

# **Improving Communication Education for Second-Language Students**

Barbara Breaden

Speech & Communication Studies

## **I. Background**

The values of Lane Community College have become familiar to all, yet we can read them again and hear resonate their pertinence to our second-language students. We “welcome, value and promote diversity among staff, students, and community.” We strive to “work effectively in different cultural contexts to serve the educational and *linguistic* needs of a diverse community.” We seek to “minimize . . . *linguistic* and *cultural* barriers to learning.” When our second-language students hail from other lands we sense another vibration of their place in our mission. Paying three times what residents pay, they exert meaningful financial impacts on college operations. And so our commitment to their excellent education should honor their pledge to us.

As an instructor in Speech & Communication Studies for more than 30 years, my interactions with second-language students have expanded each year. Currently my Voice & Articulation class includes from 1/2 to 2/3 English language learners. In this class students learn to analyze and optimize their vocal patterns and quality while perfecting American English articulation through the study of American English phonetics. The past two years, the Speech and Communication Studies and the Academic Learning Services Departments have joined with the Math Department to found an International Bridge Learning Community to improve international and English language education for transfer students. The emphasis in my teaching assignment on second-language instruction and international education casts a glaring spot on my lack of cultural immersion experience in my academic background. This sabbatical has sought to remedy that deficiency.

## **II. Goals**

My objective has been to identify with the international student educational experience among my students through my own cultural immersion. My research in preparation for this sabbatical uncovered the finding that second-language student educational success is bolstered by classroom interaction with other students. So as a part of my study, I sought to discover ways to improve classroom effectiveness by promoting student interactions across linguistic barriers. Finally, I sought to develop my own pedagogy through observation and consultation with diversity-immersed 2<sup>nd</sup>-language professors.

## **III. The plan**

My own cultural immersion required that I have at least passing knowledge of a second language, which for me would be French. Thus I arranged to study at the Alliance Française, Paris, France, an institution with a 100+-year history, enrolling students from 160 different nationalities annually. I would live in an apartment in Paris with a native French woman and take classes at the Alliance in extensive general French, French pronunciation, and French phonetics

#### **IV. Findings and applications**

In carrying out my plan, I was able to identify with difficulties that an international/second-language student encounters, such as loneliness, a sense of being alone and an outsider, the need to rely on my own resources when ill, lost, or longing for companionship. I came to feel the frustration of language incompetence (in spite of more than seven years of French studies), feeling childlike, dependent on others' good will, a loss of control over my environment, and veritable exhaustion from the strain of functioning completely in a non-native tongue. As my powers of expression improved, the difficulty of continually *listening* to spoken French made my progress seem meaningless.

But at the same time, I came to understand first-hand the merit of student interactions across linguistic barriers. An immediate sympathy with classmates fostered a number of friendships with other students. The intensity of these rapidly formed, informal contacts, helped to liberate me from my persistently self-conscious speech. Speaking imperfectly with my peers increased my confidence overall and encouraged me to speak more freely in other contexts.

In terms of pedagogy, I readily recognized the fundamental value of structure and clear standards as opposed to an informal professorial style. Coming from a U.S. institution and feeling comfortable with both structure and flexibility, I found my peers (from eighteen different countries) preferred clear goals, demands, assignments, and answers. Professors provided, and students expected, consistently *immediate* correction and drilling in repetition, repetition, repetition of the correct response.

The French language, admittedly, lends itself to rigid standards. My professor would appeal to the rule of the French Academy, saying "L'Académie accepte," or "L'Académie n'accepte pas," a particular articulation. Whereas I might be more relaxed in my correction of a student or in my demands for precise articulation, my French professors demonstrated often the glaring difference between professorial standards of perfection in pronunciation as opposed to what I would consider acceptable. My pronunciation professor: "The way you pronounce this sentence will determine your place in society—where you go to school and where you will be employed." My phonetics professor: "As soon as you produce the [t] sound in that way, the French person will know you are American." Their frequent corrections could be unnerving and intimidating, yet I found

myself reflecting, “This is how I make my students feel when evaluating my their speech. In short, I was able to develop *empathy* for my students.

My professors were adept in providing opportunities for students to socialize, yet maintaining a firm identity themselves as authority as opposed to friend. We had team assignments daily in class and were allowed a 15 to 20-minute break in each three to four-hour class, a time we would use to get acquainted, working on a worksheet or procuring a cup of coffee. Our friendships were encouraged as well by our open discussions of cultural differences in class. While such discussions can be testy and sensitive in the United States, these students welcomed and thrived on them. As I say, they became the basis for our budding friendships.

For communication education at Lane, my clearest lessons concerned the need for instructors to assist second-language students in the art of listening. Techniques of paraphrase, repetition, and elaboration are critical, as is drilling students to assess comprehension. Second, aside from confirming the value of intercultural communication, communication education should remain open to acknowledging and testing cultural differences and stereotypes, not shying from them.

For Voice and Articulation instruction, I found that the phonemes of the International Phonetic Alphabet are not as uniform as I had thought. A [t] in French is not quite the same as a [t] in American English, and so it is with other sounds. In teaching articulation, it is right to teach General American Standard articulation, but to take pains to distinguish linguistic differences in the same phoneme. I encountered several techniques in teaching sound production that I had never tried—using a student’s pen as tongue depressor or a mirror to mimic sound formation. The technique of touch, freely employed in France, would not fly at LCC.

## **V. In Sum**

The lessons of my sabbatical were rich and numerous. First, although I have valued immensely the diversity of my LCC classroom, on my leave I came to know the profound *joy* of diversity. I found as well that the shock of cultural immersion can be at least as profound late in one’s career as in young adulthood. Without discomfort, and the discomfort was often extreme, we do not grow. The exertions, cultural stretches, and witness of other pedagogies assure that I can never return to the “innocence,” and perhaps the parochialism, of my pre-immersion self.