

## Barrier to Open Access in the Community College: The Effect of Unadapted Campus Written Material on Participation of Nonnative Speakers

- Recognizing the impact of the changing population on the community college campuses of our nation and the requirement for more attention to the special linguistic needs of nonnative speakers, the author proposes that campus-produced publications and written materials be adapted to encourage and facilitate equal access for all. The author further argues that recruitment, participation, and retention of nonnative speakers can be fostered through not only modified campus-produced materials, but also more explicit registration and support-service procedures. The focus is on adaptation of materials by trained staff in lieu of the provision of bilingual or multilingual materials. A list of recommendations is included.

The community college has publicly subscribed to a policy of open access for all students, an egalitarian approach that promises fair and impartial treatment to any student, regardless of his or her background. As the numbers of nontraditional and minority students increase, the college is even more aware of its commitment to equality. Yet, the open admissions policy it supports is undermined by assumptions that the institution makes about its students, assumptions that reflect a lack of familiarity with the unique characteristics and needs of nonnative speakers of English.

### The Problem

One of the most significant assumptions under which an academic institution operates is that its students meet an acceptable standard of English language proficiency (Graham, 1987). Just what that standard is has become increasingly controversial. Students must read at a minimal level to pass an English placement test allowing them to enter a California community college as credit students; but that level

is often inadequate to operate effectively on the campus and may not reflect familiarity with cultural norms. Furthermore, for nonnative speakers with low English proficiency and limited time in the U.S., prior high school completion may not truly change this situation.

Academic performance is not the only issue; mere survival in the process of registration and use of support services on the campus is the beginning point. A community college needs to become cognizant of the variety of demands upon students learning English as they seek to participate on campus. I am not alluding here to comprehension of textbooks and class notes. I am referring to comprehension of college-produced written information that assumes an audience capable of processing messages in the manner of the native speaker of English. Such an assumption is no longer valid, especially in California, where the student population increasingly includes large numbers of immigrants.

For nonnative students, the challenge of literacy is especially difficult. Confronted with written information intended for the native English speaker, they will be at a disadvantage until their English approaches native proficiency.

The point ... is that literacy is not so much the ability to decode words and read textual material as it is to process the information contained therein, derive meaning from it, and apply it to specific tasks that need doing in specific contexts. (Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1987)

Reading requires that information from written or printed language be related to knowledge the reader has in order to create meaning for the text (Eskey & Devine, 1990; Johnson, 1981). According to second language reading research, nonnative speakers of English tend to read like poor native English-speaking readers, unable to determine what is significant in the text or use contextual cues to get the main idea (Miller & Perkins, 1989). In addition, some ESL students entering college for the first time may also be poor readers in their own language. Thus, they can be hindered in two different ways in reading comprehension: They may have never developed good reading strategies in their native language, and they are trying to read in a second language that is semantically, syntactically, and textually different from their own. Having to read for both content and structure poses problems for students with less proficiency in English (Parish & Perkins, 1984).

Reading theory provides insight into some differences between first and second language reading, even though the theories have been developed for more extensive connected prose than that which is the focus of this paper. For example, Perkins (1988) found that both imperfect knowledge of the second language and poor first

language reading ability may cause reading difficulties for the unskilled limited English reader.

The interference of the first language also means that students learning English may struggle with word order, unfamiliar structures, and sound patterns (Mellor, 1988). Speed and orthographic sensitivity (the reader's knowledge of letter order in English) have been suggested as factors that influence reading comprehension (Haynes, 1983). In addition, familiarity with transition words is also crucial to comprehension, but often is not part of the reading background of beginning-level students. In fact, many nonnative students, like numerous native English speakers enrolled in basic skills classes, may lack the full range of reading skills and strategies that a college believes its students have. In the case of nonnative students, their refugee or economic status may result in several obstacles simultaneously: educational gaps of several years' duration coupled with language and cultural barriers.

I suggest that the task of reading college-produced information may present obstacles for nonnative students and that the college should communicate important messages through material written with nonnative speakers in mind. Such responsiveness to a real need could facilitate recruitment and retention of these students, their integration into the greater campus, and their readiness for education in general.

