.

STRATEGIES
• Make students aware of weak forms and contractions. E.g. *of* in units of measure; Design ‘n’ Technology vs a strong and (cf. *fish ’n’ chips*).
• Teacher talk should be natural, with a full range of weak and strong forms and contractions. Babytalk should be avoided – instead so-called motherese or caretaker talk which means simplifying, or careful repetition or modelling (although your student may totally ignore your remodelling, just like your 3-year old). Shouting is unnecessary – students have a problem with listening skills, not their hearing.
• Lots of exposure to English is essential. Often it is possible to base a lesson upon a listening activity (e.g. dictogloss).

SPEAKING
• Students rely on their dictionaries. They may grope for a dictionary halfway through an already stilted conversation.
• Some students are shy, and they may not like the sound of themselves in English. Ever listened to yourselves on tape in a foreign language? Scary stuff.
• Lack of imagination or opinions is often a problem.
• Sometimes they do not have enough information about a topic – consider more thorough guidance or pre-teaching.
• Sometimes they do not believe in the value of group or pair work – they only want to listen or speak to their teacher, the Great Authority.
• Their speaking is often painfully slow, and really challenging to listen to for any extended period of time.
• They do not want to speak because they believe people do not understand them anyway.
• They may not be ready to speak.
• Students have differing views on correction. Some think they would benefit from being corrected all the time, which is an unrealistic expectation.

STRATEGIES
• Teach them there is a time and place for dictionary use. Dictionaries have no place in a fluency-based activity, i.e. the speaking activity itself. They may be able to use their dictionaries in preparation for the activity.
• Do confidence building activities, and teach them that mistakes are learning steps.
• Speed them up – encourage them to do ghost-reading, for example, where they read simultaneously with a tape. Old-fashioned, but it works. It gives them an idea of the natural speed and rhythm of the target language.
• Give them reasons for speaking, e.g. task-based activities, formulation exercises, explaining processes (very difficult even in L1).
• Give them preparation time and thinking time.
• It is essential that they have the language and vocabulary to speak. Focus on teaching the jargon they need to use in your subject.

PRONUNCIATION
• Speech is often unintelligible, also to their peers.
• As with listening, students expect phonetic pronunciation of words which they know the meaning and spelling of, i.e. they have a passive knowledge of but have never heard or used before. This happens very often in the school setting where students study jargon never heard pronounced before.
• There is strong mother tongue interference with rhythm and intonation patterns.

STRATEGIES
• Provide hooks such as the phonemic chart, terminology such as the schwa, voiced/unvoiced, syllables; also teach the position of the tongue and lips in sound production. Students with difficulty pronouncing 1 and r find it much easier to pronounce those sounds once they understand the position of the tongue relative to the palate when forming them.
• Exposure to native speakers, lots of listening activities, songs, jazz chants (in ESL), ghost reading. Ghost reading provides a model reader who reads aloud while the student follows, tries to copy in pace, and pronunciation and intonation patterns.
• Point out word stress when teaching vocabulary – it is a good practice to mark the stressed syllable and insist the student copy this.
• Have a regular pronunciation slot, preferably daily.
• Voice-setting phonology involves activities such as providing models and ghost-reading.

GRAMMAR
• Ah, grammar.
• Students try to learn formulae mathematically – a practice more prevalent in some nationalities, e.g. Korean. This is a reflection of how grammar is taught in their home countries – a method that is reminiscent of the unfashionable grammar-translation method without the translation (or without effective translation).
• Some students believe their grammar is good.
• Most students have not had enough exposure to language patterns in context.
• Students do not see the language form in simple isolation.
• They often expect absolute rules and are not tolerant of all the exceptions in the English language.
• Students are often not linguistically ready to integrate a particular structure in their language learning. Although the 3rd person singular *s* seems like a simple rule, native speakers are often puzzled by how seemingly fluent non-native speakers do not use the *s*.
• The English language structure is sometimes more complex than the L1.
• Fossilisation is a big problem. Students usually progress relatively quickly from a beginner to pre-intermediate level, stagnates for a loooooooong time at intermediate level, then make good progress to a good upper-intermediate level and stagnate again at an almost advanced level where they are seemingly very fluent but still make some persistent errors.

STRATEGIES
• Provide hooks such as terminology and metalanguage for correction.
• This involves grammar consciousness-raising – so called grammar by infection, not injection.
• Contrastive grammar has a place at the lower language levels – even if it is at the level of the student understanding why the present continuous would be a better tense to use in a particular situation than the simple present.
• Teaching tense vs aspect is important – e.g. the present tense does not necessarily express present time; future time is not necessarily expressed by “will” or the simple future tense (which is what students are often taught in their countries).
• Task-based activities are useful, e.g. text reconstructions where the student provides the grammar words in a passage where the content words are given.
• Move from lexis to grammar, e.g. teach the grammar of vocabulary (the same as with dictionary training); point out parts of speech – it is sometimes really helpful to know whether a new vocabulary item is a noun or a verb.
• It is useful to point out language patterns (more so than absolute rules).
• Try to simplify and highlight form in a meaningful way, e.g. in the simple present and simple past question form *does* and *did* are followed by the base form of the verb – students often say *When does he goes?* or *When did he went?*
• Demystify modals (*can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, must*) and their wide range of meaning, use, form, register as well as specific rules for modals. Example: Modals can not be used together. *I will can* is a perfectly logical semantic choice for students – This year I can’t, but next year I *will can*. The better choice would be *I will be able to*.
• It is useful to understand the approximate SLA (Second Language Acquisition) sequence of morpheme acquisition: present progressive –ing (mommy running); plural –s (two books); irregular past forms (went); possessive ’s; copula (She’s nice); articles; regular past; third person singular simple present; auxiliary *be* (She is coming)

