



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

“INTERACTIVE ERRANDS”: TOOLS TO ENHANCE THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF ESL STUDENTS

Rationale

We all understand that people who leave their native countries have difficulty adjusting to the language and customs of a new land and are likely to have a difficult time locating and using community resources. The inconvenience and frustration they experience can be prolonged and debilitating, depending upon how well individuals and systems within the host country respond to their needs. Educational institutions such as community colleges bear a unique responsibility for assisting with the adjustment processes of these newcomers.

The time students spend with instructors in a community college classroom, however, is clearly insufficient for them to develop complete “communicative competencies.” Such communicative competence, including the ability to exchange meaningful cognitive and affective information in a full range of circumstances, can only be acquired via natural, genuine personal contacts. The out-of-class world is a rich but usually under-exploited resource for the acquisition of this competence.

Procedures

Several out-of-class assignments at Austin Community College are employed specifically to enhance communicative competence among ESL (English as a second language) students. Because they require the initiation of contact with outsiders, these assignments are called “interactive errands.”

Students are sent into the surrounding community on interactive errands to build up linguistic, sociolinguistic, and informational capabilities that can ease their adaptation to life in the United States. Among potential interactive errands are “idiom searches,” “human bingo,” site visits, and team “quests.” Idiom searches

are activities in which students take a list of English expressions and get two or three native speakers to explain those expressions and give examples to contextualize their meanings. Site visits and team quests, instead of sending students by themselves, dispatch them in groups to gather facts about historical locations and community organizations.

Human bingo is frequently used at professional education conferences as a “mixer” to help people meet and learn a few facts about each other. It requires participants to get the signatures of several individuals who fit a number of descriptions revolving around a common topic. The task is considered complete when participants have gathered enough signatures to fill up a row or column on their bingo cards.

Ideally, interactive errands are introduced, conducted, and evaluated in a purposive fashion. At Austin Community College, a three-part process is followed to capitalize upon the advantages of the method.

In-Class Orientation

An in-class orientation process precedes each interactive errand to equip students with the necessary confidence and competence. Generally, the ingredients in such an orientation are vocabulary, question-asking etiquette and terminology, grammar, cultural features related to the topic of the errand, and an opportunity to practice asking and answering questions with each other.

For a “human bingo” sheet dealing with the topic of food, for example, the instructor might lead students through the following sequence of activities before sending them to collect signatures:

1. Exploring the meanings of “outdoor grill,” “food processor,” “chili dog,” and other unfamiliar terms appearing in the 16 cells of the signature card.
2. Explaining the advisability and mechanics of setting the stage before posing questions to strangers or casual acquaintances. (It’s probably not a good idea to accost a stranger with, “Hi. My name is Abdullah. Have you ever used a doggie bag?”)



3. Reviewing English question forms which students will need to employ in their conversations with outsiders; e.g., “You wash dishes every day” turns into “Do you wash dishes every day?”—but “You have made apple pie” does *not* yield “Do you have made apple pie?”
4. Discussing why Americans might or might not bake bread as much today as they did 40 or 50 years ago; what kind of person might be most likely to use a food processor, eat at salad bars, or participate in activities against world hunger; to what degree fast food chains selling ice cream may have become common in large American cities, etc.
5. Having the class split into pairs or two large groups to role-play the process of asking an outsider question from the bingo sheet, and following up the practice with a group discussion of rough spots, etc.

Performing the Errands

Interactive errands maximize students’ control and direction over their own learning experiences. In working on a human bingo project, for instance, students are able to approach potential signatories when and where they feel most comfortable doing so. They are free to ask people of their choice to sign their signature card which allows them to proceed at their own pace from less-demanding encounters to others which call for initiative and pluck.

Furthermore, students are bound to do and learn more in the process of preparing for and performing interactive errands than simply finishing the relatively uncomplicated errands themselves. They may experience social situations and learn facts which otherwise would be slow in coming to them. It may become clear to them, for example, that when social conventions such as saying “excuse me” are observed, Americans are most likely to help them complete their tasks in a cooperative, friendly fashion.

By fulfilling the terms of an academic assignment such as a site visit or idiom search, foreign-born ESL students whose home environment is monolingual may gradually develop a desire and capacity to venture into English-speaking society on their own in the future. Because they incorporate speaking, listening, reading, and writing, interactive errands may contribute to students’ holistic development.

Debriefing and Skill Adjustment

After completing an interactive errand, students are given a chance in class to share and describe their encounters. If they have conducted a community site

visit to a library or hospital, for example, they might present an oral report to the rest of the class. At this point, instructors can gauge how difficult the errand was in practice, to what degree different students displayed a spirit of adventure in carrying it out, and how much students actually learned from the errand. Following up this classroom procedure with an interchange in the weekly written “dialogue journal” circulated between students and their instructors is another way for the benefits of an interactive errand to be identified and consolidated.

Conclusion

The process through which foreign-born students adapt to life in America has numerous components. It is within the power of a strong ESL curriculum to contribute substantially to at least three of these components: learning our language, understanding our culture, and finding out how the organizations and facilities of our communities can be used. If they institute out-of-class interactive language errands as a part of a comprehensive pedagogical program, we believe that ESL instructors will be well on their way to enhancing the communicative competence and contributing to the cultural adaptation of their students.

**Phillip Venditti, Faculty, Clover Park Technical College*

**Robert Bahruth, Professor, Teacher Education, Boise State University*

For further information, contact Phillip Venditti at Clover Park Technical College, 4500 Stailacoom Blvd. SW, Lakewood, WA 98499-4098.
Email: phil.venditti@cptc.edu

**When this article was originally published, both authors were faculty members at Austin Community College.*

Showcasing Popular Issues Series

On occasion, NISOD will reprint some previously published articles, showcasing some popular contributions to professional development and the improvement of teaching and learning.

This issue was originally published in September 1986, as Volume VIII, No. 19.