

Teaching ESL to ASL Users

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Abstract

Historically, it has been the practice of colleges, universities, and other institutions that have English as a Second Language programs to place deaf students who are having problems in composition classes in those programs. At the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), this has been an occasional practice since 1980, near the beginning of the Intensive English Language Program (IELP). Reasoning behind this was that educators had discovered that many deaf students share similar problems with some of the foreign students learning English: no articles; lack of the verb "to be;" and few, if any, prepositions.

As the 10th and newest affiliate of the Postsecondary Education Consortium (PEC), UALR is committed to expanding and improving services for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. One area of increased focus since the inception of UALR's PEC affiliation has been the need for additional English instruction to students who are deaf and non-native English users or who have deficits in their English education backgrounds. With a task such as this one, each university must examine its own resources in order to develop programs that offer the best available options for its particular situation. At UALR, we chose to collaborate efforts between the Disability Support Services/PEC affiliate program for students who are deaf or hard of hearing and the Intensive English Language Program in order to develop an English as a Second (Foreign) Language class for American Sign Language (ASL) users -- ESL for ASL Users.

PROGRAM COORDINATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Affiliation with the Postsecondary Education Consortium at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville has allowed UALR and Disability Support Services (DSS) to enhance services to students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. These expanded services range from purchasing new assistive listening systems to a summer orientation program to professional development for interpreters and notetakers to the development of a two-tiered English language instruction program for deaf students who are non-native English users or who have deficits in their English education backgrounds. As stated in the UALR-PEC goals and objectives,

. . . the program will involve coursework geared specifically toward students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. The coursework will be developed during the first year of PEC funding. The course will utilize materials and instruction methods from the UALR Intensive English Language Program (IELP), in conjunction with components used successfully by other PEC affiliates. The course will be developed jointly by the PEC

Program Coordinator and IELP consulting staff. Course credit through IELP will be offered.

Preparation and Curriculum Development

Combining the efforts and expertise of our DSS/PEC program staff (and PEC advisory council members) with the Intensive English Language Program allowed us to approach this class in a unique way. Much of the initial preparation involved constant collaboration between myself and the IELP instructor, Anna Vammen, who would teach this course. Although Anna was an experienced ESL teacher and had a vast knowledge of language and the instruction of English to non-native English users, she was not knowledgeable in the field of deafness. Her commitment and desire to teach deaf students the reading, writing, and grammar skills they would need to be successful in their postsecondary career required an extreme amount of studying and learning on her part. This included gaining an understanding of Deaf culture, ASL grammar and syntax, common problems deaf students face in learning English, and basic differences in ASL and English. At the same time, I gained a greater knowledge of the teaching strategies related to English as a second language and English as a foreign language. Together, we were able to outline the initial goals and objectives for this course.

It is important here to clarify our main objective for this course. All students entering UALR who do not possess the skills (as determined by their ACT/SAT scores) to enroll in Composition I are first placed in two developmental courses, College Reading and Composition Fundamentals. Most deaf students entering UALR will follow the developmental track before enrolling in Composition I & II. Over the years, it has been discovered that, although deaf students are passing the developmental courses and possibly the Composition I course, they may still lack the appropriate skills to successfully meet the challenges of the reading and writing required on the postsecondary level. Therefore, our main objective in creating this class became the following:

To teach students whose native language is ASL to successfully communicate in English through writing, with emphasis also on improving reading skills.

Role as consultant

My biggest part in the creation of this course came during the initial design, preparation, curriculum development, and implementation phases. With the understanding that this is a pilot course and is a 'first-time' experience for all those involved, a continuation of discussion and support concerning the class has been vital. Anna, John West, the interpreter, and I meet periodically during each semester to discuss strengths and weaknesses of the class, any changes that need to be made, and to brainstorm ways we can improve future classes. As the primary consultant for this course, my role during the first two semesters has been three-fold: (1) to act as a support for the instructor by providing additional information on deafness and/or ASL related issues, (2) to communicate with the instructor and interpreter as well as the students in order to assess the course and future changes needed, and (3) to target and recruit students who could benefit from the class.

The Future

Each semester, UALR has approximately 15 deaf students whose primary mode of communication is sign language (including ASL, PSE, and English sign systems). The target size for this class is five to seven students with no more than ten. We would like a small enough class to be able to address the individual needs of the students, yet large enough to engage in group discussion and activities. It is our hope that as this class continues and the number of deaf students entering UALR increases, the popularity and credibility of this course will attract deaf students who desire to learn the English skills necessary to meet their academic and career goals.

INSTRUCTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

ESL and EFL

Two terms that need to be explained are ESL and EFL. ESL stands for English as a Second Language. Teaching ESL involves teaching English to non-native speakers who are living in a country where English is the native language. EFL is English as a Foreign Language, and it is the teaching of English to non-native speakers where, outside of the classroom, the students are in their native language cultures. Teaching ESL or EFL is more closely related to the field of teaching Foreign Languages than that of teaching "English" in the traditional sense, i.e., to native speakers of English.

Most ESL/EFL teachers have studied, speak, or even teach a foreign language. Many have lived in other countries and are, therefore, quite familiar with dealing with other cultures.

There are as many different techniques for teaching ESL as there are in any other education field. Also, there are as many, if not more, different kinds of programs where ESL is taught. This includes everything from kindergarten to university to Adult Education; from the class that meets once a week for an hour to an intensive, all day/everyday class to a friend teaching a friend. Perhaps, though, the biggest thing that sets ESL teachers apart from mainstream English teachers is that every student they teach has a specific goal for learning English -- from being able to play better with kids at recess to studying medicine to being able to go to the grocery store. The teacher is there for the sole purpose of helping the students achieve those goals.

The ESL program at UALR is an intensive English program that works on an eight-week, 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., five-day-a-week schedule. It is designed to provide foreign students with English classes before they enter the university. It was set up as an intensive program to facilitate the students' learning as quickly as possible before they started college classes. There are four subject areas and classes to fit each of six levels: Grammar, Reading, Writing, and Listening/Speaking.

Incorporating Deaf Students in IELP

As was mentioned earlier, deaf students have been occasionally sent to the program for grammar or writing instruction with varying degrees of success. One of the biggest problems, though, was that IELP's class schedule did not correspond to the university's schedule, and, since most of the deaf students

were already university students, it was hard for them and their interpreters to adjust to the intensive schedule.

In 1994, Susan Queller, the Director of Disability Support Services, made the suggestion that instead of putting the deaf students in an ESL class, why not take an ESL teacher out and put him/her with an all-deaf class. In April of 1995, everything was set in motion and planning of the class began.

One of the first things that was looked at was the strategy of designing the class as an ESL class rather than as a composition class. The most prevalent reason was simply because of what the students needed. Most deaf students have similar problems -- at least superficially -- as most foreign students do with English: lack of or very different uses of key grammatical points, such as articles and the verb "to be"; problems with the irregular verb patterns and uses of the past tense; unfamiliarity with the rigidity of English word/sentence order; and a need for more vocabulary.

Another key in approaching this as English as a Second Language was that in an ESL classroom, the instructor is experienced in teaching the target language to people who do not know it, which sounds like foreign language teaching, but with a twist. The instructor usually does not know the native language(s) of the students, and, therefore, does not use the students' native languages in class. Only the target language is spoken by the teacher. This in itself becomes almost more art than skill because the teacher has to be able to explain the language being learned in the language being learned. If that sounds confusing, try being in a beginning class of 7 students from 7 different languages whose only knowledge of English is "Hello," "Good-bye," and "chicken salad sandwich." Most ESL instructors accomplish this mainly through a lot of patience, knowledge of English, and an understanding of the syntax (if not the language itself) of key elements of the students' languages and the cultures of the students. This is accomplished many ways, but primarily through experience and calling on more experienced teachers for guidance. Talking with others from those cultures is also immensely helpful.

Collaborating Efforts

As an ESL and a foreign language instructor (I also teach Spanish), these were the strategies I intended to bring to the teaching of this class. However, as I progressed in my learning of ASL syntax and Deaf culture during the summer before the class was to start, I realized that what we were actually going to be teaching was EFL -- English as a *Foreign Language*. While the grammar, etc., instruction would not necessarily change, the fact that the students -- outside of class -- would be functioning in their native language and culture, and that the native language would be used in the class as a vehicle of presenting the target language, made this class closer to an EFL class than an ESL class.

Once my colleague, Christy Owen, and I had come to terms with all these methodologies and had learned each other's techniques and idiosyncrasies, we were able to sit down and hammer out our main objective, which was easy, and the methodology, which was hard and went through several changes before it reached the stage it is in the handouts of the syllabus you have received.

Course Objectives

The next procedure was to decide on the course objectives. These had to be much more specific than the main objective, of course, and tied tighter to the actual course material that would be taught since that material would be chosen specifically to reach these particular goals or objectives.

