

# In the Classroom

## *En Classe*

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This section presents descriptions of teaching techniques or practical classroom activities.

*Cette section est consacrée à la description de différentes techniques ou activités d'enseignement.*

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### ESL THROUGH ISSUES IN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

#### **B. Mary Petrie**

This paper examines the multiple problems of improving the oral English skills of mature students (mostly women) returning to academic studies after a number of years' absence from the formal classroom, and it describes a course which provides an effective response to these problems.

This course was designed by the TESL Centre at Concordia University in Montreal at the request of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute, the Women's College at that University. The Women's College realized that most of the non-anglophone women returning to formal study also planned ultimately to enter the job market. Most of these women had taken traditional English classes during their schooldays and claimed to have satisfactory control of reading and writing skills, but they realized, that because, in many instances (especially in the province of Quebec) they had not been taught ESL by native English speakers, they had not acquired an adequate control of the oral English skills required for today's job market.

The TESL Centre at Concordia felt compelled to answer this challenge, although realizing that the three-credit one semester course that had been requested (with meetings for only one two-and-a-quarter hour session one night a week or for two one-and-a half hour sessions during the day each week) would prove ridiculously inadequate for great improvement of oral skills. However, we realized that high motivation for such improvement was present, and we assumed, too, that as these students were making their inquiries through the Women's College, topics from the issues posed by the Women's Movement would greatly enhance the initial motivation. However, as the course had to be open to all students of the University

who tested at the appropriate level, we wondered how male students would react to the feminist topics. We need not have worried. Some men were violently opposed to the women's positions on the feminist issues raised and therefore flung themselves wholeheartedly into debates and discussions, and, of course, their participation encouraged the women to defend themselves and their positions heatedly, so that discussions have always been extremely spirited. Muslim women, too, were lined up against the feminists and provoked lively controversy, but because of the great degree of politeness evidenced by the Muslims the more militant feminists have learned that there are, indeed, two real sides to every issue, and they have learned to argue from force of logic rather than from force of voice.

This paper will first describe the student body involved in the course, then consider the specific aims and objectives of the course, next list some of the major topics chosen by the students for discussion, then consider the various methods employed during the class sessions, and finally make an assessment of the course effectiveness.

### **The Student Body**

The students have been mostly women advised by the Women's College at Concordia University to take the course. The course has been given four times to date with 80% women and 20% men in the first three sessions but with 40% men in this year's class. Several students have entered through the University's Mature Student Qualifying Program (MSQP), and the men have come mostly from the Faculty of Fine Arts. This faculty's student body is composed mostly of francophones who realize that an English-speaking university offers a golden opportunity to improve their language skills in ESL classes as well as in their other courses.

*Age:* The students have ranged from 20-70 years of age, but most have been in their late 20's to early 40's. Those entering under the MSQP are usually returning to academic studies after several years' absence from the classroom experience.

*Motivation:* Motivation is usually very strong for the women, for they want to improve language skills but in a feminist context. A communicative approach to ESL insists that students make greater progress when they choose their own topics of discussion, so we assumed that women would appreciate the course, but we worried about the male students. However, the latter have usually delighted in playing "Devil's Advocate," and so, with two sides of a question always under discussion, debates become hot and heavy, and *all* participate.

*Country of Origin:* The majority of the students have been Quebec francophones, others have been Muslims from Bahrain, and this year's

class also had students from Greece, Poland, Morocco, and Sweden.

*Educational Level:* Most students have been post CEGEP students (post Junior College) enrolled in the Women's Studies Program, or in Sociology, Translation, or Fine Arts; some are in the MSQP (they have completed high school but have no CEGEP education); and others are independent students, not yet enrolled in a regular program but interested in improving oral skills in this particular context.

*Level of English:* The University students in regular programs must test into Advanced University ESL and they are capable of reading the course material for their other academic courses. It is their oral skills which need attention. The independent students may possess a lower level of all four ESL skills, and they are accepted only if space remains after regular registration.

### **Aims of the Course**

The stated aim of the course is the improvement of oral skills through a term's study of a special subject. Improvement in general fluency is the primary aim—less hesitant speech, less thinking in L1 with obvious translation, fewer false starts, in other words “near native-like fluency.” As the students want to “sound more English,” they also expect the course to improve their phonological control: first of the segmentals (the dental and glottal fricatives, the back vowel /ɑ/ versus central vowel /ʌ/ causing the greatest problems in Quebec); and secondly, of the suprasegmentals of word stress, sentence stress (where my francophones use final stress as opposed to the Germanic stress pattern—e.g. *nati<sup>o</sup>n* vs. *n<sup>a</sup>tio<sup>n</sup>*), and the resulting problems with intonation (where my students want to know the differences between their L1 patterns and the English patterns for statements, *wh* questions, *yes/no* questions, contrasts, items in a series, etc.). The students also hope to improve grammatical control despite their instructor's insistence on focussing on function rather than on form. The course also aims to expand the students' vocabulary, to explain appropriate social register, and to introduce native idiomatic expressions.

