The Act of Writing

"There are times I find writing hard work, but few where I can say I don't actually enjoy it. Usually I have an aesthetic problem I want to work out, and if it won't come I get frustrated. But, of course, there is also a frisson of release when I stumble upon an answer. To some extent it is mechanical, like tinkering with a motorbike you want to get onto the road again. There is that sense of an ultimate end being fulfilled. Life is full of stops and starts of course; some things succeed, others fail. This idea of everything being an automatic success is rubbish. I hope that every poem I write contributes to my development as a poet, but I demand nothing more than that. The pop if it won't come I get frustrated. But, of course, there is also a certain point where one's responsibilities guide the important life decisions. Anything like that. This is the sort of thing I have done already in 4,004 B.C.) and calls itself the "Garden City". The truth is that unemployment (the highest in Queensland) is the only thing really full of stern sour faced people who never talk to each other. I know the central metaphor is going to be a wheel away garbage bin, "standing like sarcophagi", something like that. This is the sort of thing I have done already in Provincial City, with its image of the youth of the town in then angle-parked cars "their feet on invisible accelerators, going nowhere, fast". The images are even more acid in On Bad Days, but it finished with a picture which could be amusing. You've got to have a sense of humour. "I go to church, and a cramped Saviour winces on His cross, saying, 'When I first came here I admit, I was hopeful to...'."

The difference is, I think, I still am."

Assisting The ESL Pupil With Linguistic Difficulties In The Secondary Classroom

ERROL VIETH

In an article in an earlier edition of this Journal (No.72, June 1985 - 'Classroom Register and the Non-Native English Speaker') the language of discourse within the classroom and the language of the content of the subject English were investigated to discover areas of difficulty for the ESL pupil in a classroom where the majority of pupils were native speakers of English. This article looks at ways of adapting the material presented in the earlier article to make it more comprehensible to the ESL pupil and at ways of altering classroom procedure to reduce areas of difficulty for the ESL pupil.

Barriers to Communication

Levin (1981:13) has found three different types of barriers to communication: linguistic, emotional and cultural problems. Difficulty for the ESL pupil could come from any one of these areas or from a combination of two or three. This article looks primarily at linguistic problems although mention is made of the other interrelated areas. This article is not an attempt to provide a specialised ESL course for pupils in the classroom. The rationale for this is that teachers are often overwhelmed by the amount of work they have to do in providing the barest essentials for the pupils. Any course requiring vast amounts of extra work on the part of the classroom teacher is not likely to be implemented given current teaching conditions. The proposals outlined in this article aim for maximum effectiveness with minimum extra input.

A perennial problem for classroom teachers is knowing the level of understanding of English which the ESL pupil might have. The suggestions outlined in this article do not require that the teacher has such knowledge; the solutions can be applied at almost any level of English ability of the pupil. As a corollary, these suggestions can be used in other subject areas besides English.

'Remedial'-type activities are not the solution to the problems of the ESL pupil. [Knight 1977; Garton 1980:256] ESL pupils are often placed in remedial English classes, quite wrongly in the majority of cases. ESL pupils already know one language and are, on the whole, literate in that language. The pupil attending 'remedial' classes is not. The methodology used in 'remedial' classes is not appropriate for ESL learning.

Errol Vieth is a teacher of English, German, History, and English as a Second Language at Bundamba State High School, Queensland.
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"There are times I find writing hard work, but few where I can say I don't actually enjoy it. Usually I have an aesthetic problem I want to work out, and if it won't come I get frustrated. But, of course, there is also a frisson of release when I stumble upon an answer. To some extent it is mechanical, like tinkering with a motorbike you want to get onto the road again. There is that sense of an ultimate end being fulfilled. Life is full of stops and starts of development as a poet, but course; some things succeed, others fail. This idea of everything being an automatic success is rubbish. I hope that every poem I write contributes to my development as a poet, but I demand nothing more than that. The pop psychologists from America who promote the idea that success is instantly attainable by everyone are popularising a dangerous fantasy. This is the American Dream, isn't it, that anyone can become President: just toddle off from log cabin to White House. Not everyone would fit (quite aside from the fact that not everyone wants it), and think of the company you'd be in anyway."

