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A Survey and Critique of the Methodologies and Techniques Used in Abilene Christian
University's English as a Secondary Language Classrooms

An Honors College Project Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Language and Literature

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

Honors Scholar

by

Hannah Elizabeth Bowling

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This Project Thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee,
has been accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the distinction
HONORS SCHOLAR

Dr. Jason Morris, Dean of the Honors College

Date

Advisory Committee

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Abstract

There already currently exists a curriculum for the ESL program at ACU. However, some have questioned how effective that curriculum is at preparing the ESL students for undergraduate coursework. In my paper, I offer a basic description of the methodologies undergirding the curriculum currently in use, an explanation of why these methodologies are used, and a critique of how effective they are. Additionally, I will make suggestions on how to better adapt the curriculum in order to more fully address the needs of the students' as currently expressed in the classroom. The majority of my research is based on my primary research. This comes through my first-hand experiences with the curriculum, having graduated from the TESOL program and taught as a TA for the past year.

Abilene Christian University is a university that prides itself on its diversity. With a population of over five thousand students from all across the US and sixty different nations, ACU serves a variety of students with a broad set of academic needs (“English”). One of those academic needs is for a program that equips nonnative English speaking students for undergraduate courses. This is where the Institute for Intensive English (IIE) steps in to serve ACU students. The IIE provides semester-long courses in low-intermediate, high-intermediate, and advanced English studies, which incorporate listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills specifically designed for an English for Academic Purposes ESL program. These courses are offered to nonnative English speaking students who meet the requirements for the levels according to their scores on a variety of ACU-accepted English language proficiency exams. There are many different theories and methodologies that the teachers in the IIE have available for them to use in the courses for English as a Second Language (ESL).

These different methodologies include grammar translation and audiolingualism. The methodology adopted by Pam Sullivan, ACU’s current IIE Coordinator, and employed in classrooms is known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), under which Natural Approach (NA) methods fall. However, after the eight weeks I have spent working with the curriculum, I am convinced of the need for growth in socio-cultural aspects of language teaching, such as areas relating to teacher-student power dynamics and its reflection in curriculum, activities, and interactions. The primary purpose of Emergent Participatory Teaching (EPT) practices is to aid students in developing effective metacognitive strategies, in turn helping them become independent language

learners. In doing so, it also addresses power dynamics in the classroom, seeking to create a more balanced power structure between students and teachers. While the IIE's use of CLT and NA has created an environment that equips ESL students for undergraduate coursework, an increased implementation of EPT best practices will help more effectively aid students in their transition from ESL classes to general requirement courses and for-majors courses.

Grammar translation and audiolingualism are two different methodologies in competition with CLT in ESL classrooms globally. Grammar translation, often referred to as "the Prussian method," was a popular form of foreign language learning (FLL) from the "mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century" in American and European classrooms (Richard-Amato 23). It is still considered a popular and effective way to teach ESL in many countries. Teachers primarily focus on developing students capable of reading and writing in the target language; little attention is given to listening and speaking skills in the target language, and the target language is rarely communicated orally by the teacher to the students (23) or by the students in practical interaction.

Audiolingualism, popular in America and Europe in the 1940s onward, was "developed to replace or enhance" grammar-translation in the classroom (23). In a reversal of grammar-translation, listening and speaking skills "took precedence" over reading and writing skills; however, grammatical structures and dialogue scripts were memorized, vocabulary was limited to scripted interactions, and creative language was not fostered (24). Neither methodology, however, creates healthy environments where all four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) are all fostered. It is for

this reason that CLT and the NA was chosen as the methodology under which ESL classrooms at ACU would function.

CLT was a movement that began in the 1970s in Europe that quickly spread to America (33). A CLT classroom, otherwise known as a communicative classroom, model has four basic communicative competencies: “sociocultural, strategic, discourse, and grammatical” (33). Sociocultural competence places emphasis on the social rules and context of both the language and the speakers. Strategic competence stresses the need for coping mechanisms for language learners and their imperfect knowledge. Discourse competence focuses on the messages and themes present throughout speech and writing; it is dependent on “coherence and structural links” (33). Finally, grammatical competence concerns itself with basic sentence-level constructions, relying on the “recognition and use of the semantic, syntactic, morphological, and phonological features of the new language” (33). Students are perceived as having achieved competency in the target language when they can use the appropriate rules in the appropriate context.

