

Collaborative Practice to Improve How ELLs Are Characterized in Online TESOL Methods Courses

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Online Disconnect

Though online environments certainly have potential to—and do—connect people across great distances, we have found that online teaching can ironically feel like an isolated endeavor. People have long said that teaching can be lonely in regular classroom settings: Once a teacher shuts the door, he or she is “alone.” Fortunately, educators—specifically language teachers—have made strides in finding innovative ways to establish collaborative relationships within physical schools and universities, through inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), communities of practice (Wenger, 2009), and various approaches to collaborative teaching (Gladman, 2015; Martin-Beltrán & Peercy, 2012). In online teaching, however, being alone takes on an additional dimension, with feelings of isolation a primary challenge of online instruction (Wilson et al., 2003). No longer is the teacher alone in front of a class of students in a physical institution; there are no hallways where you might run into another faculty member and talk about practice. Instead, being alone might actually mean sitting by yourself at your computer, possibly miles apart from students, with little or no connection to other teachers.

This, at least, seemed to be our situation. As learners of each other’s first language, we had not only formed a close friendship in graduate school but also had begun questioning together how educators depict language learners. After graduation, we found ourselves as young instructors teaching separate online courses miles apart at different institutions, at first in different U.S. states and later in different countries. Through occasional video-conferencing conversations, we came to realize we were doing similar work, facing similar challenges. We were both teaching online courses on TESOL to practicing and preservice teachers pursuing TESOL certifications. We both valued talking positively about English language learners (ELLs). And we both faced tricky situations in trying to facilitate and shape our students’ online, asynchronous discussions to that end. After recognizing our mutual, separate struggles, a collaborative relationship naturally emerged. Next, we share our stories of learning.

Positioning Ourselves Within the Narrative

Elena's Story

I am a nonnative English speaker, or an ELL, or a bilingual. Sometimes I do not know which label to use to describe myself and my linguistic and cultural abilities. I grew up learning and speaking Romanian, and I did part of my academic work in Romanian. I learned English as a foreign language (EFL) in my native country; now I am using English as a second language (ESL) daily while teaching in the United States. I have been an EFL and ESL teacher, as well as an international student and a faculty member, so I can say I have various life and professional experiences with using and developing ESL skills.

I met April when we were doctoral students. She was the first non-Romanian I met who speaks Romanian. It brought tears to my eyes hearing her speak Romanian because I regarded it as a great compliment and honor for me, my language, and my country. During graduate school, April was my language and cultural guide, helping me with the language and cultural intricacies that were new and unfamiliar.

I love teaching online, which is not the case for everyone, but even I sometimes felt alone with my class (that is, sitting at my computer) trying to determine how to talk (that is, write) to my students and unsure how to respond to posts that might portray emergent bilinguals in deficit-oriented ways (García & Kleifgen, 2018). I believe both April and I have the basic mechanics of teaching online figured out: We create online learning communities in which students interact asynchronously; we participate actively in forums; we write wrap-up announcements at the end of each forum; we maintain consistency across weeks by having a weekly overview, objectives, and tasks; and we encourage students to share their expertise and experiences. But I've found that when I have to address misconceptions about ELLs, I need a peer "buddy." In those moments, I wonder: How do I tactfully address these misconceptions in the forums, when everyone, not just the teacher with the misconception, can read the post? How do I address misconceptions while still valuing teachers and helping them save face (Goffman, 1955)?

April's Story

Elena and I are linked not only through our scholastic interests but also our common languages, both figuratively and literally. We both speak English and Romanian. For me, English is my first language. I learned Romanian as a Peace Corps volunteer 15 years ago in the Republic of Moldova, a former Soviet state bordering Elena's native Romania. When Elena and I met as doctoral students, I had just visited the campus international office to ask if they knew of any Romanian speakers with whom I might practice language; they didn't. So I was surprised at our initial orientation to find ourselves within a cohort of only six doctoral students.

Since graduating, we have moved miles, even countries apart. Like Elena, I have also lived and worked in my second language environment. Though my online courses are through my U.S. institution, I worked as an international scholar in Moldova. The beauty of online work is that it travels easily across distances. Through collaboration with Elena, we have often discussed what it means to be called an English learner. This question affects not only our identities but also how we talk in online environments with teacher-education students who are, in turn, discussing pre-K–12 ELLs in their classrooms. We certainly talked about this question of naming back in graduate school. It is a nuanced discussion even in face-to-face settings with added sensitivities necessary, as we have found, in online environments. We are far from the first to have this conversation. In conceptualizing our inquiry work, we draw heavily from literature affirming that emergent bilinguals (García & Kleifgen, 2018) should be regarded for the many linguistic and cultural

resources they bring to classrooms—rather than being perpetually cast as learners (Valdés, Kibler, & Walqui, 2014).

