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ABSTRACT

Features of a special purpose English as a second language (ESL) course for foreign graduate students entering the Wharton School of Business at University of Pennsylvania are described. In response to the rigorous demands and competitive atmosphere at Wharton, the course has been designed to teach coping skills and strategies, particularly for the demanding case analyses courses. Departing from the traditionally supportive atmosphere of ESL courses, the course for foreign business graduate students will include a grading system and ratings of the quality of class participation, similar to those of the Wharton program as a whole. Among the coping strategies to be taught for case analyses courses are: be prepared, participate actively, take risks, be assertive, and avoid digressions. The communication skill development strategies are sociolinguistic awareness and vocabulary expansion. Reading strategies include previewing, critical reading and thinking, significant fact identification, memory, and prioritizing and time management. (RW)

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TESOL TORONTO '83

"Coping Strategies: Preparing Foreign Graduate Students for Professional Academic Programs"

We are in the process of developing a course for foreign students planning to enroll in graduate programs at the Wharton School of Business, part of the University of Pennsylvania. Our rationale for developing the curriculum for this course is threefold:

1. First, in Summer II session (July-August) our program receives a sizeable number of foreign students from all over the world destined for MBA or PhD programs in business starting in September. Traditionally this is our most high-powered contingent of students. A large number of this group has already been accepted for study at the university, which implies high TOEFL scores and strong academic records, considering the highly selective admissions policy of the university and especially Wharton. Generally speaking, they are serious in purpose, apprehensive about their upcoming first semester, and demanding of their English academic preparatory course, for which they have high expectations. The university International Programs Office reports that of all the fields of study offered at the university, Business holds the highest enrollment of foreign students, (495 in Fall 1982).

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And, the university administration has recently announced a large overseas recruitment campaign. Therefore, we have reason to suspect that a sizeable number will continue to be admitted and be in need of our services.

2. Second, our intensive (4 hour per day) courses in Summer II session last only seven weeks, which pass extremely quickly, and do not allow sufficient time for major syllabus adjustments or materials development. As those of you who have taught ESP courses know, the pressures of developing materials for classroom use as the course is going on create a feeling of what Swales (1980) aptly calls "siege", for each class meeting represents another deadline for the instructor. In a way, what we are trying to do in this project is make it easier for the instructors to cope with this type of English for Business Graduate Students course by developing a core curriculum in the form of specific goals and objectives, and, lacking a core textbook, a sizeable packet of materials ready for use on day one. To this end, over the past several months we have been carrying out a general needs analysis which has included our interviewing American students, professors and former foreign students of ours, all presently at Wharton. We have also been visiting classes and examining reading materials.
3. Third, the demands of the Wharton Business School are special, and require emphasis on specific skills that are not covered in the traditional college skills course that we now offer. The academic program at Wharton is rigorous. Some American students have gone as far as to describe the atmosphere as "cutthroat".

The pressures of these conditions are likely to be exacerbated for the foreign student whose native language is not English. Therefore, we see instructors of this course especially as responsible for preparing these students for the reality they will confront. This implies the need for including more competitive elements than are found in traditional fostering, supportive ESL classes. We have in mind, for example, use of the Business School grading system: DS (Distinguished), HP (High Pass), P (Pass) and NC (No Credit). Ordinarily, grading is not a part of our regular ESL program. Classroom management modifications would include the use of seating charts, where the instructor has a grid with each student's name and assigned seat and gives daily grades for quality of class participation. This practice is consistent with that of many case analysis courses. These dreaded, but required courses are the most divergent from the traditional graduate school lecture or seminar course. For this reason we feel the case method, similar to that described by Plotrowski (1982) for foreign executives at the Harvard Business School, is appropriate for incorporation into our course.

With this information as background, I would now like to turn to the major focus of our paper today. Because of limitations of time, we have chosen to present examples of what we envision as an essential component of courses such as ours for graduate business students, that is, what we are calling "coping strategies". We are using this term to mean plans of action that we recommend students apply when faced with particular pressures

or problematic situations that may arise in this particular academic environment. We intend to give the students in and out of class assignments to put these coping strategies into practice as part of what might be called an overall plan for academic survival.

Some of these strategies are useful for foreign students in general. Others are specific to students of business, and the latter are what we will emphasize here.

Foreign business students that we interviewed, for the most part identified three areas where they were having the greatest problem coping:

1. keeping up with lectures at the same time as taking useful notes
2. following in-class discussions, especially in case analysis courses
3. keeping up with the heavy reading load

The first, listening and note-taking in lecture is a recurring problem for foreign students in general, and, since techniques for improvement described at length in the study skills literature and spelled out in a variety of recent advanced ESL materials, I will not deal with this area today.

The second area, following in-class discussions, is more challenging for the curriculum developer, because it involves spontaneous interaction. Foreign students find it nearly impossible to keep up with the rapid-paced discussion of a case analysis course, for example. They are often unable to participate because, by the time they formulate what they want to say, the discussion has moved on to another topic. If they are graded according to quality of participation, then this is a serious dilemma.

