

It is likely that our own attitudes toward language learning as well as our past and present experiences with it affect the approaches we take with our international students. Take a moment to think about yourself as a language learner. (This is just for each individual; we will not share these). On a scale of 1-5, rate your responses:

(5) Agree strongly (4) Agree (3) Maybe (2) Disagree (1) Disagree strongly

A. ____ I think of learning a foreign language as a pleasurable and meaningful activity, even if I'm not currently engaged in such learning.

B. ____ I have found that learning a foreign language showed me new ways of thinking.

C. ____ I regularly read in another language, or I wish I did.

D. ____ I regularly write in another language, or I wish I did.

E. ____ There is no such thing as a true translation of a great work of literature.

F. ____ An individual may acquire a different personality when he or she is speaking another language.

G. ____ The next generations of native-born Canadians are likely to know more languages than past generations.

H. ____ Language requirements will eventually become part of many university programs of study, or they should, given the processes of globalization.

I. ____ I wouldn't be overly self-conscious about using a foreign language even if I knew I was making grammatical errors and my vocabulary could use improvement.

J. ____ If someone told me that the way I'd expressed an idea in a foreign language was quite understandable but was not idiomatic and was more a quirky-sounding translation from my native language, I would be eager to change the way I expressed that idea in the future.

K. ____ If people stop trying to learn a language methodically and logically, it's easier to learn.

L. ____ I have pretended to fully understand what someone was saying in a foreign language, even if I actually didn't or could get only part of the meaning.

Narrative #1: I've Never Written an Essay Before

Bruno is teaching a large section of a course called Contemporary Issues in Linguistics, which attracts many international students. Bruno knows this is partly because the course content interests them and partly because until this semester, there was no writing requirement. He is hoping to retain the interest of this group in taking his course even after word gets out that he now requires two five-page papers. The first assignment was to apply the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as well as some later theories of linguistic relativism to examples of science writing in the popular media. Bruno wants students to discover how the public perception of science is shaped by the consistent presentation of scientific discoveries in hyped-up, oversimplified analogic discourse such as, for example, the language of war—planning battle manoeuvres, psyching out the enemy, conquering territory, etc. He's become convinced that students will better develop their critical skills through having to write, and besides, his department chair has asked faculty to give attention to writing.

Violet is an international student who has been in Canada for less than one semester. She studies very hard and spent five solid days in her room writing the first paper for Bruno's course. She put a lot of thought into it, especially the theoretical part, which seemed central to her. To do this, she had to spend hours reading and rereading the theory and going over the lecture notes, looking up many unfamiliar words. The requirement to analyze newspaper articles seemed odd to her, but she did her best. When the TA returned her paper with a 66 and a note to go to the writing centre, she felt crushed and angry. The writing centre appointments were all booked, so she decided to go to Bruno's office hour to discuss her grade. Bruno has met with four other students that same day—some multilingual and some native speakers--all of whom were arguing for higher grades. So far, he has agreed with the grades the TA gave. However, when he reads over Violet's paper, he feels uncertain.

This student, unlike the others who came to argue, actually seems to have been listening to what he said in class. In addition to this, she has obviously thought a great deal about the lectures. It is true that, as the TA pointed out, the first three pages of her essay make no attempt to answer the question about science writing in popular media. However, she explores the various linguistic theories with subtlety and insight, synthesizing them and adding interesting remarks that, through questioning her, he discovers are truly her own. Violet appears to be wonderfully skilled at abstract reasoning. The last two pages, where she analyzes the media examples, contain some good insights but are a bit sketchy and lack the development of the earlier sections. Also, the entire paper is not written in anything approaching Standard English; Violet's wide vocabulary has led to spectacularly faulty diction, and the sentence elements are quite dramatically mixed--this is not a matter of merely correcting grammatical errors. Nevertheless, her intelligence and academic dedication come through. "I've never written an essay before," Violet explains to Bruno, as he wonders where to begin.

Narrative #2: What Do You Really Think of My Style?