Toowoomba Today

"I made the move north mainly to give my family a secure income. There is a certain place where one's responsibilities guide the important life decisions. There have been problems, mainly for my children attending school. It wasn't seemly to have a poet for a father by small town standards. I'd gotten to know the town during my stint in the air force, masquerading under the cloak of respectability; hiding the "rotten poet" beneath. It does have a small town mentality, why even my college — possible the most conservative campus in Queensland — is considered a hotbed of radical thought. The essential problem in Toowoomba is that any idea is considered communistic. It lays claim to upholding cherished standards of decency. All this is a veneer, of course, as it often is in Australia. The place is riddled with Christian fundamentalism of the Bishop Ussher variety (holding that the world was actually created in 4,004 B.C.) and calls itself the "Garden City". The truth is that unemployment (the highest in Queensland) is the only thing full of stern sour faced people who never talk to each other. I know the central metaphor is going to be a wheel away garbage bin, "standing like sarcophagi", something like that. This is the sort of thing I have done already in Provincial City, with its image of the youth of the town in then angle-parked cars "their feet on invisible accelerators, going nowhere, fast". The images are even more acid in On Bad Days, but it finished with a picture which could be amusing. You've got to have a sense of humour. "I go to church, and a cramped Saviour winces on His cross, saying, 'When I first came here I admit, I was hopeful to...'."

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The prerequisite for any solution to the problems of the ESL pupil is teacher awareness of the fact that the ESL pupils will have difficulty to varying degrees. Teacher awareness and empathy will enable positive reinforcement to occur. [Gregory 1981:25-31]. Ideally this awareness needs to encompass the culture the child has inherited and something of the native language of the child. Given teacher awareness, there are number of methods of minimizing the difficulties of the ESL pupil in any classroom. In brief they are: using a tutor system, group work, using teacher aides [if possible], asking pupils to paraphrase sections of the text, native speakers paraphrasing certain texts for the ESL pupil, and, on the teacher's part, using a certain routine for repetitive activities such as spelling, speaking clearly and repeating instructions in simple form. This final point is important as Levin has found that many ESL pupils find difficulty with the speed and complexity of teacher talk. [1981:18, 19]. These and other specific solutions will be discussed in this article in relation to the difficulties unearthed in the earlier article.

The three areas of language which were isolated in the earlier article were instructional (meaning to give instructions), administrative and language related to content. At the same time it was shown that the culture of the classroom was importance since one and the same sentence, the same set of words in the same syntactic relationship, may be a request, now a command, now a compliment, now an insult, depending upon tacit understandings within a community. [Cazden 1972:xxix]

Ways of assisting the ESL pupil to become familiar with the functions of language in the classroom will be suggested.

Instructions

In the classroom surveyed the passive voice was used. It is rarely used outside the classroom but is used in written form in educational English. [Taylor: 1979:23]. One obvious solution is to use the active rather than the passive voice in the classroom. Sentences such as 'It should be written in your exercise book' and 'The work should be finished by Friday' become 'Write the sentences in your exercise book' and 'Finish the work by Friday'.

Such an obvious solution may not be the most appropriate because the passive voice does not only occur in discourse in English classes but probably in other classrooms as well and regularly in textbooks. [Taylor 1979:238]. By eliminating the passive from the English classroom the problem may be solved in one classroom but may be more pronounced in other subject areas. In addition, it may be difficult for the teacher to substantially alter his/her own speech patterns.

A number of other solutions, relevant to other situations discussed in this paper are effective. The teacher could give the ESL pupil a textbook with an explanation of the passive and exercises. Both the explanation and the exercises would need to be within the pupil's sphere of linguistic competence. If a visiting ESL teacher attends the school some work could be done in ESL.

