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Teaching with an Accent
I want to thank Dr. Tracey Derwing for helping me in the preparation of this presentation.
Outline

- Challenges of teaching with an accent
- Approaching accent in the classroom
- Engaging students
- General classroom strategies
- Vocabulary strategies
- Voice strategies
Students may have anxiety about having an international teaching assistant (ITA). –(e.g., Rubin, 1992)

Problems with general teaching and communication skills can be blamed on accent.

- Improving communication skills and understanding cultural differences can make ITAs more successful. (Douglas & Myers, 1989).
“They don’t understand me. I don’t know why, but they said that I don’t speak English.”

“Sometimes I think I know the lab much better than the other TAs, but students would rather ask a native speaker of English than me, just because they can better understand their speaking”

- Cited in: Derwing, Campbell, & Moulton, 2005
“When I used to lecture, I just talked and people just thought, okay, I won’t understand her because her first language is NOT English. Then they just put the gap in front of them and they won’t understand. They cover their ears.”

- Cited in: Derwing, Campbell, & Moulton, 2005
Approaching Accent in the Classroom

- Be up front about your accent from the first day.
- Make sure students know that it is okay to ask for clarification or repetition.
  - Students may feel that it is rude and/embarrassing to say that they can’t understand you.
- Ask questions throughout your lectures/discussions to make sure the students understand what you are saying.
Engaging Students

- Tell a students a little bit about yourself.
  - Make sure they know you have the expertise to teach the course.
- Learn their names.
- Look people in the eye.
- Move around the classroom.
- Don’t allow distractions.
  - Don’t let students use cell phones, check their email, etc.
Most students are primarily concerned about their grades.

- Be clear about grading procedures
- Make sure that students understand how they will be graded on each assignment
- As you teach, make sure you emphasize important information
Introducing important information

“Okay, make sure you get this because it could be on the test.”

“This part is really important.”

“You will need to memorize all of these formulas”

“This is how I want the answers written on a test.”

Don’t worry about writing this part down.
Have good visuals to back up your information

- Use clear handouts, PowerPoint slides, board writing, etc. to clarify what you are saying.
  - This can help students figure out what you are saying if they initially misunderstand
  - If students can’t understand everything you say, at least they will know they have key information written down
Use a 3 step delivery system

Introduction: Tell students what you are going to tell them that day

Main: Give the information

Conclusion: Summarize what you just told them
Vocabulary strategies

- Learn the common words in your discipline.
  - Record yourself leading a discussion or lab
  - Write out a lecture you might give
  - Check all of the words in your handouts and slides

- Learn how to pronounce these words well.
  - Have a native speaker record these words
  - Record yourself for practice
  - Make sure the stress is correctly placed
If a word or sentence is particularly difficult find another way to say it.

Use repetition with synonyms.
- e.g., If you push the button, the temperature will drop quickly and the water will freeze.
  
  Then....

So, the water will become ice really fast when you hit the button.
Voice Strategies

- **Intonation**
  - There is no way I can cover all of the rules of intonation here. However:
  - Be wary of talking at one constant pitch level...especially if that matches the hum of the projector.

- **Speed**
  - Talking to fast or too slow will make you hard to follow.
  - Sometimes nerves and the large amount of material you have to cover will make you want to rush.
Strategies Continued...

- **Volume**
  - Speaking quietly can make accented speech more difficult to understand.
  - If you can’t speak loud enough see if you can get a mic or make the students sit at the front.

- **Mumbling**
  - Sometimes we mumble without meaning to, especially if we are unsure about what we are saying.
Don’t face the board.

- Your voice will be much harder to understand if the student can’t see you.
To Review

- Be open about your accent.
- Encourage questions when learners don’t understand.
- Engage your students.
- Use visual support.
- Learn the important words in your discipline.
- Make sure you are loud enough and slow enough words.
References


Questions

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