



ESL MiniConference

Why I (kind of) hate (some) ESL curricula A Rant by Ashley Green

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Procrastination
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Disclaimer: I am solely basing this complaint on my experience in four different intensive English programs here in the States. Which is not to say, however, that I disliked working in these programs or that I am completely questioning the structure of these programs. I have learned a great deal from each teaching experience I've been given, and I am grateful for this. What follows is simply my observation of weaknesses within the curriculum and assessment methods I've worked with.

1. The curriculum is divided by skills. The program I'm in now has four skill areas: Grammar, Writing, Reading, and Listening/Speaking.

My last program also had four skill areas: Grammar/Writing, Reading, Listening, and Speaking. The program before that had three skill areas: Grammar/Writing, Reading, and Listening/Speaking. (Poor Reading out there all on its own.) I'm just not convinced that language learning divides so easily along these lines, however. Grammar is relevant in all skill areas, not just writing. Listening connects easily and wonderfully with reading. Speaking and writing also go well together.

I realize that IEP's use skill areas out of convenience. It's a lot of work to teach a class that covers all skills. But I've found a lot of drawbacks here. For example, my Arabic-speaking students tend to excel in speaking and listening. Accordingly, they become convinced that speaking and listening are the most important language skills, and they should advance further in the program because of their superior ability. I've also found the reverse to be true: a student who fails at one skill develops a mental block about that skill. She struggles in her reading class, thinks "I can't read well," and gives up.

This is also, I've found, a huge issue in low-level classes where it's nearly impossible to teach the skills separately. How do you begin to teach writing without the students having some basic understanding of English grammar? How do you teach speaking when the students may

still be in their “silent period,” where they need to be taking the language in without being forced to produce it?

2. The curriculum is divided into levels, with lists of specific skills that students should master at each level, and students are assessed based on their supposed mastery of these skills.

Every IEP curriculum I’ve seen has detailed lists of the language skills a student should be able to perform in any class at any level. Of course, there’s some validity to organizing the curriculum like this, but here’s my problem: tell me when, after my students leave our program, that they’ll need to identify the topic sentence of any given paragraph. Tell me when a professor will ask them to distinguish fact and opinion statements, or when their knowledge of the “will/going to” distinction will come up in their electrical engineering class.

Of course, I know your response: “Well, no, Ashley, these items won’t come up in their university classes because this sort of knowledge is assumed at that level. We teach it explicitly so the students will be prepared.” Yeah, I know, I know. But I still feel like I’m expending a lot of energy on activities that only make them marginally better at reading or writing or whatever, but do somehow make them much better at taking a test I, the non-expert in assessment, wrote. Which leads me to my next problem...

3. Students advance within the program based on grades and test performance.

This one really concerns me. I’ve yet to work in a program that didn’t base placement on tests, and I’ve seen no upside to this other than convenience. Assessment is a necessary, integral component of any curriculum, but it’s important to look at what assessment does: evaluates and, if possible, educates. But if we expect teachers to enact the curriculum in new and exciting ways, why do we insist at the same time that assessment (the kind that actually counts for something) has to be a test, with right and wrong answers and a time limit? It feels like taking two steps forward only to be yanked three steps back.

When my students are assessed based on their performance on tests, I get a little annoyed. Most tests I’ve come across were either written by another teacher in the program with little to no expertise in assessment,

or they were written by me, and I know I've got no expertise in assessment (though I'd like to think my common sense and teacher's intuition counts for something here). Not only is the validity of these tests up for debate, but I'm fairly certain that there are more than a few students out there who need alternative forms of assessment, which, by the way, they'll likely be given in their university classes. (I can remember doing lab experiments, making portfolios, and keeping journals as just a few of the non-traditional ways I was assessed in college. And I went to LSU. Not some fancy, experimental liberal arts college.)

Finally, grades. Grades, which are designed to motivate, but often have the exact opposite effect. I just came from a program that didn't give grades, and the students were lazy. I'm working in a program now that does use grades, and the students are completely obsessed with them. They may be motivated, but if they don't get an A, I get angry emails and visits to my office. And then I have those rare (but yes, they do exist) students who work really hard, but still fail the tests. Poor grades make them less motivated. Where's the benefit in that?

To sum up... I'm worried that the structure of so many ESL programs reflects an inherent procrastinatory (which is a word, even though Firefox insists on underlining it like it's not) attitude within education. It's the attitude that says, "Well, we know we need to rethink our curriculum and assessment and do what's best for the students, but we've got too many other problems to deal with right now. We'll get there eventually." And eventually never happens. Now, don't get me wrong, I don't think that we educators procrastinate because we're lazy; think we really do have 11,000 other things to do and rewriting the whole curriculum just isn't going to make the cut today. It's kind of like putting "change the world" on your to-do list. It's a nice idea, but someone's gotta pick up the dry cleaning and cook dinner, right?

What worries me is that while we tend to the day-to-day problems, there are all these students moving in and out of our ESL programs not really getting the best education we can offer. And I think we owe them better than that. I think we owe them a useful curriculum and a thoughtful assessment process. I firmly believe that we always have time for the things that matter. So, if our students really matter (and surely we'd have all picked other careers if we didn't care about students), it's time to get

to work.

Rant over.

If you stayed till the end, God bless you.

This article first appeared on Ashley Green's blog at
<http://notthatashleygreen.wordpress.com>.

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