It was through my talks with Elena that I realized I had also personally taken on the identity of a language learner. I realized that whenever anyone in Moldova asked me if I spoke Romanian, I always answered, “*Încerc* (I try).” Elena helped me question that response: Why did I not simply respond, “*Da* (Yes)”?

“ If I myself, as an adult with years of immersion, school success, and specialization in language study, have difficulty presenting myself as proficient in my second language, how can children or adolescents studying English portray and envision themselves as proficient, especially when living and studying in the U.S. system that constantly portrays them as learners? ”

How can we help teachers we teach—sometimes themselves monolingual English speakers—understand these concerns, through the indirect medium of online study? It is this type of questioning that Elena and I are applying to our online courses.

Collaborating Online

As collaborative partners, we are working simultaneously toward two goals: (1) We are researching our practice with the intent of building knowledge about how instructors can shape online environments toward positive-oriented—rather than deficit-oriented (García & Kleifgen, 2018)—discourse, and (2) we are working as “critical friends” (Heath & Street, 2008) toward improving our own teaching practices in facilitating online discussions.

Through this process, not only are we available to talk with each other when we are flummoxed about how to respond to online discussion posts; we are also systematically reviewing each other’s course sites and watching for instances of deficit-oriented language. We are using an approach informed by discourse analysis (Bloome et al., 2008; Gee, 2014) to help us consider how meaning was constructed in online conversations and how we might better shape that conversation in the future. Our emphasis in this inquiry is not to affirm that we are good teachers but instead to look for ways of becoming better teachers, specifically online instructors, and in this sense to keep for ourselves a growth-oriented mindset (Dweck, 2007).

Sample Online Discussion

To illustrate the kind of work we are doing, we present a sample excerpt from the first week of April’s TESOL course on assessment and curriculum design. Because this was the beginning of the course and because it was expected that some students were taking an online course for the first time, learning objectives for the discussion include not only TESOL content but also understanding posting mechanics.

In the forum, April asked students to react to Gibbons’s (2009) seven intellectual practices. Prior to this passage, Miriam¹ had posted an initial discussion of Gibbons’s practices—describing how she uses interactive notebooks to help fourth-graders think like experts, one of Gibbons’s practices. In responding to Miriam, students began a secondary conversation about pull-out and push-in instruction. We coded this discussion as one for our own analysis because of the highlighted sentence in Response 5 (emphasis added):

¹All student names are pseudonyms.

Re: Diving into Gibbons' seven practices

[1] Jessica (Tuesday 4:17 am)

Hi Miriam. Do you mainly provide push in or pull out services? I mainly teach pull out, but I push in for a 3rd grade social studies class. The interactive notebook sounds like it could work really well in this scenario. What types of activities do your students do in these notebooks?

[2] Miriam (Tuesday 7:40 pm)

Hi Jessica,

There is no pull out services at the school that I work at. There is only push in. The interactive notebooks have a teacher side and then a student side that directly correlates to the other one. We put the teacher side on the right and then student side is on the left. It varies on how they appear and the content. [. . .]

[3] Elizabeth (Wednesday 8:37 am)

Hi Miriam,

I am new to the world of ELL and am not familiar with some terms. I understand pull out services, but is [sic] push in? Does it mean, giving the student one-on-one help by an ESL teacher in the classroom?

[4] Jessica (Wednesday 10:16 pm)

Hi Miriam,

“Push in” is when a teacher—ESOL, Special Ed, or Reading, provide [sic] services to the students in their regular classroom. I'm not sure if this is a formal term, but it is the phrase that is used in the county I teach in.

[5] Miriam (Thursday 6:20 pm)

Push in, is when a supporting teacher comes into the classroom to work with students. I currently have an ELL teacher that works with me throughout the day and an ELL aid. There is support in the classroom throughout the day. The ELL aid is not allowed to do guided reading with a group because she has not been formally trained in it. However, she does work in a small group setting. **Since the majority of the students are ELLs she works with the lowest students.** She does work with the other students. I think that I may have made more of a confusion.

Analysis

The two of us analyzed and discussed the passage together through an asynchronous electronic discussion. Because the excerpt was from April's course, she began our discussion by posing questions to Elena:

- (1) Do you think that Elizabeth left the conversation with an understanding of the difference between push-in and pull-out? If not, what misunderstandings might she have? As a teacher, what could I have done to clear those up?
- (2) What do you think that Miriam is saying in the highlighted passage in Response 5?
- (3) What ideas do you have for how I could insert myself in this conversation?

In her response, Elena answered these questions before posing additional questions to April. Our discussion continued in this way until both of us felt our questions had been resolved and that we had no new questions. Eventually, we came up with the following three conclusions.

