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ABSTRACT

The A. B. Freeman School of Business at Tulane University has developed an intensive, five-week orientation program based on weekly videotaping to help foreign graduate students confront problems of language orientation and build the confidence necessary to become successful students. The course covers a review of grammar rules, spelling rules, translating, report writing and article writing. The weekly videotaping of speeches, to be presented in front of an audience for review and discussion, helps develop poise. One practice, found to be essential, is for instructors to speak in formal English without affectation and irony, because this approximates the style of English the students are accustomed to hearing and makes it easier for them to comprehend important points until they are ready to use a native conversational style. (EL)

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THE FOREIGN STUDENT AND THE AMERICAN BUSINESS SCHOOL

Timothy Keogh

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THE FOREIGN STUDENT AND THE AMERICAN BUSINESS SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

In the United States there are at least 18 regional dialects and more than seven ethnic variations of spoken American English. Native speakers adapt quickly to these differences, but foreign students may face culture shock when they realize that their previous classroom experiences have not prepared them for the problems of communicating in the United States. Add to this the pressures of graduate studies and those problems can become overwhelming. The A. B. Freeman School of Business at Tulane University has developed a five-week course to take some of the pain out of the transition any foreign student must go through. By using peer support and videotaping we are able to create a sense of stability which is fundamental to the success of a foreign student in the highly charged atmosphere of the American business school.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign students who plan to study in American universities face some obvious problems. Usually good students in their own countries, they have studied English as they would study finance or statistics. They suppose, as we all do, that usage is determined by rules. They have examined the structure of English and now expect to put to use all those hours of memorizing irregular verbs and contractions they believe make up the bulk of American speech. But even though they may be prepared in grammatical usage and sentence syntax, they can never anticipate the abundance of regional dialects and idiomatic expressions they will encounter in the United States.

To make things worse, students in all countries have their own patois, and newly immersed foreign students face a blizzard of faddish terms and campus vernacular. Thus they confront a language they thought they knew, but suddenly can comprehend only a fraction of what they hear. And the speed of the spoken idiom is frighteningly faster than anything they have previously heard in classes of English as a second language.

This scenario is familiar to anyone who teaches English to foreign students, and much has been written about these problems. Not

much, however, has been written concerning the problems of the older student enrolling in an American professional school. This is an important issue to be discussed among graduate and professional schools in the United States because in 1982, according to the National Research Council, there were 106,000 foreign students attending American graduate programs. Remarkably, the TESOL Newsletter reports that "foreign student enrollment continues to be one of the few areas of growth in U. S. higher education" (IIE 1982 survey, February 1983, p. 1).

This paper discusses how the A. B. Freeman School of Business at Tulane University has developed an intensive, five-week orientation program based on weekly video-taping to help foreign graduate students to confront problems of language orientation and to build the confidence necessary to become successful M.B.A. students.

STUDENT PROFILE

There are two obvious but important distinctions between the typical foreign graduate student and the foreign undergraduate. First, graduate students are likely to be older (our students' ages range from 22 to 36, with the average at 27) and less flexible in their linguistic aptitude than when they began their studies of English perhaps as far back as grammar school. Second, they have usually been sent to the United States by companies or governments who regard them as individuals with bright futures and are grooming them for important posts when they finish their American studies (among the multinational corporations and institutions which sponsor our students are Fuji-Xerox, Exxon of Japan, CYauto S.A., and the Small and Medium Industrial Bank of Korea).

These facts set up some unique problems. Students fear failure of any kind. But imagine the dread that may exist in foreign students who know English in their heads and are intelligent and accomplished users of their own languages, yet when they open their mouths to speak in America they sound like third graders. Confronted with the demand to perform in the intellectually aggressive atmosphere of the American business school (where even notes on the bulletin board can be cryptic, and newspaper ads for finding an apartment or buying a used car are hopelessly abbreviated), the smiling face and courteous behavior of the foreign student may hide a sense of doom about ever succeeding in the United States.

Not long ago, a now successful, thriving M.B.A. candidate admitted to me that he drank himself to sleep for the first four weeks of the orientation course and took a drink each morning before setting out for class. Although he always seemed a pleasant and willing student, he was reluctant to speak more than a few brief sentences. It wasn't until the last week of the course, after a month of gruelling agony trying to forge some sense of order out of the chaos of new American words, that he felt the security to let his talents out and not be embarrassed by his mistakes. His background was in accounting, and he had several years of corporate experience in his country. But he felt

his strengths would do him no good in an environment where he could not communicate above the level of a grammar school student. His deficiency in communicative skills was exaggerated, as it is in most foreign students, because what he lacked in his knowledge of idiomatic English usage and current business terms, he made up in the creatively animated way he got his points across once he overcame his fear of sounding stupid.