READING
• Due to their lack of exposure to written English, students regard all words as important.
• They may not like reading, even in their L1.
• They may not think reading is important.
• Their poor reading strategies slow them down or inhibits comprehension.
• They are overly reliant on dictionaries, and try to look up every word they do not understand.
• Students often do not understand handouts.

STRATEGIES
• Provide graded and focussed tasks which are achievable without having to understand every word.
• Give them a reason for reading, i.e. set a pre-reading task.
• Link the reading activity to a productive skill, e.g. speaking or writing. On completion of the reading activity they have to explain to a partner how a particular process works (using the jargon in the reading passage), etc.
• Develop the skill of guessing from context, e.g. read a passage without a dictionary and guess the meaning of a few underlined words from the context.
• Set ground rules for dictionary use – see above. Giving a preset time limit is often useful.
• Make sure handouts are clear. It is usually much better to give typed handouts than handwritten ones. Some students do not understand even a mostly legible handwriting. This makes it impossible for them to look up vocabulary they do not understand.

WRITING
• Sometimes students regard writing as an unnecessary or unimportant skill.
• Sometimes students think they are good already.
• Often they do not like writing in their L1 – to cultivate a love for it in L2 is a hard ask.
• They may not understand the teacher’s marking system.
• From the teacher’s perspective, it is very difficult to mark – where do you begin to correct everything that’s wrong, ranging from spelling, to word order, to lexis?
• Spelling is a problem. Also, the majority of students have a different writing system. Handwriting is often illegible.
• Lack of imagination is an issue, as well as lack of general and culture-specific knowledge.
• Students are often overly reliant on their dictionaries. This is evident from overly formal written work, vocabulary used out of context, and also the amount of time needed to produce written work. Dictionary use often slows students down and inhibits creative thinking.

STRATEGIES
• Provide a reason for writing, e.g. a reader – let students write to each other; let them work on word processor and print their work.
• Clarify your marking system.
• Process writing provides an opportunity to the students to rewrite and to focus on the process and not only on the end product.
• Link vocabulary learning with writing. Insist that students use recently learnt jargon in their written work.
• Providing models of good written work, e.g. essays, assignments and assessment tasks is invaluable to students. Pointing out why a particular model is good may be necessary.
• Guided and controlled writing provide useful practice. This involves giving students a model answer, and give them the task to modify it with regards to another topic/subject/person/city/country/body part.
• Make time for giving sufficient feedback on writing tasks.

STRATEGIES IN A NUTSHELL
• Provide hooks.
• Encourage exposure.
• Encourage learner independence.
• Provide guidance providing role of dictionaries.
• Provide opportunities for formulation.
• Provide opportunities for meaningful listening practice.
• Facilitate grammar consciousness-raising.
• Ensure suitability of materials.
• Find a shop where you can buy patience in bulk.

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ERROR CORRECTION
TO CORRECT OR NOT TO CORRECT?

Students only learn when their errors are corrected but error correction should be in manageable units and not done all the time. When errors are corrected the corrections should be limited to language features for which the learner is ready. Errors should never be corrected in free conversation, however, free conversation is a good place to model correct usage.

For example, if, in a conversation a learner says “I done my homework” an appropriate response could acknowledge the effort and include the statement “I did my homework last night too!”

The errors made by English as a second language students fall into four main categories.

* grammatical
* phonetic – using a wrong word that sounds correct.
* morphological – using the wrong prefix or suffix.
* semantic – using a word with the wrong meaning.

Some examples of ESL involuntary puns collected by Martin Schläger

The doctors were very busy because there was an academic in town.
The weekend was very relaxative.
I talk about my dairy routine.
Bushfires produce a lot of exhaustive gases.
We are all in Hamilton of our small planet. (Dictagloss original text (inhabitants)
We prefer to eat fly vegetables and put many seasons in. (Taiwanese student)
The recovering alcoholic spent many weeks in a sexist centre.
Solar Panel: Its reflected energy can boil the plumber inside the unit.
“Could I have my conception card, please.”
“I am (a) parasite, I share a flat”. (Japanese student)
“Excuse me, Martin, I need a day off. I need to go to Sydney. It is animal judgement day.” (Hiro Jap student)
“Teacher, I need some scratch paper.” (Japanese student)
For sale sign: Cololla in good condition, new crutch. (Japanese student)