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Applying Universal Design for Learning to Center for English as a Second Language

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Abstract

This paper investigated the possibility of applying Universal Design for English Language Learning. Throughout the paper, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for data collection. The students were first asked to critique the ESL program using a methodology created by Paulo Freire to ascertain how much freedom students have in creating their learning environments and establishing their own learning goals and objectives. The results showed that the majority of students rated the ESL program very low regarding their ability to influence the program's curriculum materials or learning outcomes. Moreover, the research shows that the majority of students did not believe they were adequately prepared for graduate-level studies in the University upon completion of the ESL program. As a result of these findings, several recommendations are made about creating more opportunities for individual students to use UDL principles to control their learning environments and establish their own learning goals and objectives.

Keywords: ESL, UDL, English Language Learning

I. Introduction & Rationale

During the past four years, a growing number of Kurdish Iraqi students have been coming to SIU to both learn the English language and pursue graduate-level education based on an American educational system model. All of the students who were involved in this study and research were enrolled in the Center for English as a Second Language or CESL at SIU and participated in over a year of intensive English language instruction. Unfortunately, almost universally, most of the Kurdish Iraqi students who have completed this program have confessed that they believe the program did not adequately prepare them for graduate-level studies in the University. Furthermore, because the pedagogy was almost exclusively focused on grammar and writing skills, few of these students believe they adequately possess the verbal or listening skills to achieve a high level of genuine excellence in their respective graduate programs.

As a result of these personal observations and conversations with CESL students, the researchers became increasingly concerned and interested in how CESL taught English. Moreover, the researchers were interested in

the students ideas, who were directly involved in the program about how to improve the curriculum and learning methodologies. Consequently, the researchers had many conversations with international students studying linguistics and TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language) at SIU. Moreover, this research looked at new and innovative ideas and strategies for learning English and discovered many new ideas about student-centered learning mentioned by John Dewey and others as early as 1916 (Dewy, 1916). These ideas are fundamental because they offer an alternative, and perhaps, better ways to teach English in our country in the future and better prepare students for coming to the United States to attend graduate student programs. This is very important because our country of Kurdistan Region of Iraq is interested in sending several more students to the USA and is interested in improving the English speaking skills of thousands of Kurdish students in the coming years.

With these ideas in mind, the researchers conducted an extensive survey of CESL students about their attitudes and ideas about the program. They conducted several in-depth interviews with CESL graduates. The results of this research clearly indicate that CESL students believe there is serious room for improvement in how the program is operated, and almost everyone surveyed had many important suggestions or recommendations for the CESL program to consider. The researchers also discovered that many of the students have tried to get the CESL program to consider their ideas and positive criticisms. However, all too often, when students and graduates of the CESL program have made suggestions or recommendations to the program for changing or even discussing changing parts of their curriculum these ideas are simply ignored.

This paper will discuss the Universal Design for Learning concepts and strategies developed by David H. Rose and Anne Meyer in their book "Teaching Every Student in the Digital Age: Universal Design for Learning." In this book, these UDL concepts and principles are discussed at great length. According to the authors UDL principles are fundamental or basic to new American educational thinking, curriculums, and programs. They write that these ideas must be accessible and appropriate for individuals from different backgrounds, learning styles, abilities, and disabilities. This textbook actually states that there is no one simple "optimal solution for everyone" and that programs should recognize the "unique nature of each learner and the need to accommodate differences, creating learning experiences that suit the learner and maximize his or her progress." Therefore, it was very disturbing to discover from the research that the vast majority of CESL students think the program is the complete opposite of this UDL thinking and strategy (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Although this research clearly suggests that the entire CESL program needs to be reevaluated or redesigned from top to bottom, this paper will only look at how CESL and other programs like it could implement a section or method designed to give students greater autonomy or control over some aspects of their instruction. The researchers were amazed to discover how much information and material is available that addresses student-centered or autonomous teaching methods and how long many enlightened educators have used these ideas. Therefore, with this "good faith" attitude toward making programs like CESL better and more inclusive of students' attitudes and improving the language teaching strategies used with Kurdish Iraqi students, this research intends to discover.