Some may claim that this need to make adjustments for the language minority student with low English proficiency demonstrates that some students are simply ill-equipped to handle college-level work and should not be recruited into a system where their chances of success are so slim. However, others disagree.

I am surprised that there are those who still maintain that the opportunity to learn should be limited to those who have demonstrated that they *can* learn ... The problem is how to determine if a student will make it or not. I have taught many students who should not be in a college setting if we considered background alone. Some of these left college after a few weeks, but others went on to earn a degree ... (Hardin, 1988)

As Hardin claims, underpreparedness does not equate with being incapable or ineducable, and, of course, for nonnatives underpreparedness is largely a product of cultural and language differences and does not reflect on their potential to learn.

Education of nonnative students should be part of the community college mission. First, any effort to lessen the barriers to educational access for the limited English-speaking population represents a major step toward the educational growth of the nation as a whole. Second, the community college offers all adults a fresh start in the further development of skills, such as reading, which may have eluded them

at other times and in other settings. Third, educational institutions must be in the forefront of the move to eliminate race and ethnicity as factors in the participation of students in higher education.

### **Factors Affecting Comprehension of Limited English Readers**

Among the range of reading strategies and skills that are needed, identification of main ideas is often top priority. Yet nonnative speakers are seriously inhibited in their ability to extract main points from text because of their lack of background knowledge. Thus, familiarity of content may be the pivotal issue in text comprehension by limited English speakers. Although leading ESL researchers acknowledge that rhetorical form is also a significant factor in ESL reading comprehension, they claim that "content is of primary importance" (Carrell, 1987).

Unfamiliar content, of course, also means that vocabulary presents substantial stumbling blocks for the limited English reader, and "major misinterpretation of text may be traceable to misinterpretation of one sentence" (Lebauer, 1985). Yet, vocabulary is one of the factors that can most easily be adjusted if written materials are adapted for nonnative speakers.

These considerations, together with the visual impact of how ideas are arranged on a page, the size of print used, spacing, and graphics may affect the comprehension and retention of students reading in a second language. "With the community college student, it is not a case of the student not paying attention, but rather in not knowing where to focus attention" (Biggins & Sainz, 1989). It is not surprising, then, that many of the reading tasks students must undertake on the college campus, whether in the initial admissions process or in something as casual as reading a flier or finding and checking out a library book, require a level of reading comprehension and cultural background for which many second language learners are, at least initially, ill-equipped. Somehow, even when we think we are reaching out, our message may fail to get through. Could it be that we need to consider alternatives?

### **Overly-Complex Messages**

Apparently, existing methods of information dissemination have questionable effectiveness. Campus literature such as publicity mailers, designed with language that may not be part of the students' world outside of school, may inhibit full participation in and access to college education for nonnative speakers. After exploring the needs of this special population, the Los Angeles Community College District's English as a Second Language Institute recommended that college and district publications be reviewed and evaluated "to insure their comprehensibility" (Los Angeles CCD, 1988). Interestingly, a

San Jose City College study found that about 20% of the respondents to its survey indicated that they "learned of the ESL program through the newspapers" which were in the native language (Gosak, 1988).

Nonnative students may find the following excerpts from community college schedules of classes, financial aid brochures, and parking information incomprehensible.

1. Students "cannot enroll in classes that conflict in time with WL classes" nor can they "enroll in another section of the same course for which they have WL status."

2. "Prerequisites: If the course has a prerequisite, it is your responsibility to ensure you have fulfilled the prerequisite."

3. "Awards range from \$100 for enrollment fee waivers (BOGGS) to thousands."

4. "Vehicles parked in violation of the parking code and regulations will be towed away or immobilized at owner's expense. There is no grace period."

Although it is unrealistic to expect the college to provide two versions of the class schedule, an effort could be made to condense the most frequently needed information and terms to the essentials, with key definitions and steps to registration included. Even more important, however, are explicit instructions on where and when to find counselors trained to assist nonnative speakers. Research has found students often underutilize counseling services. ESL students, in particular, need guidance to avoid enrolling in courses for which they are unprepared, more classes than they can handle, or, conversely, fewer classes than they can profit from.