In fact, the effect is much more powerful on the listener when a speaker from another culture, through imperfect pronunciation and often archaic yet charming syntax, explains his thoughts. The foreign student should be made to understand that accent and manner of speaking can enhance the ability to communicate. The point here is not to waste the energy and talents of obviously gifted students because fear of failure constricts their throats before they have a chance to exercise their linguistic muscles. But how can this fear be eliminated?

THE COURSE

Over the last seven years we have developed a required course that attempts to apply as much ointment to students' linguistic wounds as is possible in so short a time. The course covers everything from writing case studies to translating newspaper want ads into understandable English. We review grammar rules, spelling rules, and practice writing reports from articles in the Wall Street Journal. But one of the most successful things we've done in the course is to establish a sense of cohesion, of compatriotism with other members of the class who face the same problems. This intangible function of the a course is as important as all the grammar drills, syntax exercises, and pronunciation guides which make up the tangible elements of the program. In order for any student, especially the foreign student, to be able to compete in a graduate professional school, that student must have poise enough to make mistakes and not suffer mental anguish over each error.

VIDEO-TAPING

One way we have found to develop poise is through weekly video-taping. Each student in the class is required, after a week of preparation, to present a 10-minute speech for review and discussion by everyone. Members of the audience will thus be sensitive of their own difficulties and shortcomings, and therefore will tend to be constructively critical. Students usually make suggestions for clearer pronunciation or better syntax with some degree of kindness knowing that each will have a turn in front of the camera. Some of the better speakers can become quite diplomatic when allowed to propose linguistic solutions to their classmates. They become object lessons since it should be readily apparent from their instructions that they can practice what they preach.

Through video-taping students now have faced that fear of speaking publicly in a foreign tongue and will be slightly more up to the task the next time around. In addition, they will have practiced English pronunciation and sentence construction in their heads for a week, going over the movements of their tongues and the logic of their statements. They can then display their accomplishments and share their distresses with their classmates. Such an exercise helps to create an informal bond which somewhat removes the students from their "foreignness" by making them part of a group. This sort of necessary bonding can also be seen among American students who form klatches on the first day of class to read packets and handouts and sign up for various clubs and activities, all in hopes of fitting in and relieving the tension of being outsiders. It is even more crucial, then, for foreign students to feel a sense of belonging since the surroundings to them are doubly "foreign."

Establishing a sense of place in the foreign student is one of the most important functions of this type of orientation course in general, and of a video-taping program in particular. No longer so fearful of the first day of class when information and instruction seem to come at them with a geometrical rate of expansion, foreign students are able to find at least some solace in a few familiar faces with whom they have already shared difficult moments.

CONCLUSION

Over the years we have refined this course and attempted to compress as much information and practice into five weeks as is possible without burning out the students. But we still cannot give them what they need most--time. Even though they arrive early enough before the semester begins to find a place to live, organize a class schedule, and begin to accustom their ears to the sound of real American English, they still need months of practice just to approach the reading and comprehension levels of their American classmates.

To get the most information to the student in the least amount of time, we have found one practice to be essential. That is to speak formally. By using a slightly stilted syntax, the teacher approximates the style of English that students have heard most often in previous language classes and thereby makes points quickly, clearly, and without having to rephrase the sentence. This does not mean a simpleminded use of the language by any means. That would be a disservice to the student. It means a careful selection of standard vocabulary in normal syntactical arrangement which should be free from affectation and irony. It is amazing how slurred, ironical, and contracted all of our speech is when we speak to someone with whom we are very familiar. After having seen students for several hours a day, even for only a week, it becomes almost second nature to lapse into a conversational style that in the early going would only be bewildering to the student. It should be constantly on the teacher's mind that these students, even though they appear to be picking up a great deal, still are only absorbing about 40 percent of what is said to them, and the degree of

difficulty is compounded by a zealous speaker with a quick tongue and a glib phrase. Speaking just slowly enough not to be patronizing or dull will actually save time and pay dividends of making incremental but measurable progress.

I once noticed while watching "The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau" how the famous diver subtly asked the same question of an American biologist in three different ways in order to get enough bits of meaning to answer his question. It was not that Cousteau couldn't understand English, but that the biologist's speech was so informal that it could only be understood by a native speaker. He finally got his answer and the ship cruised on, with Cousteau's formal but lyrical narration proceeding as majestically as the Calypso.

RECOMMENDATION

Much research needs to be done in this area, especially at the larger universities with sizeable foreign student populations. If an increasing foreign student enrollment is a national trend in American higher education, we ought to learn as much as we can about the problems of this significant portion of our students.

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