By using the case method in our course, we will simulate what goes on in a "real" business school course. Not only will the content be relevant and of interest, but the format will give them realistic ex-



perience, and, most importantly for our purposes, the case analysis discussion process will make clear the need for interactional strategies, and thus give us access to and provide justification for our presentation of coping strategies to the class. Student awareness of the need to improve their communication skills will be heightened in this way, and they will be encouraged to carry out assignments which are designed to reinforce these strategies. This is a crucial point, for, in the past we have found only limited success in convincing students of the importance of communication practice exercises such as Gambits (Contact Canada Series, 1979).

A case analysis discussion generally follows a three-stage pattern:

1. Description of and analysis of the case situation
2. Analysis of the options and alternative courses of action
3. Recommendations for specific action

I would recommend you to Plotrowski (1982) and Ronstadt (1976) for more detail on the format.

For our purposes we will isolate certain strategies to enable our students to cope with the case analysis discussion. Specific examples, adapted from Ronstadt (1976) are listed below:

1. Be prepared
 - familiarize yourself well with the specifics of the case
 - anticipate questions about the case
 - anticipate key issues
 - prepare comments
2. Participate Actively
 - contribution as social responsibility
 - the sin of silence
3. Take Risks
 - principle of mistaken efforts being preferable to no effort at all
4. Be Assertive
 - distinction between non-assertive, assertive and aggressive behaviors

5. Avoid Digressions

- importance of staying on task and the consequences of tangential comments and indirectness

Through continual discussions as follow-up to the case analyses, the class will fine-tune their awareness and understanding of the importance of strategies for more effective participation in classroom interaction.

Besides these strategies directly related to the case method, there are others aimed at improving their communication skills. These include suggestions for vocabulary expansion and increase of awareness of socio-linguistic rules and patterns specific to the business school context:

1. Gambits
2. Oral presentations
 - assigned roles; presenter, respondents, discussants
 - appropriate form
3. Observational visits to case analysis classes
 - specific assignments of behavioral patterns to observe
4. Group projects with formal presentation
5. Videotape
6. Out-of-class Assignments
 - TV and radio
 - Business newspapers and magazines
7. Vocabulary Research requiring interview with Americans

One final point concerning interactional strategies deals with an essential resource that often remains untapped for foreign students: the American student population. In general, foreign students associate with other foreign students, but find their American colleagues unapproachable or too competitive to consult with, much less study with. Pointing out the importance of reciprocity and formulas for initial interaction may be useful in providing suggestion for obtaining greater access to this human resource.

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Coping strategies for reading focus on techniques we can give to foreign students to make their reading both more comprehensible and more efficient.

Foreign students in particular need to develop strategies for coping with graduate-level work, since they often come from cultures where these skills have never been taught. Students need to develop approaches to text that are flexible; approaches which can vary according to the particular text to be read, the nature of the goals for that text, and the time available to complete the assignment.

Business students generally have two basic types of text to read: the case study and expository business prose. A case study presents facts and a context for them that must be closely analyzed by the student, requiring careful use of his critical reading skills. The expository prose he will be required to read contains information and analysis that he will have to digest and remember; it therefore necessitates a strategy for identifying the most significant points in the text as well as a strategy for remembering them. Both the case study and business expository prose share some distinctive textual features which distinguish them from text in other subject areas. These distinctive features include a great number of graphs, tables, diagrams and flow charts, statistical tables, formulas, and theoretical models of business organization and practice. When a student realizes that those features are common to much of what he will be reading, he can practice organizing the information provided with greater efficiency. The first step, therefore, in developing "coping strategies" is to have the ESL student "preview" several typical

business texts (of either type) in order to pull out on his own the most common elements (those named above) and to discuss the importance of looking at those features first and briefly in order to gain an overview or "framework" for the text. Students after a small amount of practice usually find that making a habit of previewing their reading material yields a great savings in time, since, when they are ready to read the text more deeply, they already have a good idea of what the text will focus on and what the significant information is likely to be.

Next the student needs to ask himself some critical questions which relate to the previewing he has done. He needs to ask himself, for example:

Who is the writer and when did he write this?

What do I already know about the subject?

What kind of information (or theory) will be presented here?

Is the writer likely to have a particular bias?

Is the point of view the writer will take similar to other views I have read? If not, how is it likely to contrast with them?

According to the title and my previewing what are likely to be the most important points in the text?

The student should be encouraged to think about the critical questions he develops before he begins reading the article carefully; he may even try to provide answers to the questions, although this is not absolutely necessary. In order to keep a particular direction to his reading the student should choose one question to keep in

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the "back of his mind" during the time he is reading. This allows him to relate the information in the text back to his questions thus giving that information a structure or framework. This framework, which might also be called a "schema," also provides a logical basis for his notetaking.

