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Engaging the Diverse Classroom by Incorporating Foreign Language Elements into Instruction

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ABSTRACT

The numbers of international students who speak English as a second language are on the rise in U.S. universities and institutes of higher education. These students represent a population for whom active learning and engagement in classroom discussion is particularly beneficial. Yet international students are less likely to access or participate in such learning communities, keeping silent and disengaged from classroom discussion due to anxiety about speaking English, a lack of confidence in their English-speaking ability, and a lack of motivation to speak in English. These deterrents can be especially damaging in a humanities class which emphasizes oral participation in the learning community. This study attempts to address this issue and test whether by incorporating the native language of non-native English speakers into a class conducted in English increases international and host student engagement. The study measured student responses to the inclusion of some Russian language instruction in a literature course which was conducted solely in English. In particular, the study measured participation rates, both in class and online, of native Russian-speaking and native English-speaking students, and found that when lecture included some emphasis on Russian words or the Russian language, native Russian-speaking students were more likely to participate in course discussion and native English-speaking students were more likely to participate, too, resulting in a stronger learning community and the likelihood of increased learning for the class as a whole. This would suggest that the incorporation of the native language of international students into humanities lectures positively impacts student engagement.

Keywords: international student, learning community, active, diversity, language

Introduction, Purpose of Study, Research Questions

Rates of international student enrollment in U.S. universities are on the rise (Banjong & Olson, 2016, p. 4). To meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, U.S. universities and other institutions of higher learning need to develop new pedagogical methods. In particular, the influx of international students challenges instructors who seek to create strong learning communities in the classroom. The learning community model of education maintains that students learn best by actively engaging in shared processes of intellectual investigation with their instructors and classmates rather than passively absorbing lecture material from the instructor alone. As Jan Guidry Lacina (2002) points out, both international and host students benefit socially, culturally, and academically from reciprocal interactions (p. 26) of the kind one finds in courses using the learning community model rather than relying solely on traditional lectures.

One purpose of this study concerns developing lesson plans to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse classroom. International students who speak English as a second language (and it is these students that this paper regards and will refer to, simply, as “international students”) struggle with language and social adjustment (Andrade, 2006, p. 149). Some studies have found that they are also less likely to make use of important resources such as professors’ office hours (Ferris, 1998, 301). This suggests that as instructors we ought to design lesson plans which foster confidence and comfort in international students, engage them in class discussion, and encourage intellectual interaction between international and host students and their instructors.

Secondly, this study proposes to fill a gap in the conversation concerning how to engage students in the global classroom. Current literature focuses on methods of welcoming and integrating international students into ESL, business, or STEM programs in U.S. universities, but few explore similar methods for the humanities or, more specifically, for literature courses conducted in English. Because English literature and other humanities classes emphasize oral participation, a problem area for many international students, it comes as no surprise that international students majoring in the humanities tend to be the “most likely to report having difficulty with class participation, small-group discussions, formal speaking, and debates” (Ferris, 1998, p. 303). Yet current literature reflects little emphasis on how to engage international students in the humanities classroom, an omission which this paper will, I hope, begin to remedy.

Finally, many studies focus on the English language limitations of international students and the challenges these limitations present. This study is interested in these challenges, too, but is more interested in the success factors that might be associated with the integration of the international students’ native language skills into the classroom setting. In other words, this study represents an asset-based rather than deficit-based approach to education and proposes that cultural and linguistic diversity is not a deficit but an asset which enriches learning communities. The paper will address one means of attempting to build in-class learning communities by drawing on international students’ native language strengths.

The research questions are:

1. Does the incorporation of the native language(s) of international students into lessons in English literature classes encourage international students to engage in class discussion?
2. Does the increased engagement of international students increase the engagement of host students?

Theoretical Orientation and Literature Review

My research will be based on the theory that learning communities instigate academic achievement. Drawing from Lenning and Ebbers (1999), Chun-Mei Zhao and George D. Kuh (2004) define different types of learning communities. The types of learning communities that most pertain to this study are two: the first, the “classroom learning community” tends to “treat the classroom as the locus of community-building by featuring cooperative learning techniques and group process learning activities as integrating pedagogical approaches” (116); the second, the “student-type learning communities...are specially designed for targeted groups” (116), for example, international students.

Learning communities integrate interactive, shared inquiry between classmates and teachers (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 5). Kenneth Bruffee argues that students learn best in

collaborative spaces like learning communities. Bruffee (1999) explains that most people “assume that college and university professors discover, store, and purvey knowledge, while their students consume, process, and use it; instead, Bruffee maintains, “professors and students alike construct and maintain knowledge in continual conversation with their peers” (x), a process of collaborative learning which yields the best educational gains (xii).

Research bears out Bruffee’s argument for the pedagogical value of learning communities. In general, collaborative learning leads to higher educational outcomes than traditional lecture models (Kapucu, 2012). According to Zhao and Kuh (2004), “participating in learning communities is uniformly and positive linked with student academic performance, engagement in educationally fruitful activities (such as academic integration, active and collaborative learning, and interaction with faculty members), gains associated with college attendance, and overall satisfaction with the college experience” (124).