On a larger level, this research may be of interest to teachers or students in other programs around the United States and other parts of the world that have similar curriculums to the one used by CESL. In the United States alone, there are several thousand such programs at all major universities, junior colleges, and independent learning centers. As a result, some of the findings from this research may be applicable to these others programs. Moreover, this research needs to be compared and contrasted with other ESL programs to see if these findings are representative of other programs across the world. If the findings of this research indicate the other programs, then there is serious room for improvement across the entire ESL teaching spectrum.

Research Design

The design of this study was both quantitative and qualitative. This research was qualitative in nature and utilized information obtained from literature reviews, books and also the CAST website Camic (2003). Also, in this research, the qualitative method is used to interview students face to face. Finally, the quantitative method was used on a survey of questions given to students originally designed by Paulo Freire and discussed in his book

Pedagogy of the Oppressed. These questions were used to find out if the CESL program uses old-fashioned ways of teaching in the classrooms that Freire defined as Banking.

Research questions

Null Hypotheses: The UDL principles and techniques would not improve ESL programs abroad, and students will not get any educational benefit out of UDL principles.

The alternative hypothesis: The UDL principles and techniques would improve ESL programs abroad, and students will get educational benefits out of UDL principles.

Purpose of this study

A: Goals: The major goal of this project would be for CESL to implement some type of independent, student-centered or autonomous methodologies into their existing curriculum based on UDL principles and philosophy. This topic has been selected because the vast majority of current CESL students and graduates of the program have identified the need for the program to initiate such strategies. The CESL program is widely perceived by students as being based on a strict and rigid top-down methodology, which is both incapable of and unwilling to adapt to their individual student needs and concerns.

B: Need: According to both survey data and interview testimonies, students have themselves recognized the "need" for the CESL program to adopt UDL type principles which would enable students to have greater control or autonomy over their individual educational goals and needs. For this project, the researchers used a survey proposed by the educator Paulo Freire in the year 1970. He includes the following survey in his groundbreaking work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Table 1: Banking system

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Banking system	50	41.8200	2.32721	.32912

Test Value = 27						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Banking system	45.030	49	.000	14.82000	14.1586	15.4814

One sample t-test was conducted to compare the statistical differences between the Population mean and the hypothesized mean. There was a significant difference in scores between them ($M = 41.82$, $M_0 = 27$, $SD = 2.32$; $t(49) = 45.03$, $p = 0.00$, two tailed). The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean differences = 14.82, 95% CI: 14.15 to 15.48).

Survey results show that students surveyed view the CESL program as being operated from a top-down, completely teacher-controlled perspective. Furthermore, they believe that they have no control or say in the educational process and often feel isolated and powerless over their instruction. Also, many students believe that the instructors are not adequately informed about the differences in how many international students learn and approach educational situations.

C: Time: The CESL program normally lasts for up to 16 months and contains seven separate levels which students must progress through before graduating from the program. This project could be structured as part of the entire

16-month program or become a one-term or roughly three-month part of the program. In other words, the project could be part of the daily or weekly activity as a unit of instruction or structured as a three-month course where students work to direct their own independent or autonomous program with limited help and support from the CESL faculty.

D: Handling Instruction: This part of the project could be handled in several different ways depending on how the individual students want to proceed. First of all, it is important for the CESL faculty to teach and support independent learning techniques and strategies to the students before they begin to identify their own individual directions and focuses. Once this has occurred, students would be supported throughout the CESL faculty or staff program in monitoring and assisting the student-centered/directed activity.

