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Motivating Unmotivated Adult English Language Learners in an Advanced Reading-Writing Course

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Abstract

Adult English learners in advanced ESL courses often lose their motivation to deepen their language skills once a functional level of fluency has been achieved. Applying a holistic, dynamic, literature-based curriculum based on the principles of experiential learning to enhance the skills of these students has been a proven success strategy in the design of City University of Seattle's (CityU) Advanced Communications I: Intro to Composition and Literature Course. The proven practices behind this course design can substantially motivate the advanced second language

student toward deeper fluency and academic success while remedying the factors that cause second-language error fossilization.

Overview

English as a second language (ESL) instructors experience a discrepancy in classroom learning environments between low-intermediate-level adult learners and advanced-level adult learners. While there is engagement in class activities, an eagerness to find and correct errors, and a joy in discovering new vocabulary in lower-level students, advanced students often exhibit bad attitudes, bemoaning even minimal amounts of homework and exhibiting marked ambivalence toward self-editing habitual mistakes—mistakes that can be easily resolved by students when prompted. These advanced second-language students can be hard to engage if they are grouped with peers who also display this behavior. In advanced ESL courses, the classroom dynamic can become oppressive, with little student engagement in course content or group activities. The reasons behind this lack of motivation are complex, but two factors in particular contribute simultaneously to a marked malaise toward even the highest-quality educational experience: adequate fluency for daily life in an English immersion environment and a loss of motivation that leads to error fossilization.

These factors are not separate issues. They are woven together by students' conflicting life experiences, inside and outside the classroom. As international students study abroad and gain higher functional fluency, their individual quirks of language (grammar, pronunciation, word choice errors) can become masked in English-speaking environments. In large, international cities where native English speakers are used to hearing international students' accents, or on campuses where international students from the same country communicate only with each other (avoiding native English-speaking peers), using similar broken English and similar accents, international students may not realize that their language progress has stagnated. This creates an illusion of high functional fluency in the mind of an international student, who believes that if his or her English is sufficient for Starbucks orders, apartment rentals, and the Department of Licensing, then he or she must be speaking articulately and no longer needs to monitor his or her mistakes. To add to this

illusion, native English speakers—such as classmates, waiters, or bank tellers—may feel it is rude to provide corrections, instead attempting to bridge communication gaps in whatever polite way possible. Repeated mistakes do not hamper daily communication, so these functionally fluent second-language (L2) adult students lose vigilance toward catching and correcting errors.

A marked loss of motivation occurs when this functional fluency is challenged by instructors in academic settings. Without fellow international students to communicate exclusively with, or when forced to partner in projects with native English speakers, L2 adults' faith in their language skills inside of class plummets. This challenge becomes amplified whenever the adult L2 student is in a university or community college setting where he or she is competing academically with native speakers who seem to complete assignments and hear details in lectures effortlessly. This failure of academic language fluency also happens in advanced ESL classes. Some teachers criticize simple mistakes and language usage failures, which can result in L2 students' damaged confidence and vexation. Loss of self-confidence inhibits motivation; the student feels so inadequate in the classroom that he or she wants to give up because it is too Herculean a task to improve (Qian & Xiao, 2010). Academic demands in English are more challenging than the demands of life outside campus, so the advanced L2 student feels like a learning barrier has been created in the classroom. This L2 student's perception of plateauing and never reaching higher fluency, combined with sufficient fluency outside of class, leads to a decline in motivation.

Academic depression alongside arbitrary language errors is known as fossilization, and may become a serious barrier toward academic language fluency. Although some research suggests that fossilization is permanent, other research shows that stagnation of learning and weakened confidence can be reversed by applying a dynamic, literature-based curriculum centered around experiential learning theory. Experiential learning stimulates L2 students, immersing them in the culture of the language they are learning and offering them a holistic learning approach, while broadening and refining their fluency through effective instructor and peer feedback. Utilizing curriculum that propels advanced English learners through experiential learning is a proven strategy in the design of City University of Seattle's Advanced Communications I: Intro to Composition and Literature Course.