The more specific aims are the students' aims, not those of their instructors. The latter believe that improved fluency and vocabulary expansion, i.e. communicative competence relative to oral discourse (with emphasis on meaning rather than on form) are the only reasonable aims for such a limited one semester course.

### **Rationale for the Course**

The MSQP and the Simone de Beauvoir Institute attract many older women who have been away from study for some years. In their earlier classroom experience, they were used to large classes, absolute teacher

authority, lecture-type classes, and emphasis on grammar; and they find dyad and small discussion groups difficult to adjust to. By letting them choose various aspects of a general topic which excites them, the TESL Centre has made it possible for them to overcome their initial inhibitions, to share experiences, and thus to learn language through a properly communicative approach.

### Topics for Study

Topics are selected by the students themselves from a list of feminist concerns, and they often suggest others.

*Sexual Stereotyping* is the choice of all, so we may start with group examination of stereotyping in the comic strips, with heated analysis of "Hi and Lois," "Beetle Bailey," "Andy Capp," etc. with the feminists explaining just what they find offensive in these comics. Men usually react with indignation or humour to "Adam."

Students next examine school readers, noting stereotyping that existed even ten years ago and which has affected their own lives and attitudes. Children's books such as *Dr. Dan the Bandage Man* and *Nurse Nancy* are also noted. These, of course, illustrate the fact that the doctor will be a male, while the female is relegated to the subservient role of the assistant. Changes in current books are analysed and further changes suggested.

*Sexism in Language* is usually a popular topic, as are *The Economic Exploitation of Sexuality*, *Sexual Division of Labour*, and *Women on Welfare*. *Wages for Housework* usually produces heated arguments, with the men in violent opposition to the women. *The Token Woman* usually elicits personal experiences.

Video-tapes such as *Women Want* and audio-tapes, such as *Women in Power*, assigned for homework, provide listening practice and elicit considerable comment for class discussion.

Individual students have prepared short oral presentations on such topics as *Women and Drugs*, *Women and Dress*, *Rape*, *Women and the Media*, *Women and a Changing Church*, *Men's Liberation*, *Women and Mental Health*, *Styles of Delinquency for Women and Girls*, *The One-Parent Family*, *Working Mothers and Guilt Feelings*, *Effects on Children when Mothers are Employed*, *The Single Woman in Canadian Society*.

### Teaching Methods

Obviously, the TESL faculty is committed to improving fluency rather than grammatical competency, and so we focus on group work and pair discussion for most of each session. However, because older immigrant students believe that they are not learning if they do not receive direct instruction, we do spend approximately ten minutes on a grammatical

point and ten to fifteen minutes on some pronunciation area during each class session. We also assign exercises on these subjects to be done as home preparation, for subsequent correction and feedback.

Even homework assignments in grammar have had a feminist context, e.g.,

If I were Geraldine Feraro, I would \_\_\_\_\_

If I were Nancy Reagan, I would \_\_\_\_\_

If I were Flora Macdonald, I would \_\_\_\_\_

If I were Margaret Thatcher, I would \_\_\_\_\_

If I were a rape victim, I would \_\_\_\_\_

If I had been Joan of Arc, I would have \_\_\_\_\_

If I had been Eve, I would have \_\_\_\_\_

etc.

My francophone students have difficulties differentiating between the uses of *since* and *for* in phrases of duration, so, after a short classroom explanation I assign a homework exercise based on current reading, e.g.,

Answer the questions first with a sentence using *for* and then with a sentence using *since*.

- (1) How long has Flora Macdonald been interested in politics?
- (2) How long has she been a member of parliament?
- (3) Was she always a member of the Progressive Conservative Party?

This amount of direct grammatical teaching and pronunciation correction seems to satisfy the demand for grammar and pronunciation assistance and is always based on the students' own demonstrated errors.

We have found that, despite Krashen's insistence that focus should always be on the message, our older students will drop out of a class or will complain and refuse to cooperate, if there is not a modicum of direct teaching. Our adult students, unlike children, demonstrate a variety of learning styles and strategies, being able to generalize from their study of the grammar of other languages, or being able to compare and contrast phonemes in their new language with similar sounds in their native language. They can intellectualize the concept of fricatives as opposed to plosives and, when having difficulties producing the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, our francophones, for example, can understand that it is easier to start with their own labio-dental fricatives /f/ and /v/ and move to the dental position rather than to attempt to achieve the dental fricatives from dental plosives. Obviously, children could not and should not be subjected to such direct explanations. Even if the twenty minutes of direct instruction will seem wasted to Krashen disciples, they do enable our

older students to relax and to learn during the other two hours of unstructured speech.

