

A Response to *Language or Culture? A Tutor's Approach to ESL Appointments*

MAIN POINTS

- ESL stands for English as a Second Language
- Two goals can be achieved by utilizing the resources compiled in this paper
 - Writing associates can help improve ESL students' understanding of English
 - Writing associates can help improve ESL students' English writing
- Writing associates should become familiar with discrepancies between English and common foreign languages spoken at Trinity (with regards to grammar and culture)
- Language Transfer Theory-“The idea that one's native language can have an effect on one's use of a second language” (Turner, 2)
 - Positive transfer-native language amplifies a student's ability to learn English
 - Negative transfer (interference)-native language hinders a student's ability to learn English
 - Practice helps counteract effects of interference
- The author claims that language reflects culture
 - Question to ponder: Is language a part of culture or is culture a part of language?
- ESL students struggle with the difficulty of being subjected to a new culture while the ways of their native culture is always in the back of their mind
 - An anthropologist would coin this idea as ethnocentric: judging a new culture based on preconceived ideas from one's native culture
 - Since ESL students are not anthropologists, writing associates must acknowledge and understand how to navigate the difficulties these students face when they encounter cultural restrictions.
 - In fact, there are words and ideas that may be prevalent in one culture, yet not appear in a different culture. Thus, trying to express something that does not necessarily exist in a certain culture can cause much frustration among ESL students.
- The author believes that writing associates must learn about the foreign cultures behind the different languages spoken at Trinity.
 - Though a nice idea, this desire is not practical. Writing associates will encounter students from various cultures. I believe that understanding how to communicate with ESL students is more important than excelling in specific grammatical rules that are privy to certain languages.
- Two approaches to ESL pedagogy:
 - Prescriptive-emphasis on correctness of grammar
 - Descriptive-emphasis on why we use certain grammar in certain situations
- Rhetoric (the way we say things), culture, and language are a package deal (Turner, 4)
- ESL pedagogy has evolved over time
 - Before 1960s-ESL pedagogy focused on memorization
 - 1960s-ESL pedagogy moved away from blaming interference for errors and began focusing on individualized learning (similar to today)
 - 1980s-oral communication became more important than memorization

- Appointment with ESL students must be a conversation of “give-and-take” instead of a “one-sided instructional session”³
- Most common native languages among Trinity students are Mandarin, Vietnamese, Nepali, and Korean⁴
- Based on data provided by Trinity, writing associates would benefit from grammatical knowledge in Mandarin, Vietnamese, Nepali, Spanish, and Korean
- Writing associates should be sure to disregard any pre-conceived judgement about an ESL student’s language skills. Again, catering to the needs of the individual is most important and will be the most beneficial way to aid ESL students.

IMPORTANT TAKE-AWAY

- Below is a crash-course in grammatical structures among common native languages of Trinity students. However, it is important to realize that grammatical reparation is not the most important aspect of ESL pedagogy. The most important aspect of ESL pedagogy is to improve communication and understanding between the ESL student, the writing associate, and the writing. In tune with the mission of all writing centers, our goal is to improve the writer, not necessarily the writing. “Improvement” is individualized and can only be measured by the student. ESL student improvement is special because a proficient conversation, an “aha” moment, or simply a feeling of reassurance, can make all the difference to students learning a new language in the presence of a new culture.

Mandarin vs. English

Articles (a, an, the) do not exist in Mandarin

Mandarin does not rely on helper verbs (have, had, will, will have) to convey time

Word order is different in Mandarin

Mandarin only adds suffixes to nouns that refer to people

Vietnamese vs. English

Vietnamese spells words that sound the same, the same (dear vs deer is not a concept)

Vietnamese is uninflected-they do not add the same letters that English does to convey pluralism and verb tenses

Word order is different in Vietnamese

Korean vs. English

Articles (a, an, the) do not exist in Korean

Subject-verb agreement/conjugation is non-existent in Korean

Verb tenses are confusing to Korean-speakers because they use suffixes instead of helper verbs

Word order is subject-object-verb instead of English’s subject-verb-object

Spanish vs. English

Verb tenses differ slightly

Adjectives follow the noun they modify

No contractions

No helper or negative verbs

For more examples, please refer back to the guides in the reading. Remember, the needs of every ESL student are different, and that the most important aspect of ESL pedagogy is communicating for understanding.