II. Relevant Learner and Context Characteristics

A. Target Population: The target population for this project is the entire CESL student body. CESL students are from all over the world and from an age group ranging from 18 years old to a high of around 40 years old. CESL students come from a wide socioeconomic, religious, ethnic, and cultural background. There are students in the program from villages in Saudi Arabia, large cities in China, remote islands in the Maldives, the mountains of Kurdistan, and the jungles of Colombia. Some of the students have never left their country before, and some have traveled all over the world. Furthermore, some have experienced American education systems and are familiar with many things about western culture, and some have never been exposed to educational ideas outside of the system of their home country.

Many of the students arriving at CESL have little background with the English language, and when they enter the program start at a language level of zero (0). Other students have been studying English for over a decade and are very proficient in the language. Also, some students are multilingual and can speak five or more languages and several dialects, whereas others can only speak their native tongue. Moreover, some of these students want to study art and sciences, while others wish to learn computer systems and engineering skills. One could argue, that this broad and diverse population of students represents a very special education type population and that the ideas of UDL are especially suited to address the many varied needs and differences of this vibrant student community.

B. Entry Level Skills: The only requirements for CESL students are that they have graduated from High School in their respective countries and that they plan on going to college or University. When the students arrive at CESL, they are given the TOEFL test. This test, called the Test of English Foreign Language, is a test designed by the Educational Testing Service and is given to all language students worldwide. There is also another test called the ILETS, and students are given this test. Depending on the score you achieve on this initial test, you are then placed in a special level at CESL, ranging from an introductory program or level one to an advanced language level, culminating in level 7. Once the student graduates from CESL and achieves a score of 500 on the TOEFL or 6.5 on the ILETS, the student can then enroll in university classes and begin their academic career. If students do not pass a level, they have to take that level over and over again. Oftentimes, students are held back in a level over as little as .05 on a test. Many students reportedly leave the program and go to other programs at other universities because of these types of scoring decisions (Britt, 2002).

C. Performance Setting: At the present time, all of the CESL learning activity is primarily conducted in classrooms in Faner Hall, the language laboratory, and the library. Also, CESL students go on a few field trips to places like Saint Louis and Memphis for cultural experiences. And, most students leave the classroom and go home and spend many hours in their homes studying and writing. However, in the independent and student-centered activities and methods that this project proposes, students would have the flexibility to study anywhere they might choose. These learning experiences could take place in any conceivable place, such as outside in parks, at coffee shops or museums, touring southern Illinois or the junior colleges in the area, spending time with American English-speaking students and families in many places off-campus. Students would also be able to go to the programs they wish to attend in the future and sit in on classes or talk with students and faculty. This idea will require much new thinking in CESL and more cooperation from the SIU community. Therefore, the performance setting could be held in almost any place.

III. Subordinate Skills Analysis

For this project, students would need some type of instruction or background information in areas like strategies on how we learn, independent study ideas, and how to structure independent student centered programs. In essence, students would need to be taught about the basic principles of UDL and encouraged to spend time thinking about their own educations and educational needs. This would require such skills as creative and reflexive thinking. It would also require students to have the skills to critically think about their own educational needs and the ability to evaluate their own educational shortcomings. In other words, if the student wants to learn more about speaking or conversational language acquisition, the student would need to identify strategies and ways for learning more about and creating environments for speaking English with native speakers. If a student believes they need to improve their listening skills, they need to think about ideas and strategies for improving these skill sets. The UDL framework would really give the student the power to create their own learning strategies and individual curriculum.

In order for the student to set up such a UDL student/learner-centered strategy or individual curriculum, the CESL staff, faculty, and graduate assistants would have to help students in this process. They would have to be informed about how they can help in this process and the skills they need as "advisers" to help the students. This will require these CESL staff to have to experience some level of training in these fields.

Within the framework of this project, students would submit proposals or ideas to the CESL faculty outlining their individual program ideas and the avenues they want to pursue. This will require them to have the necessary subordinate skills of reflexive and critical thinking necessary for this task. This idea also would require students to be self-motivated, self-efficient and responsible for meeting and monitoring their own program goals. Listed below are some of the subordinate skills which students would need to develop their own independent or self-centered curriculum or programs.