Assisting the ESL Pupil

classes or with the ESL teacher working in the classroom. A third possibility, and the most effective is that another pupil might act as a tutor to explain these types of utterances. In a classroom such as that researched in the earlier article it might be difficult to find someone who would be confident enough of his/her own abilities to be able to assist others. Nevertheless, some degree of assistance is of greater benefit than no assistance. This tutor would need to be capable and understanding of the needs of the ESL pupil, even if such understanding were not conscious. A combination of these three methods would go some way towards minimizing the difficulty.

The difficulty introduced by the use of 'should' in the example above in conjunction with the passive is that its function is to introduce some hint of a penalty if the work is not carried out within the set parameters. Possible solutions would be not to use 'should' at all, but to use 'have to' or 'must'. For example, 'You must finish the work by Friday' and 'You have to write it in your exercise book'. This solution removes the problem of the subtle overtones associated with 'should'. The function of 'have to' and 'must' are covered in the early stages of ESL courses and it is reasonable to expect that the ESL pupil will have some familiarity with the construction. However, it would be beneficial at some time to explain the use of 'should' and its function in the school environment. A method of explaining this would be to relate it to a consequence -- 'You should hand your work in on Friday or it will not be assessed'. A number of examples would be necessary.

Administrative

In the earlier article an examination was made of the register of administrative language that was used in the classroom. Idiom and colloquial speech were quite common in this area of classroom language. Statements such as 'You're on next Monday' and 'I might be round to look at those during the course of the lesson' are examples.

The difficulty posed by colloquial language is one which could probably never be solved in the short term. One solution is for the teacher never to use that language. This is not a viable solution for a number of reasons. Firstly, colloquial language is deeply fused into the language framework of the native speaker. To attempt to remove it would prevent spontaneous language flow and would require a continual self-monitoring which would not be possible for the average teacher in the informal speech context of the classroom. Other teachers in the school would have to undergo such a metamorphosis for this strategy to be success ful. In addition, such a metamorphosis would place the teacher in a completely different 'cultural group' which would be even more alien to that of the non-ESL pupils and would therefore make the 'conflict of cultures' even more pronounced. [Bernstein 1971:81].

A second solution would be to use the 'tutor' system mentioned previously. At any one time it would be wrong to expect every utterance to be clearly explained for the ESL pupil since a great deal of time and considerable skill on the part of the tutor would be required. Yet over time the ESL pupil would become more familiar with the colloquial speech patterns used in the
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classroom. Such familiarisation with colloquial speech is of great benefit to the ESL pupil both inside and outside the school environment.

If, in any one class, there is more than one pupil speaking the same first language, then it would be appropriate to place those students in pairs. Ideally the student who was more competent could assist the one who was less competent in English. The more competent pupil would be able to understand the specific difficulties of any one utterance and may be able to explain the utterance more easily for the less competent pupil. There is the possibility of confusion arising through misinterpretation in this solution; however, such confusion is to be expected and if the teacher is aware of the problems and the possibility of misinterpretation then it is likely that the problems and difficulties can be minimized. One problem which sometimes arises with this solution is that the less competent pupil can become dependent on the other's translation. The alternative solution is a considerate native speaker as tutor which solves this problem but creates another in that the ESL pupil may not be able to understand the discourse as easily.

Once again, teacher awareness is of paramount importance. If, for example, the action in the utterance 'I might be round to look at those during the course of the lesson' was effected, then it would be inappropriate for the teacher to impose a penalty as implied in the utterance if the ESL pupil had not completed the work in the required manner. The teacher's awareness of the problem is critical in this situation.

Content

In the earlier article two divisions within the area of content were made: oral language used in the teaching or assessing of the particular activity and the specific written language of the theme or topic.