A wide variety of approaches is used with these classes, discussion being based on reading assignments, interviews, surveys, TV listening, etc. Readings may be chapters from *Women Unite!, An Anthology of the Canadian Women's Movements*, *Women in the Canadian Mosaic*, articles from periodicals such as *Women Speaking*, short stories by Madeleine Ferron, poems by P.K. Page, excerpts from Margaret Laurence's novels, etc.

Role play is widely used; e.g., acting out the role of employer and applicant, male supervisor and female employee, husband and wife (the latter, of course, having female students play the male role and males the female role).

Debates have proved popular, with the Muslims lined up against the rest of the class, or men against women. The results of surveys and interviews to determine sexist bias on various issues have been reported in class. Interviews and surveys have included the following topics:

1. Interviews with the director of a Rape Centre to determine what assistance is given to rape victims.
2. An interview with a victim of sexual harrasment on-campus.
3. An interview with our current writer in residence, Erica Ritter, about her "feminist" themes.
4. An interview with a woman on the Board of Directors of a Montreal firm to ask her view of "tokenism."
5. Location of statistics on the percentage of women profesors at Concordia University per faculty and the percentage at the administrative level.
6. Statistics from McGill and Concordia's Engineering and Commerce Faculties to determine whether there are appreciably more women entering these faculties now than there were ten years ago.
7. Interviews with men and women of differing ages to determine their views on sexual stereotyping and on role socialization of boys and girls in home and in school settings.

After direct teaching of some pronunciation skill (e.g., how to produce the dental fricatives from the known labio-dental fricatives rather than from the dental stops), students, in groups, at home or in class, may compose short dialogues on some feminist issue containing the *th* sounds or the intonation patterns to be practiced; they rehearse these, tape them, and are evaluated on their performance by the rest of the class.

Jazz chants have also proved very effective in improving spoken Eng-

lish in the following manner. Students are all evaluated by oral interview upon entry to the class and are given a report, an evaluation of their general fluency and of the specific difficulties of pronunciation, grammar, and diction that have been observed. Then, quite early in their course they are introduced to Carolyn Graham's Jazz Chants; they are next asked to compose a similar jazz chant to incorporate the specific difficulties which they personally need to overcome (the chants all being expected to touch on some area of women's experiences), and they finally teach their chants to the class. Thus, for example, we see a student leading a chant that requires the class to chant the refrain "That's what they think! That's what they say!" to help with our francophones' persistent *th* problems.

One student was told by her evaluator that she had problems not only with *th* sounds but also with central vowels, confusing them with back vowels, saying /madər/ for *mother*, /brədər/ for *brother*, so she composed and taught the following:

There are always threads in the sewing basket  
For the mother (chorus)

There are always clothes to repair  
For the mother (chorus)

There are always dishes to wash  
For the mother (chorus)

There is always a bath to clean  
For the mother (chorus)

Another with similar errors taught us her poem

"Thorns in Life"  
Life passes so fast!  
I was a girl, now am woman,  
And as woman I love,  
Piercing thorn in my heart.  
Inexplicable feeling, thrusting cause  
That affects all my paths.  
Faith fights alone: all the thoughts  
That my mind will refuse to thrash out.

A third with the same dental fricative problems taught us her creation:

The truth should not be  
Threatening to human beings

It should thrive through their  
hearts like a light.

Truth, like faith, is our need  
And the thirst for it never ends.

This is obviously not great poetry, but their own, and useful for the class as a whole.

The most encouraging aspect of the course is that the students are upset when the period ends, and, as we try to orchestrate activities so that the class ends in hot argument, the students usually go off to the cafeteria to continue their discussions over coffee. These discussions, of course, are in English, as it is the only language which all can follow. The cafeteria is usually the place, too, where the students conduct some of their assigned interviews to determine people's attitudes and biases. Sometimes these interviews lead to further discussions in English if viewpoints are encountered which oppose those of the interviewers. In a province in which life can be easily lived in French only, this extra English practice is essential.

When other interviews or surveys are assigned, the instructor insists that these be conducted in an English setting. For example, one assignment has the students visiting a factory or department store to determine how work conditions for women have improved since the turn of the century (relative to an assigned article on "Women's Work in Montreal at the Turn of the Century").

And what would be the components of a typical weekly session with these students? Obviously, although the instructors prepare lesson plans for each class meeting, the communicative approach and free-ranging discussion cause considerable deviation from prepared plans. However, the following may be considered an example of a typical plan.