This, too, was a team effort based on my experience of teaching ESL and new knowledge of ASL syntax and Deaf culture, and Christy's experience and knowledge of the latter two and what particular problems deaf college students have with English learning. Three objectives made it to the final list. In the order they appear on the syllabus, these include:

1. Communicate ideas in written English form. This is basically the grammar and writing part of the class. It stemmed mainly from instructors in other classes having trouble being able to understand the answers that deaf students wrote to essay questions on tests. Two sub-objectives were written to further explain this one:

- Write standard English sentences.
- Communicate ideas in paragraph form allowing readability without confusion.

For this section, we decided that we would need a text that would have grammar in it, yet allow for a lot of practice in writing.

2. Use equivalent English synonyms for ASL vocabulary. The two sub-objectives to this one explain it best:

- Use English vocabulary that expresses concepts of "feeling" on different levels (e.g., the ideas of *great* to *wonderful* to *marvelous*).
- Use English metaphors, idioms, and colloquialisms when writing, and to recognize them in reading.

We felt that this section would be best taught in context with what the students were reading in the class.

3. Demonstrate improved reading skills in English. This last course objective really encompasses the one before it, but it was written separately to stress the fact that the students would not only be learning new vocabulary and idioms, but would be expected to carry that knowledge into reading. Emphasis would be on them learning to:

- Analyze reading for grammar, vocabulary meaning, and content.
- Write a brief summary of the reading.

To accomplish this objective, I decided on two materials: an ESL reader (a story or novel reduced to a particular word level) and a newspaper.

However, before I could finally choose the best texts and materials for the class, we needed to have a good idea of what level the students were reading and writing on. We decided to give the students the placement exams in grammar, reading, and writing used by IELP for three reasons:

1. I would be choosing my materials from available ESL texts;

2. Deaf students have many of the same English-learning problems as foreign students; and
3. IELP already had in place a tried and proven battery of placement exams.

IELP uses the standardized English ALFA exam for grammar placement and in-house generated exams for reading and writing. The program is divided into six levels:

- Level 1 - Zero to Beginning English proficiency
- Level 2 - Beginning English proficiency
- Level 3 - Lower Intermediate English proficiency
- Level 4 - High Intermediate English proficiency
- Level 5 - Advanced English proficiency
- Level 6 - College Preparation

As shown above, a student who places in levels 1 - 5 is considered to have an English proficiency level below what is necessary to successfully enter into college level coursework. A student placing in level 6 may still need some fine tuning but is otherwise ready to begin at least some college level coursework. *Figure 1* shows how students are placed in each level according to their scores on the ALFA English test and IELP Reading test.

Figure 1

Placement Test Guidelines
(ALFA English & IELP Reading)

ALFA	READING
<u>Items</u>	<u>LEVEL</u>
1 - 50	0
0 - 15	1
10 - 25	2
26 - 40	3
40 +	4
1 - 75	5
45 - 60	6
61 +	
1 - 100	4
65 - 85	5
85 - 95	6
96 - 100	

* Students must pass the reading level 3, 4, and 5 at 80% to move to the next level regardless of overall score.

The IELP writing placement test uses three prompts to elicit a writing sample from its new students. The prompts ask the students to (1) describe their family, (2) describe a trip in the past, and (3) describe what the student has done since arriving in the U. S. [Note: This third prompt was changed to "describe what the student has done since graduating from high school" to accommodate the American deaf students.] The students are given one hour to complete all three paragraphs.

The paragraphs are holistically analyzed for three salient features: control of grammatical structures, especially verb forms; organization; and vocabulary usage. The most important feature to

analyze is the student's control of grammar. The most basic grammar point to check is that the student can form correct sentences with Subject-Verb- and Objective/Predicate. *Figure 2* shows how students are placed within the IELP levels.