1. *It was unclear whether Elizabeth had an improved understanding of “push-in” and “pull-out” instruction and that April as the instructor could have clarified this issue.*

We considered that Elizabeth’s question was a call for factual information and that it would be appropriate for April to enter the discussion and provide resources for answering the question. This information was not part of the week’s learning objectives, and Elizabeth did not post the question to the course site’s forum, which April specifically set up for asking questions. But the literature supports the value of “teachable moments” as opportunities for teaching and learning (Hyun & Marshall, 2003) when teachers might exercise sensitivity and provide quality feedback (Pianta, Hamre, & Mintz, 2011). April was reluctant to jump into the discussion because she did not want to squash students’ opportunities to position themselves as experts and because she tries in her teaching to disrupt the traditional initiation-response-evaluation order of classroom discussions (Bloome et al., 2008): “You know, this makes me think about the [initiation-response-evaluation] cycle, and how I try to disrupt that and avoid being the teacher with the answer in the end of a face-to-face discussion.” Elena pointed out that carefully crafted language can help further discussion, without overpowering students’ posts: “I like to be very diplomatic and I would say something like, ‘To add to what Jessica and Miriam are saying. . .’” The question of how teachers and students are positioned as holders of knowledge in online discussions is one we continue to explore in our ongoing research.

2. *The online context is reflected in the excerpt.*

As we paid careful attention to this excerpt, we noticed that in Response 4, Jessica apparently mistakenly responds to Miriam instead of Elizabeth. Although Miriam posted initially, Elizabeth asked the question about pull-out versus push-in. April did not notice this misnaming while teaching that week. In our analysis of the discussion, we considered the possibility that this might be because students are in their first week and are still learning each other’s names. We believe that it might also be related to the format of online discussions, in which respondents can lose track of who posted in which thread.

Elena commented: “In online instruction it is more difficult to keep track of names and if they are also learning the online format of the class, then it might be that they got lost in reading.” Because we both believe in building positive classroom climates (Pianta et al., 2011), whether in face-to-face or virtual environments, noticing this mistake, minor as it seems, speaks to us about the importance of helping students build community. One way we do that is by introducing ourselves and asking students to do the same, offering professional and personal information about ourselves, as we might do in an “ice-breaker” at the start of a face-to-face class. After our discussions about this excerpt, April also decided to adopt Elena’s practice of encouraging students to post pictures of themselves to help indicate who is “speaking.”

3. *There are larger discussion issues that April could bring up related to Miriam’s description of ELLs as “the lowest students.”*

Finally, our discussion led us to consider several possibilities of what Miriam might have meant in referring to ELLs as “the lowest students.” April said: “I didn’t respond directly to this, but looking back, I think that I really overlooked that in the hurry to get opening-week logistics taken care of.” This comment also reflects our previous point that the online context of the class affected the discussion.

Additionally, Elena saw how Miriam’s post reveals that a classroom aid, rather than Miriam as a fully licensed teacher, is largely teaching the ELLs. This statement echoes research that ELLs often receive fewer resources in schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Further, Elena pointed out that Miriam’s language is akin to national standardization discourse characterizing students by perceived measurable achievements. The question thus remained whether April should have addressed the statement in the moment. Elena noted:

“ So, I think like in pre-K–12 schools and with feedback we need not to correct everything and pick our battles. . . . This is what I think: These are wonderful teachers who are interested in ELLs and want to perfect their teaching so ELLs can really learn. We do not want to scare them off, we want to manage the situation/discussion in a delicate way and make them jump to the conclusions themselves. ”

Through our continued discussions, we thought of ways we could better manage learning without entering the discussion every time as correctors. April suggested setting discussion norms in this first week. We both regularly practice setting discussion norms with our face-to-face courses, but we had never done so with our online courses. Additionally, we decided we would bring up two issues from this excerpt later for whole-class discussion: first, the issue that teaching assistants, rather than fully certified teachers, might more often teach ELLs; and second, possible effects on ELLs of being labeled as “low” or “deficient.” We could easily think of literature to provide on these topics. We could even ask students to go back and examine their own language in discussion posts.

Conclusion

Through our collaboration, we have created new space to examine and improve our teaching in ways that are difficult to achieve during the regular pace of online courses. Our partnership stemmed from the need for collaboration when feeling isolated as online TESOL instructors. Our collaboration grew out of our common situations and interests, as language learners ourselves and as TESOL teacher educators uncertain of how to steer online discussion away from labels and toward positive depictions of ELLs. We acknowledge that in training future TESOL professionals, we have the responsibility to ensure teachers’ views toward ELLs do not harm students’ identities, including how these students see themselves and how they want to be seen (Gee, 2014). In online environments, teaching teachers about the language they use to describe students must be interwoven across the course, not in isolated modules. Our collaborative process helps us improve our practice for the future. For example, after April noted that she missed an opportunity to correct Elizabeth, Elena responded:

You see, as you mentioned in your other comment, in online and the first week, you can be busy, busy, and we can lose or overlook nuances. That is why this project of ours is so important. Now that we look in detail and at what the students said and why they might have said that and what we could have done, it sensitizes us for later when we see something similar.

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