

t r a n s l a t i o n

from understanding to misreading and back again

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From Translating to Bridging the Language Barrier: Preparing Non-native English Speakers for an American Art and Design Curriculum

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If design students are given the task to design a store, they know from their basic experience that buildings should have walls and a roof. A store should have an entrance, a cashier area, a storage area and a place to display goods. Students might add their own ideas such as windows, vaulted ceilings, departments and specialized lighting because they are part of their own shopping experience. But are the students savvy enough to recognize the functions of each of element of their design? Do they realize how shoppers' behavior is affected by what the designer chose to place in the store. Thus, it an architecture instructor's role to convey to students an awareness of how to deconstruct forms in order to analyze familiar ones. Then the instructor gives the students tools to manipulate this form.

The illustration above is like learning a second language. All language students have experience with the functions and potentials language in their native tongue. In addition, all of our students are highly literate in their native language and culture. However, like the beginning design student, they have probably never analyzed the individual parts of their language. They have not had to bring their subconscious knowledge gained through interaction into active analysis. Unlike the beginning design student, though, learning English is not the students' primary goal; rather ESL seems like a hurdle in pursuit of a degree from an institution where English is the medium of instruction.

Furthermore, the students will continue their art and design education, and perhaps, their professional career in a new and foreign culture. This means that in addition to the language skills they need to compete academically, they also need the vocabulary, cultural background and tools to critique, visualize and reinterpret the foreign environment which surrounds them. To address this need, SCAD's (Savannah College of Art and Design) ESL (English as a Second Language) program includes not only language instruction, but also language of art and design instruction.

Overall, 10% of SCAD's student body is International. Within the graduate school, the percentage is 20%. There are currently about 125 plus each quarter who need to increase their English ability before they are prepared to take regular academic courses at SCAD. 95% of our ESL students will matriculate into the degree programs of SCAD. 80% of our population is from East Asian. There are several elements which are typical of SCAD's studio classes. These classes require students to lead critiques, which means students need familiarity with culturally acceptable style and/or historical development of a particular style.

Many of the more advanced classes require students to journal project development and complete some group projects. As a result, fluency in art and design vocabulary is a necessity. Additionally, some majors require portfolio reviews which include mock job interviews. Thus, students should be able to frame their artist statement and theories within a context culturally familiar to United States firms. Finally, graduate students of all majors will produce a Master's thesis.

Hurdles in Functioning in a New Language

The acquisition process may have the following challenges. Language learners have problems with verb time because expressing time tends to be language specific. Likewise, words do not necessarily have a discreet point or one-to-one translation. They have problems producing and interpreting sound which are not present in their first language. Also, acceptable word order varies from language to language. For languages that are more linguistically distant, the student may have to learn new letters or a new direction for reading before s/he can write and read and, in effect, self-study a language.

The less obvious fact is that language is how a culture interprets its world. People speaking the same language are able to access a concept because they share a common medium through which they have coded concepts into their minds. For people speaking different languages, maybe direct word-to-word translation falls completely off its mark due to cultural interference or bias.

An illustration of this concept is the interpretation of meaning in color. From a survey conducted among our ESL students, we collected some interesting data. For example, a particular design's criteria may include the use of "warm, welcoming" color for a home exterior. The subjective context here can bring about a variety of results depending on a student's culture of origin. A design student from Mexico, based on a lifetime of Mexican cultural experience, may apply to this criterion a bright, saturated tangerine (a common color in Mexican architecture). Though "welcoming" and "warm" in Mexico, the same color choice may be viewed as "loud" in the US, or even aggressive by a student from an environment like Japan, where such colors are seldom used for architecture. The Japanese student may opt to use dull, flat, Earthy tones to convey warmth and welcome, which in turn could be viewed as bland by American professors, classmates, or clients. This is how cultural context can lead to skewed interpretation and off-target results, which then leads to confusion and the need for students to gain cultural and linguistic awareness.