Figure 2

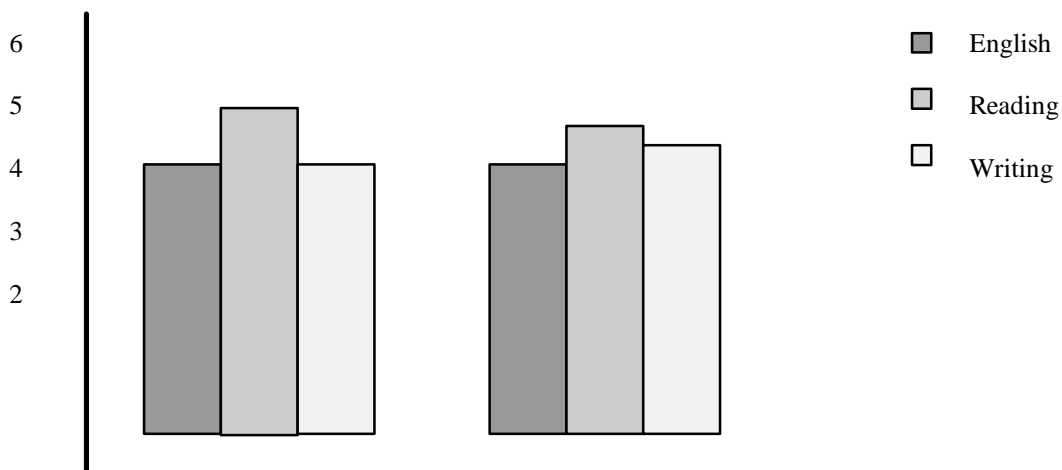
IELP Writing Exam	
Level 1	cannot write complete sentences/confused about basic sentence structure
Level 2	can write simple sentences with S-V-O constructions but repeat the same words with only minor variations of nouns
Level 3	know difference between and use simple present tense, present progressive tense, past tense, and future tense verbs
Level 4	able to use the present perfect tenses and use some compound sentence combinations -- using <u>and, but, or, & so</u> . Not able to use many complex sentence forms
Level 5	use complex sentences containing independent and dependent clauses (use subordinators, e.g. <u>when, while, as soon as, because, since,</u> and transitionals, e.g. <u>therefore, however, on the other hand</u>).
Level 6	able to do all that Level 5 can with higher levels of vocabulary knowledge and organization of the paragraphs

* Section on evaluating the IELP Writing Exam written by Philip Less, Academic Coordinator, IELP. (Revised and edited for this report.)

The two deaf students tested came out as being generally in the equivalent of Level 4 on all three placement tests (*see Figure 3 below*).

Since this was not to be an intensive class set up as the IELP classes, but a 3-credit-hour university class, it was decided to meet twice a week for 1 1/2 hours per class, with one hour of lab (to be scheduled later). Partly because of the schedule and partly because I could not find the exact test I wanted, I decided not to go with a traditional ESL grammar textbook. Instead, I chose a grammar workbook, GrammarWork 1, which had exercises covering the grammar points that the placement exams showed that the students needed work on. The grammar itself would be taught as it became necessary--i.e., as problems surfaced in the students' writing. In this way, I hoped to make the lessons pertinent and not become a "grammar-bound" class.

Figure 3



1

0

Student 1

Student 2

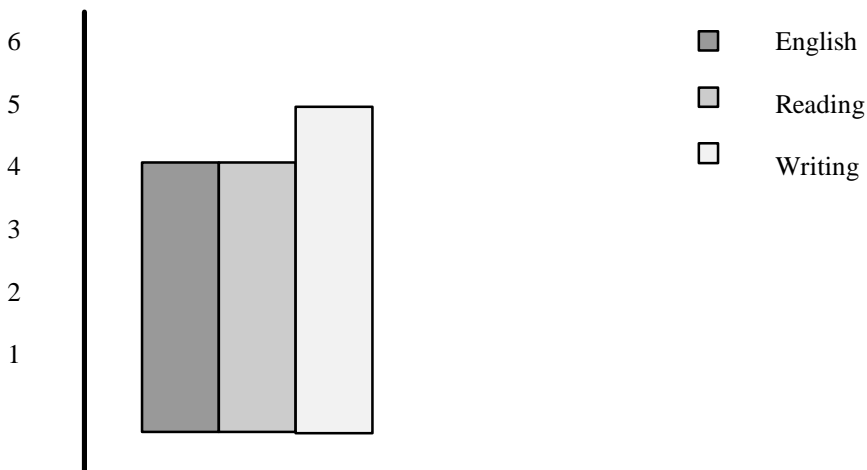
To meet the other two course objectives, I chose an ESL reader that is used in IELP's advanced reading class, Eye of the Tiger, and an ESL weekly newspaper, News for You. The reader was assigned as outside reading with discussion questions to write answers to. The students were quizzed on several chapters at a time, after discussion in class. The newspaper, News for You, provided a variety of activities in the way of exercises, cross-word puzzles to practice and learn vocabulary, current events, quizzes, and lots of vocabulary work. The lab requirement that first semester was pretty light. Basically, it consisted of getting the students set up on and learning how to use E-mail to ask about class assignments, and generally chat, and write class assignments on the word processor.