The testing of spelling was one of the activities recorded. The structure of this type of activity can be made fairly routine. Unlike spontaneous language in the classroom sentences illustrating the meaning of the words can be kept simple. The pattern of testing can be made to be routine; for example, 'Spell the word “amateur”’, followed by a simple sentence using the word in context - 'An amateur athlete is not paid money for playing sport'. If the ESL pupil were informed of the requirements and structure of such tests early in the year, he/she would be more easily able to grasp the requirements of this particular situation.

The rationale for teaching spelling in the school is to help all pupils learn how to spell words and their meanings. Although a routine procedure would help the ESL pupil in the testing phase of this activity, it does not assist in the initial phase of teaching the words and their meanings. It would not necessarily be sufficient to explain orally the meaning of the word. One possible method is to draw up a sheet listing the words and their meanings in simple terms along with examples of sentences in which the words are used. This sheet could be photocopied and distributed to the whole class. The ESL pupil can then peruse the words and their meanings at home; a characteristic of Indo-Chinese pupils. [Beecham 1982:46].

Assisting the ESL Pupil

Although the exercise would require time on the part of an already-pressured classroom teacher, it could be done more easily if shared over the whole staff in the English faculty. The sheets could then be used with minor adjustments, year after year.

The English faculty or the library could buy a number of picture dictionaries for the ESL pupils or the ESL pupil could buy a dictionary if it were listed on the subject booklist and available from the school bookshop. The dictionary which was to be recommended at any year level would have to be chosen with care. A concise list of possible dictionaries has been compiled by Levin. [1981: 145, 136].

Another element of the content section discussed in the previous paper was the comments made by myself in the classroom in regard to oral talks. This discourse area was found to present the most formidable problems for the ESL pupil, as there is nothing written which s/he could peruse in his/her own time. The discussion - with attendant irrelevancies and tangential information - flowed backwards and forwards and the niceties of classroom behaviour were not observed. Linguistically, idiomatic and slang expressions were common, sentences were chopped short and non-verbal language and intonation changes modified the meanings of the utterances.

There is no ESL course which could adequately prepare the ESL pupil for this linguistic environment. Nor would it be possible, nor favourable, to attempt to solve this problem by changing the linguistic environment, for the reasons already mentioned in the section of this article on 'administration'.

The teacher once again needs to be aware of the problems this linguistic environment poses for the ESL pupil. The teacher needs to ensure that any relevant information regarding the structure of oral talks - time constraints, methods of assessment etc - is accessible to the ESL pupil. This information can be presented either on the blackboard or on an overhead transparency for the class to copy. The ESL pupil then has the opportunity to peruse the information in his/her own time. That s/he comprehended the requirements needs to be ascertained by the teacher, preferably on a one-to-one basis.

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A further matter for consideration is whether the ESL pupil is able to give any kind of oral talk at all. The general level of competence of the pupil has to be considered. An ex-ESL pupil of mine, now in year ten at a State High School, rang me up one night in a state of consternation because he had been asked to give a talk to the class. I advised him of a number of ways he could approach the problem. A few weeks later he told me that he had been given a
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mark of 7.5 out of 10. He was happy with this result. He had been in Australia for three years. One could expect that a pupil such as this would be able to talk on some subject, given assistance, for some period of time. The teacher once again needs to be aware that there are linguistic problems facing the pupil. Assessment could not be made on criteria such as the number of mistakes made by the ESL pupil.

Another strategy for assisting the pupil is the tutor system discussed earlier. Although it would be unreasonable to expect that this system would solve all problems in the short term, it would assist the ESL pupil to learn idiomatic English and provide some kind of support structure.

Another strategy is for the ESL pupil to write about the events which occurred in the classroom during the lesson. Such writing can be in the form of a diary, allowing the teacher to see at a glance the degree to which the lesson has been understood and any problems with language. More importantly, the ESL pupil has the opportunity to practise writing. One consideration for any extra writing activity is to ensure that the pupil is able to manage the task, given the extra load imposed on the pupil in his/her attempt to complete the normal tasks. Hence an oral report might be more appropriate. The teacher can then spend some time discussing the lesson with the pupil. In this way the teacher can ascertain the depth of understanding the pupil has and, if continued over time, the progress made by him/her, as well as giving practice in oral and aural English. This exercise need not be done after every lesson.