Review of the Literature

Experiential learning theory (ELT) is a collaboration of works by John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, and Carl Rogers. These scholars devised six propositions that make up ELT: (1) learning should be measured as a process rather than measured in outcomes, (2) learning is characterized by relearning, (3) being able to learn is to resolve all conflict with what blocks you from adapting to the world, (4) learning is holistic and about adaptation to the world, (5) synergy in transactions between a person and his environment will result in learning, and (6) learning is defined as creating knowledge (Mohammadzadeh, 2012, p. 124). ELT is highly motivating for students; as they fully interact with the course materials, the knowledge gained from those materials ceases to be an abstraction in a textbook, and instead becomes a tool to overcome challenges inside and outside the classroom.

In coursework designed with ELT, each student participates in the process of active, individual learning. Individual learning focused on gaining skills in advanced English means students are trained to see language learning as a process—one in which mistakes are inevitable. The objective “is to make better and more sophisticated mistakes” as L2 students progress in the language; reframing mistakes as “taking risks” means embracing their learning process as a positive and natural flow toward a goal (Schwarzer, 2009, p. 29). Seeing mistakes as part of the learning process rather than as threats to success helps L2 learners prevent recoil inside and outside the classroom, even when tasks are daunting and unfamiliar, such as reading a full-length novel in the acquired language. City University of Seattle’s Advanced Communications I is designed around ELT. The course uses a historical fiction novel, Jamie Ford’s *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, as the text at the centerpiece of other authentic materials.

Using historical fiction in language classrooms is a proven technique to engage students. Well-chosen narratives bring emotion and vibrancy to history that can appear abstract and dry in textbooks. Historical fiction’s narrative power allows readers to share a character’s perspective and kindles the desire to share their own perspectives on presented themes. High engagement with a text improves reading comprehension; when students read historical fiction, they see history through the perspective of the characters, and this process represents deep comprehension (McTigue, Thornton, & Wiese, 2013). For many L2 students, enrollment in

CityU’s Advanced Communications I will mean being asked for the first time to read an unabridged novel in a second language. Students are also expected to respond to each chapter through a daily writing journal, answering reflection and comprehension questions. These responses, alongside academic writing/research tasks and professionally guided historical tours of Seattle—all of which are based on the historical and thematic contexts in the novel—create a balanced course that integrates and invigorates all language skills (reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, listening, and speaking).

Integration into the Student Experience: Holistic Exposure to the Text Creates Relevance, Critical Thinking, and Global Perspectives

Some of the specific factors that contribute to the reading motivation of L2 students are curiosity, a desire to be challenged, a need to share learning experiences with peers, and consistent achievement of satisfactory scores on tasks. Of these, being curious about a topic and then being challenged to explore it through a variety of experiential learning techniques especially generates the desire to learn. It is therefore important to choose materials that are engaging and relevant. To prevent resistance to extensive reading, it is necessary to assign interesting reading topics and activities that support collaboration among peers (Komiya, 2013).

When Advanced Communications I students begin to read Ford’s novel, even the most reluctant, disengaged learners find themselves immersed in the characters’ lives. The novel has several vital features—authenticity, reliability, and a regional setting—that increase students’ desire to become involved in the story. Because the novel is well researched and accurate, its historical world appears vibrant and alive. The characters in the novel live between two worlds; living up to the cultural views and expectations that each character inherited from their immigrant parents and grandparents, and struggling to assimilate as American children coming of age in the World War II era. In both situations, the characters face racial prejudices and hardships that make them question their identities. These challenges mirror those that L2 students themselves face while studying abroad, and the ideas presented by the text are applicable to international students’ political and social media environments. Accessibility of the text connects

students to the new culture in which they live and to the second language they use in ways more enthralling than reading a textbook. Finally, because the novel is set locally, students can visit the locations they read about such as Jackson Street, Maynard Alley, Kobe Park Terrace, and the Panama Hotel Cafe; this transports them physically into the text's setting and compels them to think critically about history. Finally, supplemental media and a professional, guided historical tour of Seattle's Chinatown/International District makes gained knowledge more memorable than simply reading alone. The classroom experience is created by the students processing their emotions regarding topics broached by the novel. "By reflecting on the experience and incorporating the experience into their existing schema, the individual gains and grows" (Tyler & Guth, 1999, p. 157). Choosing the right materials is therefore the first step in applying the principles of experiential learning to any curriculum.