Extensions of CLT methodologies began to emerge as early as the beginning of the 1980s. Tracy Terrell and Stephen Krashen first began to develop the NA in “the early 1980s” based on the presupposition that “students acquire the second language” similarly to how “people acquire language in natural situations” (226). NA methodology is based on four basic principles: “comprehension precedes production,” “production emerges in variable stages,” “the course syllabus focuses on communicative goals,” and “the activities are designed to lower the ‘affective filter’” (226-7). First, comprehension precedes production. This presumes that the process by which students learn the target

language mimics the process used to learn their native language. Students engage in a nonverbal or “silent” period while teachers provide interactive activities and a variety of other techniques to provide comprehensible input for the students. Second, speech production emerges in variable stages. Students begin by using nonverbal cues and basic verbalization until they are able to engage in discourse in the second language. An important aspect of this stage is that speech errors are “usually not corrected directly” but instead “recast or reformulated” (226). Third, the course syllabus focuses on communicative goals. Learning units are formatted not around grammar principles but instead by “topical/situation organization,” with grammar being “acquired mainly through the relevant communication” (226-227). Lastly, the activities are designed to lower the “affective filter.” The affective filter includes anxieties, fears, and motivators of students that either aid or hinder their language learning experience. Activities within the NA rely on a lowered affective filter, where students feel less anxiety and are more motivated, both extrinsically and intrinsically, to participate in activities that aid in acquiring the target language.

There are many positive implications of using NA methodology in the classroom. Teaching occurs in the target language, creating great exposure to a wide range of vocabulary. Additionally, classrooms that employ the NA generally create safe spaces for students to practice speaking in the target language, which helps lower any student’s affective filter that might be heightened by speaking anxiety. Students often communicate that foreign language learning is an enjoyable experience when done in a NA

methodology-based classroom because they do not feel as frustrated or overwhelmed as when learning under more grammar-based structures.

However, there are also negative implications of using NA methodology in the classroom. The NA can prove demanding on educators because of the time and energy required to create lesson plans, interact with students, and engage in activities within the classroom. It also requires a vast number of activities to reinforce the concepts learned in the classroom. Additionally, grammar structures and errors are often ignored in favor of reinforcing oral communication skills, and literacy skills are severely limited at lower levels of language learning. Despite these negative implications of NA methodology, its focus on the affective filter of students and dedication to curating all four language skills makes it a suitable fit for the ACU ESL classrooms.

Curriculum used within the ESL classrooms at ACU is chosen through the lens of NA methodology. This means that the textbooks, activities, homework, and discourse within the classroom either use one or a combination of the NA principles listed above. However, within this framework, there is room for growth. My experiences of working with the curriculum this semester led me to conclude that an increase in EPT practices, in combination with the current NA methodology, would create a classroom environment that is more effective at preparing ESL students for undergraduate classes at ACU.

EPT methodology is foundationally built upon undermining the traditional teacher-student power structure within the classroom setting. The presupposition within educational settings that employ EPT techniques is that students have “knowledge to share” and that “language should be a mutually beneficial activity” for both students and

teachers (95). As Judie Haynes and Debbie Zacarian note in their book *Teaching English Language Learners across the Content Areas. Assoc. for Supervision and Curriculum Development*, unhealthy relationships can begin to form between English Language Learners (ELLs) and native speakers. ELLs are often treated as inferior students because of their incomplete understanding of the language, which is often translated by native speakers as a general lack of intelligence. This assumed superiority by native speakers can often be unintentionally reflected in the interactions between educators and their students. In order to create classrooms at ACU in which ESL students have agency and educators recognize the prior knowledge and general intelligence their students have, not in terms of the target language but in terms of their previous education, EPT practices need to be more intentionally employed.