Many ESL instructors often write adapted announcements for their multilingual classes when important information must be communicated clearly. I have had several experiences cooperating with staff in other departments on a community college campus rewording information for our language minority students who are using admissions, health, tutorial, counseling, child care, and language lab services. Most recently, I taught a workshop for ESL students enrolled in a Work Experience program. I chose to focus on safety information because many students worked in custodial and grounds maintenance jobs. As I had expected, they could not read the precautions commonly found on cleaning solutions they used on the campus.

Often the provision of simplified written instructions eliminates the need for bilingual staff to interpret the message. Recently, a staff member in a support service at a community college commented to me that getting information out in the most efficient, economical way was the first consideration. Yet, lamenting the complexity of forms in her department, she said, "We thought about moving the key information to the top of the page, under the name, but it would have been too expensive to reformat." What is the real cost if the

forms have to be read and filled out for students, rather than by them, and are never really understood?

### **Unadapted Information**

There are, moreover, other significant obstacles that further complicate reading for language minority students. In this age of technological progress, computer-generated communications to students about their registration or academic status also act as barriers to those unfamiliar with this type of message and format. Students receiving a communication in the mail from Admissions regarding a problem with their registration process will often not understand the implications or significance of the steps they must follow to rectify the problem. Part of their difficulty may be with the form of the letter received, but another important part is likely to be the language, which is often more sophisticated than necessary for the purposes of the message. Sometimes nothing more than an additional fee for parking or health services generates a letter with complex terminology, which nonnative students have trouble following perhaps because they have had no prior experience with this type of communication.

A familiar example of the nonresponse of language minority adults to institutional writing can be seen in the ways they often fail to act upon fliers sent home from their children's school, bringing them instead to the college ESL class for an explanation from the teacher. Recently, for example, I received a copy of a flier sent to parents of children needing to update their immunization records in order to remain legally in the local high school. The letter, written by health staff, used language that sounded officious and firm, but was difficult to understand. It referred to "provision of verification of adequate immunization," when a more effective wording would have been simply, "the school needs proof of your child's immunizations (shots)." When I suggested such a change to the nurse at the school who sends out the letters, she seemed relieved and pleased, yet said she could "always get Mrs. Gonzalez to call the families." That assumes, of course, that the families speak Spanish and are home for the call.

### **Inadequate Distribution of Information**

However, adaptation of written information is not enough. Information must be disseminated more widely and conspicuously. For example, a typical assumption regarding written information on campus is that students can find their way to various departments based on a few centralized signs. Quite the contrary seems to be the case. Native English-speaking students arrive on campus with background knowledge of how schools are set up in this society but still must ask

for directions and explanations before they can find buildings and offices they want. For nonnative speakers the task is more difficult. If verbal skills are weak, pronunciation or vocabulary inadequate, or comprehension insufficient to the task, these students are less likely to complete registration and follow through on referrals. Even native speakers often stop faculty to ask the location of key departments. Can't we do better with our signs? I am not referring so much here to rewording as simply to the provision of more information, more liberally distributed.

As common as these experiences are, educators and academic institutions professing to believe in encouraging participation of the underrepresented fail to learn from the examples of other institutional outreach efforts. Why not share our failures and successes and learn from each other in our common struggle to communicate with those not yet proficient in our language? Sometimes the obvious escapes us: What is familiar to some is not familiar to all.

### **Characteristics of Language Minority Students**

An informative 1983 survey of university students at California State University at Long Beach revealed that even though nonnative speakers of English with low-level ability averaged 5 years living in this country, they had done so by surviving "with a minimal code and language strategies adequate for everyday use, but far removed from standard academic English" (Fox, 1984). And it is standard academic English with which they must cope when reading school-issued fliers, publications, letters, and other types of official literature.

The author of the CSU Long Beach study further commented that we cannot expect informal contacts in the environment outside of the institution to prepare students for the demands of the institution in terms of language comprehension and use. She concluded, "Accumulated evidence from this study points to minimal and compartmentalized utilization of the target language" (Fox, 1984).

Students of ESL often use English in very restricted ways because of the routine nature of many of their contacts with the English-speaking community. For example, they hold jobs that often do not require significant interaction with English speakers or require only limited, unvaried interaction. As an illustration, some of my students have told me that they use essentially the same conversational exchanges every day in positions in which they meet the public.