The same is true for international students, for whom peer-based learning communities also increase academic performance (Mlynarczyk & Babbitt, 2002). Delphine N. Banjong (2015) discovered that international students who reported difficulties with language and socializing and who made use of their institution’s writing centers and counseling centers experienced positive outcomes and exhibited greater success in college. However, according to the 2015 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), international students constituted one of the groups that was least likely (at 13%) to access learning communities. Moreover, language barriers often deter in-class collaborations. International students’ lack of confidence in their English oral skills limits their likelihood to participate in classroom learning communities (Andrade, 2010, p. 223).

Student disinclination to engage in classroom discussion can prevent learning communities from forming, and it is unfortunate but unsurprising that it is precisely a population of those students who need learning communities most—international speakers of English as a second language—who find it most difficult to speak in classes conducted in English. Many studies have established the problem. Ferris (1998) found that international students lack confidence in their listening and speaking abilities in English (310), and that students experienced difficulty engaging in “oral presentations, student-led discussions, or structured large-group debates” and were less likely to attend professors’ office hours (301). In a survey of more than 1,000 international students at the University of Toledo, Sherry et al. (2010) found that students stressed the need for support in regard to spoken English (37). Hye Yeong Kim (2011) found similar results among international graduate students, who experienced difficulty adapting to the host classroom due to language and cultural barriers (291-292). Anxiety concerning speaking English in class impeded these students’ ability to engage in the class and complete course requirements (285).

Along with anxiety, another deterrent to speaking in class concerns motivation. Andrade (2010) found that international students might be unmotivated to practice speaking English or to participate in classroom discussions conducted in English (221-239). Wu et al. (2001) reinforced this finding at the graduate level, concluding that instruction geared toward an international student’s major focus of study functions best as a means to engage the student in English (303-304).

While many students might be unmotivated to speak and engage in a course conducted in English, many also remain disengaged because they are not confident in their abilities to speak English. This lack of confidence constitutes a significant risk factor in a student. Among international students, confidence in academic ability has been linked to confidence in spoken

English and to success rates in college. Telbis et al. (2014) found that international students who lacked confidence in English also lacked confidence in their academic abilities and were less likely to succeed (336-337). After conducting a study of an international and host student buddy program, Nittaya Campbell (2012) found that international students value a congenial and low-risk atmosphere where they are welcomed to practice and improve their English speaking skills; in Campbell's study, the buddy program provided the international student "with an opportunity to practise speaking English in a nonthreatening environment," and students' confidence in speaking English increased (221).

Methodology

This research was conducted in a class listed under European literature at the University of California, San Diego. It was a single-author course focusing on the prose work of the Russian-American novelist Vladimir Nabokov. Course readings, papers, lectures, and discussions were conducted in English. I was the course instructor. Thirty-one students enrolled in the course, and among the course's students were four native Russian speakers coming to English as a second language.

Because Nabokov wrote both in English and Russian, I was able to incorporate into lecture analysis of Nabokov's Russian work (both in my own translations and in his) as well as analysis of his use of Russian words, phrases, and puns in his English works. I presented lectures heavily featuring Russian words and passages during the third, seventh, and eighth weeks of the ten week course. I tracked participation during each week of the course and then compared rates of participation for weeks in which lecture incorporated some Russian against weeks with no Russian supplements.

Early in the course, students were informed that participation in discussion was encouraged. The course offered two outlets for discussion: in class (by speaking during lecture) and online (by posting in writing on the course website).

Each day, I traced participation in these two forums. To be counted as a participant in the classroom, the student had to speak, posing a question, a comment, concern or argument for analysis. To be counted as a participant in discussion, the student had to post a response to the course reading for that week.

Findings

The results showed that those weeks when Russian was featured in lecture, course participation increased significantly among host students as well as native Russian speakers in both the classroom discussion and the online forum. On average, 83% of students would submit a weekly post to the online forum. The weeks of engagement in Russian saw a response rate of 97% (week 3), 90% (week 7), and 97% (week 8), the highest rates of activity for the quarter. These online acmes of activity corresponded to peaks in in-class participation. During an average week of class, 73% of students voluntarily spoke. The weeks of Russian readings saw a participation rate of 81% (week 3), 90% (week 7), and 84% (week 8), again, the highest all quarter.

Moreover, 100% of the native Russian speakers participated in those classes that featured Russian language analysis (in and in relation to English), and 100% of Russian language speakers posted in the online forum during weeks featuring Russian language analysis.

Uncharacteristically, Russian speaking students initiated the online discussion during the weeks that incorporated Russian into lecture. After the first lecture incorporating Russian, two out of the first three online posts were responses from Russian speakers. After the second lecture incorporating Russian, the first three online responses were from Russian speakers. And after the third lecture incorporating Russian, the first two online responses were from Russian speakers. Shortly after the first lecture referencing Russian, each of the Russian students separately visited office hours.