At the end of his reading the student needs to think about other critical/evaluative questions. For the most part, he needs to relate the specific information he has just read to other information he has read previously and to a more general overview of the subject. Questions he might need to ask are:

1. How does the reading relate to other readings I have been assigned (a) this week and (b) during the whole course so far?
2. Does this article contribute to understanding of the (business) field in general? If so, how?
3. Does the article expand my own knowledge?
4. What was the writer's purpose in the article?
5. What was my instructor's purpose in having me read this article at this particular time?
5. Would I modify or add to the writer's ideas?

In the case study types of readings the post-reading critical questions are especially important, since the business student will need to analyze the situation that has been presented in terms of the knowledge and experience he already has and provide concrete solutions for the problem at hand. The post-reading critical questions will focus the beginning of his case analysis.

Foreign students often complain that although they manage to comprehend their academic reading they are not able to retain the information they have read. Therefore a "coping strategy" for improving memory of what has been read is an important component of this program. Memory work also reinforces the student's comprehension, since only when the meaning of the concepts he wants to remember are clear to him, will he be able to process them in his memory. Thus, the first principle in improving the student's retention of text is making sure that the text is clearly understood. In order to check his comprehension, the student should be encouraged to recite or write the ideas in his own words after reading or, if the reading is quite long, after one section of text. If he finds at that point that he has difficulty zeroing in on what the writer said, he will need to go back to the text and concentrate on the part or parts which are still "fuzzy" for him. Again, he will need to check himself by reciting the main concepts of his reading. The recitation is also helping him process the information for retention in his long-term memory. It may be the case that it will be more difficult to retain information in a foreign language than in the student's native language; if this is true, it is particularly crucial that memory techniques be emphasized.

The principle of categorization is also an important one for retention; clustering the ideas of the text into categories makes them more meaningful and thus more easily remembered. It also helps divide the material to be remembered into small "chunks" that the student can process easily as he attempts to remember one chunk and

then makes connections from one "chunk" to the next. In addition, students will find that they will remember better when they review material at regular intervals rather than in a concentrated period of time (just prior to a test, for example). Since business students must constantly apply their accumulated knowledge to case analyses and must constantly have facts and figures available for recall in class discussions, this is particularly important technique for them.

To summarize, the coping strategies for reading include the student's previewing of the business text for specific features distinctive to it, asking pre-reading critical questions to give him a focus for his reading and notetaking, asking post-reading critical questions to help the student toward an analysis of the case situations and practicing of memory principles to reinforce new information.

The foreign business student with a tremendous amount of material to read needs to prioritize in terms of his reading assignments so as to make the best use of the time he has at his disposal. He can do this in one of several ways, e.g.: 1) in terms of which readings may be most crucial to his instructor; 2) in terms of which readings he is most interested in; 3) in terms of which readings may be most significant (according to author or title) for the business field in general. In my experience, foreign students tend to feel that they must read everything, and everything must be read thoroughly. On the contrary, students need to be selective about what they read and how they read it; some articles merit only a preview rather than an intensive reading. Foreign students seem to have a particularly hard time doing this, so it would be worthwhile spending some class time in a discussion of the prioritizing process.



Related to the issue of prioritizing is the more general concept of time management. Foreign students in a new and confusing environment seem to be particularly vulnerable to the trap of lack of efficient scheduling. Moreover, the Wharton business students, even more than other students, need to develop strategies for keeping up with their academic work, since the nature of their courses and grading system means that serious consequences will result if they do not. In case courses the students need to be very much "on top" of the material in each class session, and since they are graded on how much and how well they participate, it means that they simply cannot afford to "let things slide". By planning an overview of the semester in terms of which assignments are due when, and organizing a "plan of attack" as to how to best divide the time available for the assignments, the student is more likely to complete the assignments on time and with less stress. The concept of a weekly study plan also needs to be stressed; and students need to think realistically about how much time they can devote to a particular project. Realizing how much (or little) time is available for a particular assignment tends to force the student to become more efficient in his studying.

We have tried to analyze the needs of a particular population of foreign students and have based our program of academic "survival" on the real-life situation with which these students will be faced in a graduate business program (at the Wharton School). We have tried to identify the most crucial areas in which foreign students need to concentrate in order to keep their "heads above water" in the competitive environment of the Wharton School or others like it.

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TESOL TORONTO '83

COPING STRATEGIES: Preparing Foreign Graduate Students for Professional Academic Programs

I. Introduction - Background information

Rationale for development of "English for Foreign Graduate Students in Business" course

II. Coping Strategies

A. Interactional Strategies

1. Case analysis course

- a. Be prepared
- b. Participate Actively
- c. Take Risks
- d. Be Assertive
- e. Avoid Digressions

2. Communication Skill Development

- a. Sociolinguistic awareness
- b. Vocabulary expansion

B. Reading Strategies

1. Previewing
2. Critical reading and thinking
3. Significant facts
4. Memory
5. Prioritizing and Time Management

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