The CSU Long Beach report also showed that students in the ESL population live in ethnic neighborhoods, use English less than 3 hours a day at work, and speak English at home less than 1 hour per day. Therefore, it is not difficult to see that the background information considered essential for reading does not, in most cases, exist for the second language reader of unadapted printed matter. Significantly, however, though they may be enrolled initially only in

English as a second language courses, ESL students are faced with reading demands outside of their program which are the same as those of native speakers.

These findings suggest that students attempting to become part of the greater campus have much building and development to do in terms of their knowledge base in the target language before they can understand the expectations of the school of which they are now a part. In addition to vocabulary and linguistic aspects of language, they also need cultural knowledge (Burquest, Henry & Barger, 1988).

In a comprehensive study of language minority students at San Jose City College, (Gosak, 1988) several additional characteristics of this emerging population came to light. The trend at San Jose City College is toward students in an older age group than that traditionally thought of as college age. The data from the report indicate this population is composed of 22- to 39-year-olds, supporters of households, unavailable for full-time studies. Rather, these students come to campus "to improve job skills, including language, take vocational courses, and perhaps pursue an AA degree" (p. 15). Most of them, at least in credit programs, are male.

With these characteristics in mind, we can see that such students are not likely to spend extra time reading cumbersome communications in English. In contrast, they are the kind of students that might be expected to welcome succinct, highly readable, explicit communications in which brevity and clarity are strongly valued. Should the numbers of second generation immigrants entering college from high school increase significantly, preference for concise, clear information would not change. In fact, studies have found that native English speakers also prefer information that eliminates extraneous detail (Derwing, 1989). Therefore, whatever efforts are made in the direction of simplification will have wide acceptance and endorsement. However, any institution cannot claim to have available such printed material at this time. It has yet to become a priority.

Real access to the educational system and the campus community dictates concrete actions be taken to enable students to become aware of the opportunities available for their growth and development on the college campus. For real access to occur, these actions must include modification or restructuring of written materials explaining college enrollment procedures, student services, course offerings, including occupational programs, and official policies so that students will not be at a disadvantage in seeking self-improvement and further development of their potential.

### **Addressing the Problem**

What form might such modification take? It should involve adapting existing written material so that the meaning of the original text is preserved in a more concise, explicit, and vocabulary-controlled

version. Ideally, the adapted version should include some illustration providing an appropriate clue to the student reading the accompanying text. More explicit passages should foster comprehension, retention, and recall (Connor, 1984). When written materials do not already exist, they should be developed with these guidelines in mind.

The adaptation should be done by ESL professionals familiar with the reading comprehension problems faced by ESL students. Since time and compensation are concerns, it should be possible to assign this task to ESL staff who can apply for grants or special funds to cover this type of responsibility. If ESL professionals are unavailable for work on individual pieces of adapted written materials, there should be inservice training arranged for other departments. In addition, copies of adapted materials should be reviewed by ESL staff before final printing.

While considering the adaptation process, we must also give sufficient attention to formatting. As we are increasingly learning in our computer age, formatting is gaining in importance, accounting for many of the changes in levels of sophistication in word processing programs, and is an essential starting point for creating a more readable, explicit text. For the second language student learning to read in English, careful formatting may be the essential ingredient that helps such a student focus attention on key information and understand more easily the gist of the ideas, if not every word or detail. As an illustration, technical writing, with its focus on brevity and clarity, may be viewed as an example of communication which seeks the elimination of superfluous or ambiguous wording (Hirschhorn, 1980). Technical writing experts in ESL suggest similar guidelines for nonnative speakers (Nash, 1987). Those who create materials in an institution need to be aware not only of what they are saying but of how they are saying it.

### **Additional Considerations**

Research in second language reading argues for preserving the authenticity of a piece of writing when it is used for instructional purposes and for simplifying the tasks required of the student rather than altering the text itself (Johns, 1985). However, in noninstructional situations, it may be fair to claim that simplification of text, with control of vocabulary and grammatical forms, is key to making the reading matter accessible to the nonnative speaker. Clewell and Clifton (1983) provide a list of considerations for evaluation of textbook readings that is applicable to any printed matter ESL students might have:

1. Do textual aids (illustrations, headings, special features, format) provide the reader with an overview of the content?
2. Do illustrations support or extend the accompanying discourse?