The written language of the content area presents fewer problems in the sense that the ESL pupil can refer to the text at any time. The response does not have to be immediate. Again, the teacher would need to be aware of the fact that the ESL pupil might need extra attention. The tutor system or working in small groups would be of assistance.

Notwithstanding the above, units of work such as the humorous poems of A. B. Patterson present serious problems for the ESL pupil, as pointed out in the earlier article. The language of the poems is the colloquial language of the day and even non-ESL pupils have comprehension difficulties. Terms used in the poems are often only to be found in dictionaries of Australian slang. The cultural and historical environment of the poem is even more alien for the ESL pupil than for the Australian-born pupil. This problem has been recognized by other writers. [For example Smith 1980:39, 45; 1981:7]

With this type of material it is doubtful whether the tutorial system alone is of any great benefit, given the limitations of the classroom participants as outlined in the earlier article. The other possible solution is to avoid such problems altogether. The argument against this solution is that the purpose of the unit — to show that poetry is not something written only by English poets, that poetry does not have to be 'deep' and 'serious' and to explore some aspects of early Australian life — is valid and such units might be of value and interest to a majority of pupils.

A viable alternative is for the teacher to rewrite the poem in simplified English and distribute this material to all students before looking at the original. There is no doubt that this destroys to some extent the atmosphere of the original and some appreciation might be lost. However, it is better that the pupils have some understanding of the story, an understanding appears to precede appreciation. Rewriting creates extra work for the teacher, yet there are a ways to minimize the workload. The Subject Master might arrange for another class, with no ESL pupils in it, to do the unit initially and one of the exercises can be to paraphrase the poem. The best could be edited and used for other classes at a later date. The paraphrased version could be handed out and worked through before the original poem is presented. Although such a simplified version does not solve all the problems for the ESL pupil, once again they would be minimized and would enable him/her to function more effectively with this particular subject content.

Another strategy which is appropriate in the study of poetry is to use group discussions. [Gregory 1981: 29-37]. Each group can be asked to work out the meaning of the language in one verse. The assumption here is that the ESL pupil has had some experience in working in groups. The advantage of this method is that the ESL pupil has a greater opportunity to observe the speech of other class members at close range and can follow the conversation more easily. His/her comments are not as public as they would be if made in front of the whole class. An additional positive factor is that there is interaction between the ESL pupil and other class members which tends to bond class members together, after some initial hesitation. In conjunction with the tutor system a certain degree of success can be achieved with this method. On the other hand it should be noted that many ESL pupils have had little experience with group work in their earlier education and may find the system somewhat perplexing and might initially consider it to be uneducational. Recently arrived Indo-Chinese pupils often fall into this category. Such pupils need to be gradually introduced to this classroom activity. The methods described for the work with poetry can also be used in other areas of English such as the study of novels.

The second written unit was on the theme of advertising. The earlier article analysed the two linguistic elements of this unit; oral expressions used in the teaching of the unit and the written content of the unit.

The analysis of oral expressions showed a preponderance of questions. While questioning in the classroom may have been unknown in the ESL pupil's country of birth, it is an integral part of education in Australia. ESL courses introduce the pupil to question forms in the earliest stages and so the notion of questioning may not be alien. However, the questions themselves may be difficult to interpret. The tutor system can help markedly. The teacher can frame the question in different forms; teacher awareness is critical.