Process of Language and Academic Behavior Acquisition

Most students spend six months to one year in our program. Though they are prepared for university study, this does not make them as fluent as the native speakers among whom they will be studying. American undergraduates have had at least 12 years of schooling in English, and graduate students from American institutions have already finished a college diploma in English. Native students have already acquired the language they need to succeed at university as well as the skills needed to access what is lacking. Just as important, native

students have and understand the expectations academic behavior in the United States.

There are different stages a language learner passes through in order to effectively communicate in a new language. The first stage of language learning involves reception without output. In an ideal learning situation, students are exposed to language which is about one level above what they can produce fluently and accurately. In fact, a learner will consistently receive language at a higher level than s/he can produce. Moreover, the fact is that only effective communication is the goal for most learners. Additionally, communication at the same level as an educated native speaker is an unrealistic expectation for all but the most talented and those that started at an early age.

As for grammar, students begin with simple verb tenses and work their way through to the most difficult verb tenses. By the end of our program, though, students are able to produce and interpret verb tenses accurately in isolation and less so in longer discourses. As expected, sentence structure goes from use of SVO (subject verb object) sentences to familiarity with complicated sentences such as SVO [that] VO and SVO. On the whole, students leave our program being able to write sentences at varied complexity levels.

As for vocabulary, the amount a student can internalize over a one-year program is relatively small. Students must learn how to use clues from the surrounding environment, words, and grammatical structure to hypothesize meaning. If they do not, lower vocabulary affects students' classroom performance in the following ways. Interpreting reading and preparing written assignments takes longer. Students use word-to-word translation and may end up mistranslating. Or, students misinterpret concepts because the original concept is not present in their first language. Additionally, students may be familiar with a word that has the same or similar pronunciation to a word that they are unaware of, and it is actually the word that they are unaware of that they need to use.

All in all, though many people believe that grammar and vocabulary are what a person needs to be functional in a second language, these are only the scaffolding. Grammar is the rules and structure for creating meaning while vocabulary is the ideas placed within the scaffolding. However, the true goal for language is communication, and this involves a host of nuances: syntactical, oral, aural, physical and cultural.

The greatest difficulty our program has with differences in academic behavior expectations arises from students never having been required to produce novel concepts. For example, in Japan, it is expected for students to submit reports/papers that are mostly compilations of relevant material written and/or published by someone else. In other words, the notion that research serves as a support and conduit to new ideas, as generally expected in American academics, is not as commonly practiced or expected in Japan, aside from new research and experiments in the sciences. The academic custom for individuality can cause difficulty for Japanese students, or any student from a similar educational culture where researching, proposing theses, engaging in Western/American style critical thinking, and defending one's ideas is not a crucial and expected element of academic competence and success.

Interestingly enough, many of these students will state one of the reasons they decided to study in the United States is because it has innovators and creative thinkers in art and design fields versus only artists and designers who may be technically talented at copying other's work.

Thus, our programs contains classes in four language skill areas: grammar/writing, reading/vocabulary, oral skill and listening/speaking, concentrate on pulling students out of the pattern of deference to the instructor and repetition of instructor's examples to a place where students feel responsible for their academic progress and free to defend their choices on the basis of critical thinking. Likewise, this is an underlying goal of the Language of Art and Design courses. In addition to learning a new artistic culture, and by extension, its contexts, international students must challenge themselves to approach academic and artistic individuality as a requirement and expectation for expression and good design.

Specific Program Classes

Our classes are divided into Grammar/Writing, Listening/Speaking, Oral Skills, Reading/Vocabulary and The Language of Art and Design (only two quarters). When International students first arrive at SCAD, unless they meet the criteria for exemption from ESL (www.scad.edu/esl/assessment), they must take an English Proficiency exam, which is administered by the SCAD ESL department. Depending on the exam score, the student either exempts ESL requirements or is placed at the appropriate level within one level of our six-level program. Levels I through IV are ESL only classes and receive no university credit. In Levels V and VI, students can take university credit SCAD classes, along with no-credit ESL classes. In Level VI, students either take Freshman Composition for International Students, a credit course, or International Graduate Research and Writing, a non-credit course.

