Beautiful Idea:

COBI Proposal to Develop ESL Students’ Speaking and Listening Proficiency

Co-Developers:

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Project Description:

It has long been recognized by language instructors that oral language provides the foundation for the development of literacy (Krashen, 1982). Unfortunately for most Hostos ESL students, the development of oral language proficiency is a particularly difficult objective to achieve on the road to English literacy. The ESL curriculum is driven by the ACT reading and writing tests, which are the ultimate measure of the curriculum’s success, as well as the students’ and their teachers’ success. Teachers teach to the test. Thus, oral language skill development tends to receive insufficient attention in the ESL curriculum. The problem is compounded by the fact that the Hostos ESL students generally have little opportunity to develop their English speaking and listening skills outside of class, unless they happen to work in an English dominant environment; and, of course, even when they do, this environment only provides limited opportunity for the development of the academic oral skills needed for college success. Finally, while oral skill proficiency is not an explicit requirement of success in the college program, speaking and understanding English is a critical ingredient of success in the English dominant work world.

The goals of this COBI project would be,

1) To develop students’ ability to speak critically about literary texts and texts related to academic disciplines. This would enable students to become familiar with discipline-specific vocabulary and methodology and would, in general, nurture critical thinking. Literary discussion circles could be organized in ESL classes and offered at predetermined hours each week convenient to the students. Initially the focus of these discussion circles would be the readings of the Book of the Semester Project and would be guided by the discussion questions that are generated by Professor Cohen for that project and handed out in ESL classes each semester. Additional discussions of readings would focus on academic-discipline-related articles selected by the project along with discussion questions, or by readings selected by individual instructors. Groups might be conducted by upper level work study students, or writing lab tutors, if feasible. Otherwise, students could rotate responsibility for their group’s discussion, using project-provided written discussion questions and instructors’ guidance.

2) And to provide students practice in hearing, distinguishing and pronouncing troublesome phonemes, consonant clusters, and grammatical suffixes (citation). Inability to hear and pronounce these sounds accurately prevents students from accurately writing and speaking them. This deficiency hinders student progress in the ESL sequence and is particularly detrimental to the students’ performance on the ACT writing test. Less demonstrable, at present, but certainly no less costly, is the effect that poor English pronunciation has on students’ prospects for success in the English dominant work world.

Some elementary work in pronunciation has already begun in our ESL classes with students receiving a cd with an instructor reading academically oriented texts, printed copies of which students have in hand as they listen to the cd. After hearing the instructor on the cd read the passage, the student then reads the passage trying to model his/her reading on the cd. The student then plays the cd again, listening and reading, while comparing the cd pronunciation with his/her own. Then the student reads the text again, trying to model his/her reading with that of the cd reader. While this is a fairly basic pronunciation-improving technique, intermediate and advanced ESL students have enthusiastically embraced it on a voluntary, extra-curricular basis, which reflects their recognition of their need to improve their English pronunciation. Several commercial ESL speech and pronunciation programs currently exist (citation). Ideally we would like to find one which enables students to record and listen to their own pronunciation of a passage as they compare it to the model passage provide by the instructor.

Our most immediate expected outcome of this project would be that students who received this instruction would experience a greater improvement in English speaking ability than a comparable group of students who didn’t. This would be initially measured by pre and post testing of speaking ability administered to both groups at the beginning and end of each semester. A number of such tests have been developed, and one of our most immediate tasks would be to examine the literature on these tests and choose one that would be most appropriate for use with our students.
Another, but certainly no less important, expected outcome would be that the test group students would progress through their ESL writing courses more rapidly, with higher grades, with higher levels of college retention and pass the ACT writing test with greater frequency than their non-participating counterparts. This would be measured by tracking performance of test group and control group students along these parameters over a period of perhaps 3 to 4 semesters.

It would also be useful to assess students' self-evaluation of their English speaking ability before they receive the project instruction and at the end of their semester and compare it with the pre and post self-evaluation of the control group students. Such self evaluation measures are readily available.

We would expect that greater proficiency speaking English would result in greater success in the work world, although this longer term goal would be logistically more difficult to measure.

There is an abundance of literature on second language acquisition that recognizes the importance of developing oral language skills as a foundation for second language literacy (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001). The role of the school in promoting oral English skills among ESL learners and developing proficiency in the use of academic language has been examined extensively (Bartolome, 1998; Delpit; Gutierrez, 1995; Reyes, 1992). The effectiveness of the literature circle in developing oral skills has also been well-documented (Ruby, 2003; Heyden, 2003).

We would hope to begin work on the COBI project reviewing the literature which critically examines the strategies for developing oral proficiency and examining the materials that have proven useful in this work. We would then identify the classes and instructors who wished to participate in the project and matched classes of non-participants who would serve as study controls. We would organize the tutorial personnel who would participate in the literature groups and produce the instructional materials and evaluative tools to be used in the project. We would work with the office of instructional research to assess the impact of the project on student performance and retention in the college. Finally, if the project appears to be successful, we would seek external funding to examine its effectiveness more thoroughly and to integrate this instruction into the ESL program of the college on a permanent basis.

References:


