The Tutoring Experience

Tutoring Reflection Paper

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Introduction
The paper is a summary of my experiences during my work as a volunteer tutor for the George Brown College ESL program. It describes the students who made use of the program and their difficulties. It describes the challenges I faced during the tutoring process and the strategies I used to help the students. I have also included my overall reactions to the experience.

Background
The aim of the tutoring program is to provide an activity in which the students can practice speaking. The format of the tutoring sessions is as follows: Groups of learners are formed based upon their language proficiency level. This is done to make communication between students easier. A tutor is assigned to each group to act as a facilitator and participant. A question sheet on a specific topic is provided. This is used as a guideline by the tutor to assist in starting a dialogue. The participants are not limited to discussing the topic presented. Each session lasts one hour.

Description of the learners
Students who came to the tutoring session came from various backgrounds. Most people were either of Asian or Spanish backgrounds. The Spanish speakers tended to be more outgoing and extroverted. On the other hand, the Asians tended to be introverted and shy. In addition there were a small number of participants from Eastern Europe.

The participants could also be classified into the following groups: visa students, young new immigrants, older new immigrants and established immigrants.
The visa students are probably in the 18 to 24 year old demographic. Their goal is to learn English and return home. They intend to use their certification to assist them in their post-secondary endeavours back home. We could safely say that they are strategically motivated.

The young new immigrants fall into the same demographic as the visa students. Their goal is to gain acceptance into a post-secondary course. While it appears they are strategically motivated, their long term goal is integration into Canadian society. Therefore they are intrinsically motivated.

The older new immigrants are people who had successful careers in their native country but find themselves unable to get work here in Canada. Their goal is to learn English as a step to being accredited in Canada. Their motivation is strategic. However they are probably the group most likely to suffer culture shock. If they reach the recovery phase of culture shock, their motivation will change from strategic to intrinsic.

The established immigrants are closer in age to the new immigrants. They suffer from fossilization of their English language skills. Their goal is to improve their language. Their motivation is intrinsic.

**The learners’ problems**

Obviously, the problems the learners had would depend upon their language proficiency. At the lower levels, there is a greater need for vocabulary. When students reach higher levels, fluency becomes important.

All people suffered from pronunciation problems. This was evident at all levels. It seemed to be more acute in the introverted students. This may be related to a problem the students expressed. When the students were asked what difficulties they were having, they would state that they had trouble understanding native speakers.
Tutoring Challenges and Strategies

The main problem I found was getting the session started. People didn’t want to start talking. This was particularly true if the students hadn’t attended a tutoring session. Their expectations were that they would be attending another class. The challenge was to change this into a discussion between peers. To combat this I needed to employ a variety of means to try and lower their affective filters.

Since most people said they had problems understanding native speakers, after introductions, I would discuss the nature of connected speech and the importance of content words. The explanation was kept simple (why native speakers talk so quickly). This got the students interested.

Another way was to start the session by having each student introduce themselves and then write their name on the attendance sheet. The rationale behind this was to make sure I had the name correct and to get an indication of speaking problems. After that would be a general questioning about their background, how long they were in Canada and their future plans.

Depending on the group and their needs I would employ other strategies. With a level six group I had them read the question from the sheet and pose it another person in the group in an attempt to try a different approach. (While this started some conversation, it didn’t spark a dialogue). With a level three group, I had them practice minimal pairs since some people in the group had some difficulties with pronouncing some words. A level five class was having problems with vocabulary so we reviewed the picture dictionary. At other times I would ask each person a question from the question sheet and then ask them to elaborate their answers. The overall rule I applied was “go with the flow”. Most of the time following this rule would lead to a productive session.

Overall reaction to the tutoring

Overall I found the tutoring process enjoyable. It was very interesting that I could find anecdotal evidence of the theories I leaned in the classroom. I think the concept of
having the tutoring sessions is a good one. I noticed that many of the students, especially the immigrants, had very full schedules. I think to set aside a time to practice their English. Anything that facilitates this has merit.

Since the sessions are voluntary I found all the students very motivated. This was even true of people whose personalities make participating in group sessions challenging. I credit the use of communicative practices by the school with making it more comfortable for these people to take part.

When I was studying Krashen’s theories I thought the concepts were too rigid. I think language acquisition occurs everywhere, even when you are learning its rules. However I have seen through my observations that there are affective filters and people do employ a monitor. I have also seen that there is benefit to providing a challenge to the learner. It’s where the “i+1” level is that is difficult to find. I think one can only determine that through experience. So I now have adopted parts of his theories, although the same can be said about other theories we studied.

The area of sociolinguistics contains a lot of self-evident ideas. Again, I found through my observations what a critical part of second language learning this is. I now see the critical importance of introducing culture into learning. It leaves me wondering what fills the void in places where they teach English as an International Language. Culture is part of a language.

Finally, I found it very useful to see the diversity in students. The exposure to people with differences in age, background, personality and language proficiency will be beneficial in my teaching career.