- 1) Students should be able to identify their specific educational goals and recognize the language skills they need in order to achieve these goals.
- 2) Students should be able to identify what areas they need to improve to meet their academic goals. For example, listening skills, reading, writing skills, conversation skills, grammar skills, etc. This will require students to be "reflexive" or self-aware of what language skills they need to improve.
- 3) Students should understand some fundamental ideas of UDL and be able to critically think about how to develop specific tasks or objectives to meet their goals. Students should have some knowledge of successful independent learning strategies designed by other students.

IV. Performance Objectives

A. When students define their individual educational goals and have identified the types of skills they will need to acquire, they will adopt or decide on many different types of objectives to reach these goals.

B. Examples of Different Objective Strategies:

- 1) If students want to improve the conversational skills, they might choose from many different kinds of exercises or strategies. For example, Some students might work with native English speakers in regular intensive conversation sessions. Others might also watch English speaking movies or go to places like coffee shops, bars, rec center, etc. where people have conversations. Moreover, the student might use a strategy that uses more than one type of idea.
- 2) If a student wants to improve their writing skills they might choose to take an English composition class designed for freshman college students and be in class with native English speakers. This program is already available at SIUC, and it is not utilized by CESL. They also might choose to use the language laboratory and the many types of online resources that are available. They may also regularly write about topics of interest and have this work corrected by the writing center in Morris Library. They also might wish to read English

writers to see their styles and study their grammar.

- 3) A student who wants to improve their listening skills might choose objectives like listening to news, music, movies, radio programs, or native English speakers having conversations. There are many online resources that can be used as part of a strategy for making objectives that will help students reach their goals to improve their listening skills.

C. **Psycho-Motor Skills:** In the course of doing research on new ideas for language learning, the researchers discovered a language learning program/methodology called the Total Physical Response method. This method was developed by Dr. James Asher at San Jose State University in California and has been utilized by ESL teachers since the 1970s. According to Asher, "TPR is based on the premise that the human brain has a biological program for acquiring any natural language on earth" (Krashen, 1998). This method combines communicative language acquisition with physical activities, such as exercises, walks, or playing the game Simon Says. The theory is that students will better remember lessons when they are done in conjunction with other types of activities. The researchers would think about using this method and also informing teachers about this method. Although this psychomotor type of instruction has been used in language learning since the 1970's, CESL does not use any of its ideas or methods.

Another strategy that should be taught to the students are the general ideas of Bloom's Taxonomy so they would be in a good position to evaluate their own learning and analyze their own learning methods and ideas. The categories of Evaluation, synthesis, analysis, application and comprehension are all important considerations for students working on their own programs and self-centered curriculum. If students understand these ideas, they will be better able to "reflect" on their instruction and make necessary improvements and be in a position to better access their own progress .

V. Criterion Referenced Assessments

A. According to Meo (2008), establishing a good criterion for assessing the success of an educational program and educational goals is a very important part of the entire design process. For this reason, it is very important that students be able to critically think about how they will judge or grade the success of their individual programs/curriculum. For this to work, students will need to have the necessary subordinate skills to make such critical judgments. This can be done as part of the process of setting up their individual programs with assistance from CESL staff and instructors. In the next three examples some possible assessment criterion students can use for each objective are proposed.