Immersion in advanced English language curriculum through historical fiction narrative and visits to the real-world locations in that narrative are highly engaging. But in ELT, this is only part of the learning process. The next steps are overcoming obstacles in learning, adapting holistically to learning material, and then sharing this process with others to gain recognition and internalize accumulated knowledge. Responding to the curriculum through writing and discussion with peers helps students to overcome personal obstacles and think globally. That is why reflective journaling adds holistic dimension for adult L2 learners: by writing answers to reflection questions every day—questions following reading, media viewing, or a field trip—students discover that the themes presented by the text are not abstract, but deeply personal and relevant to their lives.

Reflection on learning material provides "a mechanism for understanding how their experiences have contributed to who they are, for managing positive and negative forces in their lives, and for reconstructing their images through language" (Zacharakis, Steichen, de Sabates, & Glass, 2011, p. 85). This provides adult L2 learners a unique opportunity to reframe their life in a second language, which gives them "a perception of personal power and motivation" that has a strong impact (Zacharakis et al., 2011, p. 93). This perception of empowerment is crucial; adult L2 learners who believe their English studies are beneficial to life outside the classroom invest more effort and "approach their out-of-class lives as a language learning laboratory" (Schwarzer, 2009, p. 27). When L2 students do not believe they can overcome challenges, they will not find meaning in what they learn

and their motivation atrophies. But when they internalize learning, their self-image increases, promoting motivation and proficiency in language development (Kim, 2013).

Once students have begun to process their reading experiences, sharing those experiences with peers builds synergy between what is being learned and how it is communicated. Sharing the insight gained from reading, wanting to show excellence, and achieving recognition from peers and instructors for this insight has been found to be the second most motivational factor in stimulating adult L2 learners to read extensively (Komiya, 2013). Class discussions are believed to be more authentic to adult learners when there is demonstrated active listening and participation (McDougall, 2015, p. 102). Active listening and sharing increases the ability of adult L2 students to develop understanding of multiple perspectives and to engage in critical thinking. When there is authenticity in the course materials, it generates a positive effect on adult learners; they become autonomous and self-directed and feel the prior life experience they bring to coursework is valued. They "become ready to learn when life circumstances lead them to this point, and they need to see that knowledge and skills have immediate application and relevance to a real-life context" (McDougall, 2015, p. 96). Shared experience with others regarding gained knowledge and deepened skills has been seen "as a key factor in promoting peer relations and group development in the classroom" (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998, p. 217).

Strategies for Application of Historical Fiction to Curriculum

Seattle is fortunate that author Jamie Ford set *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* in the International District/Chinatown neighborhood, and that this neighborhood's community, led by the Wing Luke Museum and the Panama Hotel, is dedicated to preserving the area's history and providing any reader of Ford's novel with an authentic experience. Of course, not every city can boast a local, engaging historical fiction novel supported by historical tours and museums. However, this does not mean accessible and authentic historical fiction cannot be used in other cities and towns. It is possible to find any number of writers across the United States and abroad who are publishing quality historical fiction. Creativity

and research may be necessary for instructors who want to include experiential learning theory in their courses, but it is a worthwhile investment toward the motivation of adult L2 students. This curriculum is also adaptable to other classrooms and students outside the scope of ESL. Using historical fiction and applying ELT to supplementary learning activities is a proven practice that also applies to history, literature, culture, and media studies courses. The motivation gained through ELT and the comprehension heightened by historical fiction narratives have been demonstrated in more traditional educational settings.