Mark is a third-year student of art history. Nancy is a long-time writing centre instructor who has worked several times with Mark and is glad to see him on her schedule. Although he has been in Canada little more than two years, he clearly had an excellent education in his home country and his papers have always been a pleasure to read: clear, lively and insightful. He used to come to the writing centre mainly to go over his occasional grammatical errors, but even those have largely disappeared. Mark gets very high grades on his papers. However, he says that there is always more to learn, and he values the writing centre as a means of gaining different viewpoints on his work. He wants to continue with art history in graduate school and is serious about writing.

Today, he has brought a nearly finished draft of a paper he chose to write on the paintings of Charlotte Salomon, which have also always fascinated Nancy. She's impressed with Mark's analysis of the "graphic novel" elements of Salomon's work and the effect of the Expressionist-style representations of the characters' body language as an integral part of the narratives. The paper reads very well; although she's able to point out a few areas where Mark's ideas could be made more explicit or transitions could be clarified, she sees no need for extensive revision. Soon Nancy and Mark are having a discussion that occasionally touches on points in his paper but also wanders into Expressionism, pre-war Berlin, and the processes through which artists become recognized. Mark mentions that his father is an artist and tells Nancy about some of the struggles his father went through in getting Canadian professional organizations to recognize as a valid art form the work he does, which Mark describes as a type of miniature painting traditional in their home country. It seems important to Mark to tell part of his immigration story, and Nancy listens with interest.

Toward the end of the session, they return to the subject of Salomon and Mark's paper, and he asks if there's anything else Nancy would point out about the paper. "What do you really think of my writing style?" he asks. In truth, Nancy finds his writing style delightful but strange. It is correct and idiomatic, yet it has an indefinable foreignness and even a slight opacity that complement his subject matter. After he asks this question, though, she looks at the paper again and sees that almost every sentence would be written differently in a more standard academic English style. His observations are expressed with a subtlety that requires some effort from the reader; a sentence signifies one thing but also hints at another. The more she looks at the paper this way, the more she begins to see it the way someone less charmed by the style might see it.

Read and discuss the vignettes in groups of 3 or 4. Consider the following questions:

Narrative #1:

1. What action can Violet take to do better on papers (besides going to the writing centre)?
2. What modifications to his curriculum might help Bruno retain his regular contingent of international students (besides eliminating the paper requirement or grading “easier”)?

Narrative #2:

1. What activities might help Mark to become more confident about his writing style and to gain greater control over the impression he makes in writing?
2. What approach could Nancy take to give a precise, honest, but encouraging reply to Mark’s question?

Both narratives:

1. What kinds of knowledge about student learning would help us to address further some of the issues arising in these vignettes (or other, similar experiences you may have had)?

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Narratives of Diversity: A Multidimensional Approach to Teaching International Students

Opportunities and New Directions, University of Waterloo, May 6, 2009

Narratives of Diversity: A Multidimensional Approach to Teaching International Students

This interactive session will begin with a self-reflective, private questionnaire that focuses participants' attention on understanding their own attitudes toward language learning. Following this, participants will read a series of original narratives that portray the complexities of international students' attempts to cope with the multiplicity of demands in academic work. In small groups, participants will discuss these narratives, which raise the dilemmas of grading (Ferris, 2006); cultural differences between instructors and international students (Matsuda & Cox, 2004; Zamel, 2004); and the need to take a "multidimensional" approach to language learning so that students' curricular learning is deepened through co-curricular and extra-curricular activities (Khoo, 2007). The use of "fictional" narratives helps participants to gain insight into the need to transform current models of curricular learning and the importance of further research into teaching "discourses" (Chanock, 2004; Kutz, 2004). A brief overview of the new English Language Learning Project at the University of Toronto will conclude the session.

References

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To learn more about the ELL Project at the University of Toronto/Faculty of Arts and Science, and to see some of the materials I've developed for student use, please visit our website:

www.newcollege.utoronto.ca/ell or email me at ell.newcollege@utoronto.ca

"Notes on Teaching L2 students in the Writing Centre," by L. Freedman, is available through the link on the Writing at U of T faculty page: <http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/instructors.html#readings>

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