Type of Participation	Average for the Quarter	Average During Weeks Featuring Russian
Online	83%	95%
In Class	73%	85%

Figure 1: Rates of Participation

Discussion

The findings suggest that the incorporation of a student's native language into lessons in English literature augments collaborative efforts among both native and nonnative English speakers. Students reported benefiting from the peer-engagements in the classroom and online settings, attesting to the theories of Bruffee (1999) and others who assert that interactive learning communities foster strong environments for educational growth. The students who were native Russian speakers participated in the course discussions concerning Russian with unanimity, regularity, and rigor, suggesting that foreign language use in the English literature classroom can boost the participation of foreign language speakers and improve the likelihood that the foreign language speakers will establish themselves as integral elements in the learning community. After Russian was used in this class, the Russian speakers were more likely to engage in in-class discussion, to post in (and lead) online discussions, and to attend office hours, a resource which Ferris (1998) found international students rarely use (301).

It stands to reason that this method of foreign language use in the English literature classroom might bolster confidence in foreign language speakers. The nonnative English speakers can be called on as experts in their native languages. In this course, nonnative English speakers were eager to share that expertise. This addresses the point made by Telbit et al. (2014) that confidence in speaking in English is essential to an international student's immersion and success in a learning community (339). The course's native Russian speakers exhibited greater confidence and willingness to participate when they had a clear contribution (as Russian language consultants) to make to the class.

This confidence spread to the class' other nonnative English speakers, who also increased engagement. When one second language was engaged in lecture, the other, non-Russian speaking international students tended to take a greater part in the classroom activity. Andrade (2009) reports that nonnative English speakers are more confident and comfortable discussing problems in English with other nonnative English speakers (as opposed to discussing them with English speakers) (30). The introduction of one foreign language in an English literature classroom might be enough to pique the involvement of speakers of other foreign languages, particularly if the discussion (as it is wont to do in literature classes concerning multiple languages) centers on questions of translation and style, questions which a bilingual population must constantly consider.

When the course's international and nonnative English speakers began actively collaborating in the classroom and online forums, the course's native English speakers became more engaged, too. The Russian speakers' input on Nabokov's manipulations of Russian in English enriched our analysis of the texts and pushed the classroom and online conversations into ever more sophisticated terrain. On a more basic level, the native English speaking population of the class was exposed to a foreign tongue which, according to Campbell (2012), cultivates patience and collaboration, as the native English speakers experience the strangeness of grappling with a foreign language (221). Such interactions, Campbell notes, aid in the creation of the "nonthreatening environment" (221) so key to the success of a collaborative learning community.

On the whole, the use of Russian in our English literature course motivated the Russian speakers to dive into the classroom discussion. As Wu et al. (2001) point out, international students tend to be more engaged in an English educational discussion when that discussion regards their intellectual or professional interests (303-304). If students become involved when course material relates to their experience and interests, then it seems probable that students will react positively when their own native language comes into play during a lecture. In this class, precisely that happened, and as one international and foreign language group of students increased their involvement in the class, the rest of the class responded in kind.

Limitations

Clearly, this is not a comprehensive study. The participants were few in number and limited to a single research university. So limited a pool of participants attending college at the same institution reduces the likelihood that these research findings reflect conditions that are widespread.

Moreover, the course in which the research was conducted lent itself to and even required the introduction of a second language to the study of literature in English. Not every author offers up a curriculum as multilingual as Vladimir Nabokov, who wrote in English, Russian, and French. Instructors may not always be able to find a pertinent and meaningful way to inform a study of literature in English by taking recourse to another language. Even then, the class roster might not possess any students who speak that language natively or at all. If instead of four Russian speakers, my class had had no Russian speakers, my lessons might not have had the same success in terms of instigating student participation.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future studies might challenge or reinforce these findings by casting a wider net. A study composed of more research participants, more instructors, more institutions and more types of institutions (for example, research as well as non-research universities) would go far to corroborate or complicate the findings of the current study and strengthen our understandings of linguistically diverse learning communities.

Future researchers might distribute surveys geared to measure confidence and motivation in students. In my discussion above, I assume that increased participation is an indication of increased confidence and motivation—but this need not be the case, of course. I offer that discussion, really, as a hypothesis to be tested in further research.

Yet another possibility for further study would involve the international students who speak English as a second language and do not speak the second language that is implemented in the English literature classroom. In my study, international students who did not speak Russian still

increased participation when Russian was used in the classroom. A future study might research these students specifically in order to see if a gesture toward multilingualism in general sparks the involvement of multilingual students.

Conclusion

My findings suggest that language diversity in the classroom positively impacts student performance. When lecture features the native language of nonnative English speakers, those students' and, indeed, the entire class' participation increase. Increased participation is crucial for academic success. A student's engagement in learning communities both in and out of the classroom will determine that student's likelihood of doing well in the university. International students are the group least likely to seek out and participate in learning communities. Therefore, it's imperative that instructors encourage international students to participate in the classroom learning community. By weaving linguistic associations into lecture, instructors can create an active role in the classroom for international students with the result that international students participate more, seek out resources, and the classroom on the whole becomes a livelier place of learning.

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