It is also necessary to specifically address how ELT can slow the process of one of the most common obstacles adult L2 students face: fossilization. Fossilization is defined as an “absence of progression toward the target in spite of conditions conducive to learning” (Han, 2013, p. 137). Adult English learners who reach advanced ESL courses—and even undergraduate or graduate college programs—will often suffer from fossilization of errors and loss of incentive to overcome mistakes and deepen their language acquisition. It has been suggested that this process occurs when students mistakenly believe they have already learned something presented by a text or instructor, and consequently avoid correction when mistakes are made (Nakuma, 1998). Through self-awareness and acknowledgment that learning is a process instead of a checklist, the principles behind ELT guide adult L2 students back toward an attitude of open-mindedness that can overcome the personal habits blocking fluency. Instead of a classroom of students who make individualized, lackadaisical, repetitive errors, a classroom where experiential learning has been applied can better address the complicated factors stagnating learning. A dynamic learning environment instills in L2 learners a habit of self-correction. This immersive experience with both the course materials and their peers helps students to bridge the gap between functional fluency and academic fluency. The stimulation found in the process of reinvigorating language learning through ELT halts language stagnation and slows and reverses fossilization.

Defining Motivation through Regular Communication and Feedback

Motivating students through ELT curriculum as a strategy to prevent malaise, increase growth, and slow the process of fossilization is a worthy

endeavor. Nevertheless, attention must be paid to what ways students are motivated, rather than only focusing on how motivated they are (Komiyama, 2013). To find out what actually motivates students requires both open and frequent dialogue. It’s imperative to communicate with each student at the beginning of a course to target four key areas: (1) which specific areas in language that learners hope to improve, (2) what they feel blocks them or challenges them, (3) what they are expecting the instructor to do for them, and (4) what areas of learning they expect to be responsible for themselves. To address these areas and get feedback from students, surveys can be created, and class discussions or message board postings during the first few days of class.

But to be an effective tool, getting feedback and applying it once is not enough. In the middle of the course, students should be offered a summary of what specific tools and skills the instructor has presented so far, and ask students to reflect on this and rate the progress they have made. This is also a great time to ask students if there are any obstacles they need additional help or review for overcoming. Finally, at the end of the course, open a final opportunity for discussion and reflection. Ask students to reflect on the four areas they shared during the first week and compare how they feel about these areas now: be sure to address each student’s goals, challenges, expectations, and accountability when giving final instructor feedback. This process of ongoing and open dialogue is indispensable for both the instructor and the student, as it keeps communication open and addresses unmet needs. It also provides the framework for quality feedback between the student and instructor, which can be more positive, personal, and meaningful than the survey-style tools used by most universities at the end of a course.

Conclusion

City University of Seattle’s Advanced Communications I: Intro to Composition and Literature Course is supported by the theory of experiential learning and coincides with using authentic source materials and historical fiction to increase student motivation. Historical fiction, supplemental media, museum visits, guided tours, journal writing, and research opportunities reinforce concepts, allowing students to learn and relearn as they identify and overcome challenges. Through this, students yield

valuable global perspectives and broaden critical thinking. They are also able to break through and overcome fears of risk taking and injured self-confidence, which are factors that erode motivation and create fossilization errors. Employing experiential learning in the ESL classroom is a both a holistic and personal approach that develops language skills and overcomes many learning plateaus.

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Christine Knorr is the Academic Director for the English Language programs. As a binational and native speaker of French and English, Ms. Knorr was exposed to both US and French culture and has a deep appreciation for both. For over twenty years, Christine has taught both French and English to a broad range of students: business professionals, refugees and immigrants, international students, and children. Christine has developed curriculum and has managed and directed several language schools: American Cultural Exchange, French-American School of Puget Sound, and more recently, the School of Management's English Language programs at City University of Seattle.