

The Application of Universal Instructional Design to ESL Teaching

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Introduction

When I became an ESL teacher my background was in counseling and learning disabilities. I had taught at the university level for a few years, but in psychology and at a university in the United States. Thus, I approached my first ESL course differently than previous courses thinking different subject, different students, and different country.

What I soon learned was that all my previous training was not only useful, but needed. Why would I simply ignore some of the basic tenets in course design that I had studied and developed years before? Sure teaching English is different than psychology, but I was forgetting that onesâ approach to teaching should be universal.

I began to apply simple concepts based upon Universal Instructional Design (Silver, Bourke, & Strehorn, 1998). That is, I began to open the classroom and attempt to make it more accessible to all students.

Universal Instructional Design

Universal Instructional Design (UID) is based upon the universal design concept made popular by architects and designers in the 1970s. The universal design concept was first utilized to make buildings and other physical structures accessible to all people, and it has been found to be applicable to university educational environments (Silver, Bourke, & Strehorn 2000).

From the beginning, UID aims at full inclusion in the classroom by viewing all students within a continuum of learning abilities. Thus, a course ? no matter the subject ? can be designed in which an array of learning approaches and teaching strategies are stressed so that all students can participate fully despite any type of learning style or disability. UID also stresses that it is the classroom and course design that can remain flexible to

accommodate learning differences. Given the emphasis on the four basic language abilities or skill groups, I believe ESL and UID are a natural fit.

Ideas

Syllabus

To begin, I try to design a syllabus/course outline that is not only readable, but something that will be utilized more than once per semester (the first day!). This document, aside from basic course information (names and dates), emphasizes my expectation that all students must accept responsibility for their own learning as well as my flexibility in teaching style. This document is not set in stone as I attempt to include students' own suggestions to how they best learn. This is invaluable and a key approach to full inclusion. I know many teachers may disagree that they know what is best or, that when given the opportunity to respond to such a question, students will reply, "I don't know." While I have faced such "I don't know," many students do know how they learn best and can make helpful suggestions to the course if given ample opportunity to participate. I try to make the course syllabus available on disk, and it is always useful to have a clear, legible copy that can be blown-up, or scanned if needed.

Materials

Dictionaries and thesauruses ? A no brainer? Maybe not. I have met several ESL teachers that continually tell me that these types of resources are the responsibility of the student. I disagree. Having these resources readily available in the classroom will allow all students to be more independent during in-class assignments and activities.

Tapes from class ? I try to make audio tapes of my classes for my students and me. Not only can I review the tapes to prepare for subsequent classes, but also the tapes can help the students in exam/assignments preparation. Tapes can also be provided to students with disabilities and students who have missed class for legitimate reasons. Tapes can also be transcribed for future lecture notes and/or reference. Since many ESL activities are available on tape, I make these cassettes readily available to students for extra listening practice as well.

Books on tape ? An excellent ESL resource! Books on tape or on CD are useful to many students including those who may have disabilities, those who travel long distances, and those who have a preference for the auditory modality. Teachers should be knowledgeable as to whether or not the books they are using are available on tape/CD. If the books are not available, organizations like the Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic provide taping services. I often will record at least parts of the books we are using with my own voice or chase down other native speakers.

Additional reading/reference resources ? I try to provide a list of supplemental readings and/or resources to further enhance the content presented in class and in the text. Because I am a strong believer in the Internet, this list mainly includes web pages.

Instruction

Notes/Outlines ? I ask students during the first week of class to volunteer to take notes that will assist in providing accommodations to all students in the class. It is usually not a problem to find a willing note taker. However, when there is no note taker, I make sure to make my own notes available to all students. These notes normally take the shape of class outlines. The outlines I make help to keep me on track as well as help students to understand the main points of a lesson. When at all possible, handing out a lecture outline before class is optimal.

Accessibility of classroom material ? I try to read class handouts, assignments, illustrations, and posters out loud and modify experiential exercises to meet the specific learning needs of all students.

Support Information ? I include my office hours, peer tutoring information, teaching assistant availability, etc. All students should know where they can access help when needed.

Study guides ? Study guides are a fantastic way to provide students with an overview of the key concepts of the material they are learning. Study guides can be presented in a multitude of forms including questions, key concepts, key terms, etc. I often include the making of study guides as a class assignment in which students work in groups to design a study guide for a particular class topic. I too participate by sharing my study guide. In the end, we all share our guides with each other.

Sample Problems ? I find having sample problems available for students one of my most valuable teaching tools. The problems enable them to check their understanding in class and prepare for exams. Reviewing sample problems assigned for homework will also allow students the opportunity to check for understanding.

Location where assignments will be posted ? This could be outside my office, in the library, a website, or any other location to which all students have access. If a student loses an assignment or forgets what the assignment is, he/she will know where to find the information needed. This is particularly helpful when changes have been made to an assignment or the syllabus.

Assessment

Posted due dates ? Due dates for assignments should be clear as should the proper procedure and penalties for turning an assignment in late.

Criteria for assignments ? I find that information regarding what the objectives of assignments are as well as how the assignments will be graded is helpful to me when grading and to the students when completing the assignments

Time frames ? I try to supply students with time frames for long-term projects and studying. These time frames normally take the shape of a graphic representation of when I suggest they begin an assignment or begin to study for a test as well as my expectations for where they should be throughout the semester/term.

Extended time ? Certain students will require extra time on exams and assignments. I try to work these issues out ahead of time with students to ensure that assignments/exams will be completed in the additional time allotted to my specifications.

Homework protocol ? Students should be aware of how the work they complete outside of class will be evaluated or utilized. I also try to provide students with information regarding how to access assistance with home assignments (e.g., study groups) and what the penalties are for not completing homework assignments.

Alternate testing formats provided ? I try to consider alternatives for all students that allow them to present the information they have learned in a manner consistent with their learning style.

Quiet space for testing ? Many students are distractible and should be provided with a quiet, distraction free environment during exams. If this is not possible in your classroom, other arrangements should be made in advance to avoid unnecessary anxiety during the time of the examination.

Assignment choices/Extra credit ? Assignments choices allow students to be creative and to find ways of expressing their knowledge in a manner consistent with their learning style. I try to allow students different ways to present the information they have learned. Extra credit assignments will also assist students who may not typically fare well in the "traditional" classroom. For example, an extra credit writing assignments may provide a student who does not do well on tests a chance to enhance their grade at the same time they are learning more.

Conclusion

The barriers faced by implementing UID techniques in the ESL classroom can be multiple, but never as big as an adherence to the status quo in an academic setting making change difficult to implement. This is what I call the "guarded knowledge" theory. Simply stated, we must have strict rules and regulations about how to learn in order to grade, label, and justify what we do. And, any derivation of the above (i.e. allowing more time, books on tape, etc.) results in a dilution of the curriculum. I disagree. I think it is important to implement new and useful course design and teaching techniques to allow more access to the information being taught.

Teaching is at times more than a job. Some teachers lack awareness of the types of diverse learning needs within higher education. By designing a course based upon UID or implementing UID techniques, ESL students will no longer need to rely as heavily on support systems that are secondary to primary instructional programs.

References

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