- 1) If students want to improve the conversational skills, they might choose from many different kinds of exercises or strategies. For example Some students might work with native English speakers in regular intensive conversation sessions. Others might also watch English-speaking movies or go to places like coffee shops or bars where people have conversations. Moreover, the student might use a strategy that uses more than one type of idea. To access their success with this objective the student could show to a CESL faculty member or observer their conversational skills by having a conversation with them. The student could also keep a journal or video journal showing their speaking and conversational skills improving over the course of the term. Moreover, the student could work with a CESL adviser at the beginning of the project to set a format for a learner evaluation that would be conducted at the end of the term.
- 2) If a student wants to improve their writing skills they might choose to take an English composition class designed for freshman college students and be in class with native American speakers. They also might choose to use the language laboratory and the many types of online resources that are available. They may also regularly write about topics of interest and have this work corrected by the writing center in Morris Library. They also might wish to read English writers to see their styles and study their grammar. The student could pick from many assessment tools to evaluate their improvement in this area. The student could write several short stories or essays or a research paper and have it "graded" by an English teacher in the composition department. Some students might not want to be tested, but choose another possibility like writing letters or detailed emails to people on specific topics or issues. The student could devise their own

"reflexive" or evaluation for grading their improvement in writing skills by writing an evaluation the experience and producing a report about it for the program.

- 3) A student who wants to improve their listening skills might choose objectives like listening to news, music, movies, radio programs, or native English speakers having conversations. There are many online resources that can be used as part of a strategy for making objectives that will help students reach their goals to improve their listening skills. The student could use a variety of forms or tools to show their improvement with listening skills, such as responding to questions from classmates or friends. Listening to a lecture and taking notes, and then telling someone about the lecture. The student might watch a difficult movie with a lot of dialogue and have to explain certain areas of the movie to a native English speaker. There are many types of assessments that can be done to show the students' progress (Berquist, 2014).

VI. Selected Instructional Strategies (Decoste, 2014)

A. Almost all students who learn about UDL and independent study or student-centered directed ideas and language learning show enthusiasm and interest in these ideas. Almost every student who was interviewed for this research who has been in an ESL program has many ideas about how to make language learning better, more interesting, and more productive. In other words, students really understand the ideas basic to UDL and say they would be really excited and interested in directing some of their own language instruction. Here are some ideas students have discussed in the qualitative interviews that could be used to "engage the learners and maintain their interests." These ideas show how creative students can be when asked what kind of projects or ideas they would initiate if they had control or the opportunity to do so.

- 1) Two students said they would like to take a three-month period and travel across the United States and Canada with an American English-speaking friend, and see the country and have to speak and communicate in the language every day. They even said they would pay for their friends three-month "trip" or vacation. This is an amazing idea and one incredible way to learn the language. Is this better than sitting in a classroom for 6 hours a day?
- 2) One student said she would like to be able to spend more time watching American movies, news, and television. She said that with her schedule at CESL she has no time to actually spend listening to the language, because she is so busy studying for tests and doing assignments. She talked about having a regular movie watching class or news watching in a relaxed non-school type environment where students could listen and then talk about the movie.
- 3) Many students said they wish they had English-speaking friends or a host family to live with or meet on a regular basis. Many students said they were sad that they had been here for over a year and did not know any Americans except some students in class or their teachers. Could some methods be used to improve SIU programs to encourage American students to meet and get to know international students. There are no really good efforts being made at SIU to build relationships between international students and American students. This should be a big focus of the University and CESL.
- 4) One student suggested that there should be meetings of ESL students to talk about language learning ideas outside of class that could be used to make learning more interesting. He said that many classroom activities do not help him learn and cause him many problems that make him think about leaving the program and giving up on learning English. He thought the independent idea was great and he had many ideas. One idea was just having the time to try and make American friends and hanging out with American speakers and listening to others speak English. He said if he had the time to do this, he thought he could learn much more English.
- 5) One student from Afghanistan wants to start a United Nations simulation project at SIU and work with all international students and programs from Political Science, the Paul Simon Center, and others. He wants to make it a class where students would work for a semester in a UN model setting. This idea is really amazing and would make international students directly involved with American and English-speaking students. Moreover, there are many English speaking students at SIU from Canada, England, Australia, and Ireland. He also said there are some students from France, Germany, Russia, Italy, Greece and other countries.

The following ideas are from students who listed their comments in their own writing. These are further evidence that students are more than capable of thinking of ideas and strategies to improve their own instruction.