The written text of the advertising unit was linguistically complex. One solution to this would be to write out the unit in simple language. However, much of the unit was taken from different texts and to rewrite it would require a considerable amount of time. In addition, the other students in the class would be disadvantaged by having material presented to them in simple language when such simple language may not adequately convey the concepts.
Errol Vieth

Assisting the ESL Pupil

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mark of 7.5 out of 10. He was happy with this result. He had been in Australia
for three years. One could expect that a pupil such as this would be able to talk
on some subject, given assistance, for some period of time. The teacher once
again needs to be aware that there are linguistic problems facing the pupil.
Assessment could not be made on criteria such as the number of mistakes
made by the ESL pupil.

Another strategy for assisting the pupil is the tutor system discussed earlier.
Although it would be unreasonable to expect that this system would solve all
problems in the short term, it would assist the ESL pupil to learn idiomatic
English and perhaps some kind of support structure.

Another strategy is for the ESL pupil to write about the events which
occurred in the classroom during the lesson. Such writing can be in the form of
a diary, allowing the teacher to see at a glance the degree to which the lesson
has been understood and any problems with language. More importantly, the
ESL pupil has the opportunity to practise writing. One consideration for any
extra writing activity is to ensure that the pupil is able to manage the task,
given the extra load imposed on the pupil in his/her attempt to complete the
normal tasks. Hence an oral report might be more appropriate. The teacher
can then spend some time discussing the lesson with the pupil. In this way the
teacher can ascertain the depth of understanding the pupil has and, if
continued over time, the progress made by him/her, as well as giving practice
in oral and aural English. This exercise need not be done after every lesson.

The written language of the content area presents fewer problems in the
sense that the ESL pupil can refer to the text at any time. The response does
not have to be immediate. Again, the teacher would need to be aware of the
fact that the ESL pupil might need extra attention. The tutor system or
working in small groups would be of assistance.

Notwithstanding the above, units of work such as the humorous poems of
A B Patterson present serious problems for the ESL pupil, as pointed out in the
earlier article. The language of the poems is the colloquial language of the
day and even non-ESL pupils have comprehension difficulties. Terms used in
the poems are often only to be found in dictionaries of Australian slang. The
cultural and historical environment of the poem is even more alien for the ESL
pupil than for the Australian-born pupil. This problem has been recognized by
other writers. [for example Smith 1980:39; 45; 1981:7]

With this type of material it is doubtful whether the tutorial system alone is
of any great benefit, given the limitations of the classroom participants as
outlined in the earlier article. The other possible solution is to avoid such
problems altogether. The argument against this solution is that the purpose of
the unit — to show that poetry is not something written only by English poets,
that poetry does not have to be 'deep' and 'serious' and to explore some aspects
of early Australian life — is valid and such units might be of value and interest
to a majority of pupils.

A viable alternative is for the teacher to rewrite the poem in simplified
English and distribute this material to all students before looking at the
Students in the class researched in the earlier article need as much exposure to language at all levels as is possible.

The difficulties can be minimized through those methods previously discussed; that is, the tutor system, using group methods to investigate the text and teacher awareness of the linguistic difficulties the pupils have.

Additional considerations

Some of the methods discussed in this article will have application outside the specific area of English classes; others are specific to topics in the English syllabus. The most important element in minimizing the problems for the ESL pupil is the awareness the teacher has of both the fact that the ESL pupil will have linguistic difficulty and the specific difficulties the ESL pupil has depending on his/her linguistic competence. The teacher's awareness is also critical in minimizing the emotional and cultural difficulties the ESL pupil may have.

In the classroom under discussion it was found that some ESL pupils seemed to suffer some form of 'classroom culture' shock when exposed to this particular classroom environment. The methods used in this article can be used with effect to enable the pupil to pass through this period of shock. The teacher needs to have the awareness that everything will probably be strange for the pupil and that some degree of alienation will be experienced. However, it is a problem that will be overcome with time and a degree of understanding. Racism expressed in the classroom by teachers or pupils has negative effects. A positive attitude towards the ESL pupil, and towards his/her culture, from class members is important. [Garton 1980:255] The ESL pupil should be allowed to become a member of the group. For this to occur the philosophy of the classroom needs to include cultural pluralism.

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