3. Do special features (e.g., italicized words) reinforce or supplement important ideas and relations in the discourse?
4. What are the author's assumptions about the reader's background knowledge and experience?
5. If the content is inaccurate, how can students be helped to recognize the inaccuracies and evaluate the information?
6. Are the relationships among the topics clear and logical?

The San Jose City College report (Gosak, 1988) recommends that multilingual information be available in the following areas: vocational department brochures; admissions and records enrollment information; ESL department brochures; counseling letters; advertisements; and so forth. These are all crucial for ESL students. While multilingual materials do meet needs, not all groups may be served equally if not all languages are represented. In most communities there are groups who seldom, if ever, receive attention in their language because of their smaller numbers. Those whose language is not among those translated would benefit from adapted materials. Indeed, the need for multilingual materials could be reduced or eliminated if the written material were substantially adapted.

Most students also have contacts who, though perhaps not completely proficient in English themselves, can read material which has been controlled for vocabulary and syntax. Grammatical complexity and vocabulary control are most significant factors in comprehension considerations. Materials that use long, complex sentences, passive voice, vague reference, and so forth, will not facilitate understanding. Likewise, materials that employ technical or specialized vocabulary will also present a barrier to comprehension. Finally, materials that are printed on a ditto or by some other means that does not ensure high quality print will make the reading task more difficult, as vowels, for example, are often hard to distinguish from one another if type is not clear. Background and context clues are just not available to the nonnative speaker in the same way that they are for the native English speaker.

If we are to reach the language minority population, we must begin by getting key information into their hands in understandable English (Olivas, 1979). Studies on recruitment and retention of non-traditional students for community colleges might well give some consideration to this issue. "Colleges and universities must offer a more hospitable climate to those from diverse backgrounds," according to a public policy makers' meeting on higher education (Evangelauf, 1988). Part of the problem may be the dichotomy between the democratic ideals professed by the community college, "a desire that everybody be part of the elite" (Kort, 1987), and the realization that the institution is not currently set up to implement such ideals.

What can be done to adapt written material to foster greater participation by nonnative English-speaking students? Some suggestions follow:

1. Simplification of essential printed materials. Control of vocabulary and grammatical complexity; focus on headings and key terms with top down rhetorical organization and, especially, redundancy.
2. Input on adaptation from ESL professionals paid for their time.
3. Arrangement for inservice training of support staff.
4. Inclusion of illustrations in printed material, when feasible.
5. Provision of a sign at the entrance to the admissions office which directs nonnative speakers to a specific area where adapted materials are provided and specially trained staff are available to assist.
6. Provision of a condensed, simplified handout on registration procedures, with parking regulations listed first and counseling for nonnative speakers highlighted.
7. Directional signs to admissions and student services offices at all major points on campus.
8. Simplification of handouts from support services and distribution to all major areas of the campus and the ESL department.
9. Explanation of the ESL program and its registration process through fliers in the main registration and support service areas of the campus to facilitate easy referrals.
10. Commitment to print quality in all materials for nonnative speakers of English.

Southerland (1986) remarks that community colleges "could lower their attrition rates by admitting only excellent scholars in the same manner that hospitals could lower their mortality rates by admitting only patients with low-risk health problems." But if colleges are sincerely interested in meeting the needs of their changing community, responding to the emerging face of the language minority student in the 1990s, they will have to make some very real adjustments to become a "more hospitable environment."

As the campus grows in numbers of second language and nontraditional students, we must ask ourselves with whom we are communicating. The questions asked by Ann Johns (Weissberg, 1990) in referring to coherence of texts used in classroom instruction might be applied to campus-produced written material as well: "Why is the text written this way? Who is this community? What are their expectations?"

Adaptation of written information for the limited English student on the community college campus represents a commitment with costs, but the final product would be consistent with the original text and more fair in making the delivery of information accessible to all, regardless of their background. The cost of adapting written information might be less than that of trying to duplicate meaning and intent

of communications through translation, often inadequate, from one language to another.

Campus resources must be mobilized to communicate more effectively with nonnative students, who are quickly becoming a large and essential part of our community colleges. ■

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