- 1) Having opportunity to chat with Native English speakers on Skype, because some students feel kind of shy and they cannot talk to others directly. This will be a good opportunity to improve their speaking and writing skills. Also, it is important for them to improve their listening skills.
- 2) Having good teachers and professors for teaching English as a second language is really essential. Good teacher and professors have a better knowledge and they have good examples in order to teach students on the right path.
- 3) Going to shopping with American people to improve their daily live vocabularies.
- 4) Improving students' vocabulary in their fields means students should memorize these vocabularies that they are going to use in their graduate school.

B. How to Gain The Attention Of Learners? This is very easy to do. All you have to do is ask the student what ideas they have that would make learning easier and more fun. All of the students have many ideas and really get excited about talking about this idea. They all have very good ideas and this would be very easy to make happen.

C. Describe Five Ways You Will Make The Instruction Relevant to Your Learners.

The examples stated above show that students have the ideas and ability to think of specifically relevant ideas. If the students are given the opportunity, they can decide on programs or strategies that will improve their English speaking abilities and make learning fun. Many students think that they need to have more relaxed or fun ways of learning besides the classroom and test structures of normal ESL programs. Some ideas could be initiated within the independent study project. Some of these may include the following:

- 1) Students involved in the independent study program would meet regularly to discuss their projects and progress with other students.
- 2) Students could have a website or chat room to talk about their ideas and report on their programs.
- 3) Some graduate students in linguistics or TESOL could do research projects on this independent study program and maybe publish their research.
- 4) The program could give awards or prizes to students for the most creative ideas or some type of other reward. Or, the program could have meetings with new students and discuss the success of other students in this idea.
- 5) The program would have a conference to talk about these ideas and get other students interested in UDL or independent type programs. The conference could have speakers, movies, and other information seminars or classes.

D. Follow Through Activities:

Upon graduating from the CESL program, students would evaluate and critique the success of their individual programs. Also, students could present their ideas to new students and discuss their various approaches and tell their experiences. Theoretically, the longer the program continues, the better students would be at acting as peers to new students. The students would also be encouraged to help "teach" the teachers in the CESL program about their successes and difficulties in setting up their independent studies

Many CESL students go into the University and study Linguistics and TESOL and these activities could be made a part of their future curriculum and become part of the program in the CESL system. In other words, students would become teachers. The research shows that CESL graduates would be very good teachers and supporters of new students and that by this method the "follow-through" activity would be perpetual.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study and the accompanying surveys clearly show that the vast majority of the students directly involved in the CESL program at SIU believe the program did not adequately prepare them for continuing their studies at the university in their respective career departments. Moreover, the research clearly shows that the program is deeply entrenched in a proscriptive curriculum and has little interest in exploring different teaching methods and strategies like UDL or developing Individual Differences types of learning strategies. Also, it has been shown to some extent that the CESL program is similar in character and methodology to many other ESL programs around the world.

This paper has briefly shown that there are many types of alternative learning methods and strategies available for programs like CESL to incorporate into their curriculums, giving students greater autonomy and control over their own learning courses and learning outcomes. The research has shown that such ideas as applying UDL and ID or Individual Differences learning strategies have been used successfully by many programs around the world for several years. In addition, other strategies and methods like giving students greater autonomy or control over directing their own curriculums into areas they believe will strengthen many innovative programs that have used their learning outcomes.

In conclusion, it seems clear that there are available programs, strategies, and methods that programs like CESL can use to give students greater control over their own learning if they choose to do so. Consequently, if programs like CESL survey their students and discover that the program is failing to meet their learner's expectations or fulfill their learner's desires for more autonomy they can turn to already existing strategies like UDL and ID to address these problems. In short, the decision to change programs like CESL to meet the needs of their students is one within the capability of the administrators of the program. If programs like CESL are truly interested in improving their learning outcomes, they have the power to begin implementing alternatives.

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