During the second semester, some minor but significant changes were made. The main objective, methodology, and course objectives stayed the same, but changes were made in the materials and labs of the class.

The original two students decided to take the class again. We changed the course number, and a third student joined the class. All interested students were given the placement exam again. The new student placed at an equivalent level as the others (*see Figure 4*).

The grammar workbook was changed to the next level of the series, GrammarWork 2, and News for You was continued, but the reader was dropped. In its place, students were given the opportunity to choose two books (approved by the instructor) they wanted to read. As they were reading the books, they had a set of questions to write "Reader Responses" to. The essay questions were given set due times in order to help the students judge their reading time better. In addition to these materials, I brought in extra work on idioms and other words taken from The ESL Teacher's Book of Lists. Also, most students bought Barron's Handbook of Commonly Used American Idioms, and we did some exercises using it. Much more writing was required of the students and a lot of practice was necessary to improve their reading ability.

Figure 4



Student 3

The biggest change occurred in the lab part of the class. From the experience of the first semester, we discovered that the students did not know how or were apprehensive of using the computers. So, each student chose a free time when she and I could work together in the lab. Here we have worked on basic computer skills, using WordPerfect for Windows 6.1, and using E-mail. This has been a beneficial time for both the students and me. No interpreters were used in the labs.

The two semesters of this class have taught us a lot. As we move into the third semester we are looking at several changes that we feel would be beneficial to the students. One thing that we have learned is that the class will always be dynamic -- changing to accommodate the students' needs.

INTERPRETER'S PERSPECTIVE

As with any interpreting situation, the interpreter's first responsibility is to assess each deaf student's mode of communication. Each class may have students using a variety of preferred modes, from PSE to ASL. As the interpreter I use PSE, but do switch to ASL if there is some difficulty understanding placement of words or concepts related to the current topic of discussion. If the discussion is related to verbs and their endings, I will use some Manually Coded English (MCE) to differentiate between the "-s", "-ed", and "-ing" endings.

Interpreter Role

As interpreters, we are constantly reminding people who have no experience using interpreters of such things as "I'm here only to facilitate communication," "We can not express an opinion," or "No, I will not run down the hall and get you a cup of coffee." As a part of the team of the PEC English class, my role covers more than "facilitating communication." At the beginning of the class, it is explained to the students that my role is more than that of an interpreter in this class. I bring up issues that the teacher and students may not have recognized and actively participate in classroom discussions when achieving a clearer focus of the material is necessary.

An advantage I have is the fact that the instructor has become well-versed in deafness, Deaf culture, and the syntax of ASL. She is able to interact with the students on a level that has more understanding than instructors in other classes. It is not necessary to discuss the Deafness and communication issues as is sometimes needed with other instructors. Advance preparation strengthened our working relationship. We are comfortable working together and depend upon one another for clear communication of the subject. An example of the advantage of being able to step out of my role as interpreter is when the instructor's explanation of material is not understood by the students. I can then ask the instructor to present that information in a different style, such as using the board. This allows the students to receive the information in a much more visible manner.

Conclusion

As we approach a new semester this fall, we are reviewing the past two classes and working on improvements for future classes. Our experiences this past year have been invaluable in helping us develop and progress. Perhaps the most rewarding experiences have been in our coming together as a team -- functioning as a unit to provide the students with the language skills they need to succeed in their college courses. In a final note we would like to thank the PEC for their continued and valuable assistance. This class is a reality because of their support.

Materials List

Breyer, P. P. (1995). GrammarWork 1: English Exercises in Context. 2nd edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

Breyer, P. P. (1996). GrammarWork 2: English Exercises in Context. 2nd edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

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Kress, J. E. (1993). The ESL Teacher's Book of Lists. West Nyack, NY: The Center for Applied Research in Education.

Makkai, A. (Ed.) (1991). Barron's Handbook of Commonly Used American Idioms. 2nd edition. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Education Inc.

News for You. A publication of New Reader's Press, publishing division of Laubach Literacy International.

Reading Placement Test. Developed by Faculty at the Intensive English Language Program, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Little Rock, Arkansas.

Smith, W. (1992). The Eye of the Tiger. [retold by Margaret Turner] Oxford: Heinemann.

Writing Placement Test. Developed by Faculty at the Intensive English Language Program, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Little Rock, Arkansas.