For home preparation, the students have read Martin Meissner's article "Sexual Division of Labour and Inequality" from *Women at Work*. They have had six questions to answer at home:

1. Do you agree with Meissner's statement that women have no class position of their own but derive it from their fathers or husbands?
2. What is meant by Meissner's statement that "men are exploited publicly and exploit privately while women are exploited both publicly and privately"?
3. Note and comment on the sexist language considered on p. 162.
4. What job discrimination is noted in this article, relative to fields of work and areas of influence? Can you suggest others?
5. How do the charts on leisure time show discrimination?
6. In what respects is women's leisure often work? Document from your own observations.



*Lesson Plan* (for 18 students)

I. *Group Discussion*

- (a) Six groups, one for each homework question, discuss their topic and prepare a brief summary of their discussion. (20 minutes)
- (b) Presentation of summary and comments from other groups. (15 minutes)

II. *Vocabulary Work* (from Meissner reading) (12 minutes)

In *groups*, suggest a sentence for each of the following:

- charwoman
- chairman
- “Girl Friday”
- ruthless
- subservience
- bickering
- primacy of commitment

III. *Grammar* (10 minutes)

Differentiation of the uses of “already,” “yet,” “just,” and “recently” (errors noted at last class session).

IV. *Pronunciation* (20 minutes)

- (a) Word Stress (only problems noted in previous classes)
  - 1. Rules concerning certain suffixes (-ic, -ical, -ity, -tion)
  - 2. Exercise
- (b) Jazz Chant
  - 1. For /a/ vs. /ʌ/ distinction, for /h/ placement, and for *wh* question practise: Carolyn Graham’s Jazz Chant “Sh! Sh! Baby’s Sleeping!” This has been changed by one of our classes to “Hush! Hush! Mother’s Sleeping!” with a cynical last line “But who really cares?”

V. *Oral Report* (Individual Student) (10 minutes)

e.g., “My Role as Director of a Crisis Centre”

Class Reaction (10 minutes)

VI. *Dyad Discussion* (Remaining time)

“I was alone, never free, for I carried my chains with me, and they spread out and shackled all I touched.”

Margaret Laurence

- (a) Discuss what “chains” women carry.
- (b) Whom do we “shackle”?

**Evaluation: Is the Course Effective?**

Current views, expounded by Chris Brumfit, Merrill Swain, etc. and upheld by all who observe the benefits of a communicative orientation to

ESL teaching, claim that improvement is great if the teaching aims at discourse competence and socio-linguistic competence rather than at grammatical competence; if student dominance rather than teacher dominance is the norm in the classroom; if emphasis is on function rather than on form; if content focusses on broad, philosophical topics rather than on narrow, restricted subjects; if materials are authentic rather than prepared solely for the classroom; if group and pair work is emphasized rather than general class discussion. These positive views we have tried to implement (with the exception of the twenty minutes each week devoted to direct teaching of grammar and phonetics). And we are pleased to have observed marked improvement in our students.

Although we at Concordia's TESL Centre fully recognize the fact that no tremendous improvement in oral skills can be produced in 26-39 hours with mature students whose errors have often become fossilized, we nevertheless have been extremely encouraged by the results. Mature students who were shy, inhibited, and hesitant, who suffered from feelings of inadequacy in their approach to oral expression, have become very much more assertive, are able to hold their own in debate, and at the end of thirteen weeks have become able to express themselves very much more fluently.

The advances in phonological control for some of our students, have been understandably, though disappointingly, small. Indeed, considering what we know from language acquisition studies about the very small probability that any pronunciation changes can be expected from older students, we have been surprised that there have been *any* marked advances with these students. All students have achieved a greater understanding of how their oral production differs from that of native speakers, and they can all produce improved production when thinking carefully, but, naturally, the improved fluency sometimes impedes the "careful thought," and only a few students have made marked gains in this area. Grammatical improvements have also been somewhat limited in rapid speech, but written work has shown great gains. Vocabulary has greatly expanded, for the students have had to conduct interviews and surveys using technical English, they have had to report on the sexual bias in English TV sit-coms and old Archie Bunker re-runs, and they realize that they must try to spend 5-6 hours weekly, outside of class, exposing themselves to English language, and practising it.

Many of our francophone students have stated that they had always hated their English classes in school for various school-related reasons (e.g., boring grammar-translation classes, mechanical drills, decontextualized vocabulary memorization) or for political reasons, such as distrust or dislike of English speakers. In contrast, our class with its use of a meaning-

ful, exciting topic which has encouraged heated discussion and sharing of experience, which women world wide, French, English or Bahrain, all may share; its emphasis on a truly communicative approach; its use of role play, games, songs, and jazz chants; its constant reinforcement of meaning rather than of form in discussions (as with L1 acquisition), has created the relaxed environment which is conducive to the development of fluency.

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