In Grammar/Writing students advance from simple to complicated grammatical structures. The writing component, though, is another area in which students must change their cultural perceptions. American academic writing tends to be straight forward. It begins with a blueprint of what can be expected in the writing and continues to develop in a step-by-step fashion following an outline. Some of our students come from cultures where the valued writing skill is the ability to subtly reveal meaning. Other students come from cultures where placing related ideas within the text is valued. Thus, the progression of ideas in writing may be chaotic instead of methodical for an American reader. It is usually at Levels V and VI before students are able to produce texts in line with American academic writing style. If this kind of clash of occurs with writing texts, imagine what other mistranslations, i.e. screwed meaning and expectation occur in other courses such as 3D design. Secondly, SCAD's structure requires presentations and critiques for many classes. Thus, in Listening/Speaking classes, students focus on: recognizing important verbal cues, engaging in social conversation, and preparing and giving formal presentations. Many of the conversational and presentation exercises are geared toward loosening students up, making them feel comfortable in expressing their ideas with Americans and in front of

American students, and increasing their speaking volume. Our Oral Skills classes teach students the individual sounds of English and the rhythm, stress and intonation of those sounds in succession. This helps students to acquire a native-like flow to their speech. In our Reading/Vocabulary classes, students learn how to access meaning thorough context. Additionally, they learn how to synthesize ideas that they read in order to produce new ideas. This is important because many students come from educational cultures where repetition, not individuality, is expected.

In the Language of Art and Design courses, language ability is cultivated and strengthened through learning about art and design. These courses are at the high intermediate/ low advanced ESL level, Levels IV and V. They employ the “four skills” of language, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing, through a hands-on art appreciation-style course format. Students learn how to: look at, read about, discuss and write about images. They also complete art/design-themed assignments and projects which target specific vocabulary and concepts relevant in art and design. Furthermore, students prepare for SCAD’s teaching technique by engaging in verbal and written critiques, making formal presentations and defending their work and ideas. The ultimate goal is for students to develop their ability to discuss art and design, intelligently and with confidence, in an American artistic environment. This ability is essential for success in the SCAD academic context, and later in professional work if students choose to remain in the US.

The content of the Language of Art and Design courses reflects the need for students to target specific vocabulary and concepts and to acculturate themselves to American artistic culture. Through a concentration in art and design-specific language, students develop verbal and written comprehension of art and design fundamentals, such as the elements of art (line, shape, form, value, color, space, texture), the principles of design (unity, variety, emphasis, rhythm, movement, balance, pattern, proportion), and the critical method (description, analysis, interpretation, evaluation). After the fundamentals, students develop comprehension of 2- and 3-dimensional media, familiarity with general art histories (Western and Nonwestern), familiarity with various art and design movements, and familiarity with architectural vocabulary and aesthetics. Presentations incorporating the above content are also an important component of the Language of Art and Design courses.

Conclusion

It is not only language, i.e. words and grammar, that students need to acquire before they can succeed at an American art and design university. There is not only the cultural context which supports the language , but also the cultural and behavioral expectations within which a student must perform. Going back to the initial example of a student designing a store, words and grammar are only the walls, the roof, and the exits. The language teacher presents the cultural nuances of culture and language which allow for the display racks, the recessed lighting, the color schemes and the space flow to produce desired outcomes.

Note: Included with this paper is a list of teaching techniques which are useful for those who have International students in class.

Classroom Techniques for Teaching Non-Native English Speaking Students

The following are suggested techniques to increase non-native English speaking students' success in your classroom:

- use high frequency words
- avoid long sentences
- avoid slang and phrasal verbs (mix up, lay out)
- avoid little known cultural references
- give non-native English speakers longer response times
- allow for shorter answers by non-native speakers
- pair native speakers with non-native speakers
- ask for rephrasing of information to check for understanding
- rephrase the information or directions yourself
- use hand gestures to act out instructions
- encourage students to meet you after class