Additionally, EPT methodology may function as a more compelling tool by which educators can foster intrinsic motivation within students. Sunny Man Chu Lau documents in her article “Reconceptualizing Critical Literacy Teaching in ESL Classrooms” how critical thinking skills applied to English literature allowed the ELLs to vocalize and communicate their experiences, particularly with bullying. This was made possible by dismantling the teaching of critical thinking skills into concepts that the students could easily learn and were discernibly applicable to their context, then building competency in these skills. By creating curriculum for students that addressed their immediate context (bullying over a lack of knowledge of English) and giving them a vocabulary by which to express that context, Lau was able to lower their affective filters and foster motivation to learn English. Students, regardless of their situational context, struggle with curriculum if

they perceive the curriculum as not applicable to their language needs or their individual lives. Thus, a focus in ACU classrooms on EPT methodology and its emphasis both on curriculum that fits students' individual needs and the creation of safe spaces to express those needs has the potential to build intrinsic motivation within students.

While advocating for more EPT practices to be incorporated in the IIE's current ESL curriculum, it is important to note, as Richard-Amato does in *Making It Happen*, that ideal participatory classrooms are "constantly emerging" (97). An EPT environment is not a static state that an ESL classroom can reach; each student's needs are constantly in flux. The dynamic status of the classroom necessitates that educators will never fully engage in participatory teaching practices, nor will equality ever be fully achieved between teachers and students. However, if educators begin to engage more seriously in EPT practices, students currently enrolled in the program might respond positively to the extrinsic motivation they are receiving by growing more intrinsically motivated.

It is also important to note that the ACU classrooms do utilize EPT practices currently. In the *Prism* textbook series, upon which the IIE curriculum is primarily based, EPT is encouraged through the use of Bloom's Taxonomy and the incorporation of topics critical for the academic disciplines required of students upon integration in ACU's undergraduate coursework. *Prism* even explicitly teaches metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategies to students so that students feel better equipped for independent English language learning. However, as aforementioned, EPT practices must be dynamic and adapt to the classroom setting and the students' needs.

A proper understanding of NA methods and EPT practices is essential to understanding the curriculum used in the ESL classrooms. It is also essential in understanding the curriculum provided to students within the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program. All of the curriculum provided to the students during their certification process is chosen based on the four basic principles of the NA and a basic understanding of EPT. After building a solid basis of curriculum to be used in a wide variety of classroom settings, students are then challenged to find their own curriculum to supplement the curriculum provided. At this point, students may choose to deviate from the NA methodology that the curriculum provided is based on.

As part of my honors thesis project, I compiled the curriculum currently used within the TESOL classrooms at ACU. This was achieved in primarily two stages: in the first stage, I took original copies of the curriculum handouts for the TESOL students and created copies for the current TESOL students. However, in order that the students more explicitly understand the theories and methods undergirding the curriculum, I spent hours researching in Richard-Amato's book *Making It Happen* and creating correlations between the text and the activity handouts. This research was the second stage of my work. After spending eight weeks working with the ESL/TESOL curriculum and teaching as a teaching assistant (TA) this current academic year, I have seen how effective the NA method is in the classroom. The NA methodology addresses the basic needs of the ELLs at ACU by equipping students with the four language skills. However, there exist gaps in the curriculum where students might feel that material is inaccessible, either due to a lack of understanding or perceived unrelatability. The TESOL program enables students to

identify gaps like this in the curriculum and supplement them by introducing them to methodologies like EPT. In the future, however, there should be more of a focus in the ESL classrooms of ACU on EPT practices in order to address ELLs' lack of motivation. This will correlate with a greater emphasis on EPT practices in the TESOL program and its curriculum, both primary and supplemental.

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Glossary of Abbreviations:

Abilene Christian University (ACU)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Emergent Participatory Teaching (EPT)

English Language Learners (ELLs)

English as a Second Language (ESL)

Foreign Language Learning (FLL)

Institute for Intensive English (IIE)

Natural Approach (NA)

Teaching Assistant (TA)