

Helen Tasho

A lot of the views that I expressed in my first writing assignment are still valid. I mentioned the fact that the Literacy Center takes a learner-centered approach in their tutoring, and I feel like that is still true. An article that I read for one of the journals, as well as in Colvin's *I speak English*, discussed the learner-centered approach and how important it is, especially in an ESL setting. Taking this approach makes perfect sense; the learners come to the center to learn English for a specific reason, so linking what we learn inside the classroom to what they want to achieve outside of the classroom is critical. The whole purpose of the ESL tutoring is to help the learners, so not adhering to a strict schedule, and being flexible with lessons is very important.

The tutors that I've had the privilege of working with have mainly been Group E learners, which Colvin describes as being able to understand, speak, read and write in English, but not at a high level. All of the learners that I've worked with have been educated in their own countries and have held professional careers back home, but English is where they need help in order to continue their professional careers in America. Something Colvin recommends, and that we use at the Literacy Center, are portfolios. We use our logs to report what occurred in each session, what needs improvement, and suggest activities for the next session. These are kept private and not usually shared with the learners, which is opposite of Colvin.

Another topic that Colvin discusses— which links to my first writing assignment and taking a learner-centered approach—is the fact that we need to work on things that the learners need for their daily lives. If a learner needs help at the pharmacy, or on public transportation, that should be one of the focuses for the session. Additionally, Colvin also mentions in chapter seven that some words in English are slurred when spoken. She stresses the fact that the correct pronunciation is important, but since learners are going out into the world and trying to engage in

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everyday conversation, they need to learn how to speak and understand this informal, improper English. I have found myself often saying certain words “improperly” without appropriate stress on certain syllables within a word. For example, I often say, “what do you wanna focus on today” instead of the proper “what do you want to focus on today”. This slurring and omitting of proper stress on certain words can be confusing for the learner, and I initially was very aware of this slurring and improper speech. When I started tutoring, I was always trying to pronounce words correctly with the proper syllable stress, but Colvin’s point about exposing the learner to the “improper English” that is used everyday is critical to their lives outside of the Literacy Center. However, what I do want to mention is that it should be clear to the learner that this informal speech is used for speaking only; if they are writing a formal paper or an essay for the GMAT, formal English should be used.

Something else that Colvin mentions that applies to my tutoring was that correct pronunciation doesn’t mean comprehension. An example of this was during a tutoring session that I had earlier this week; the learner pronounced “meanwhile” perfectly, and I assumed that she knew what it meant, but when we went back and discussed new vocabulary and words that she wasn’t familiar with, she asked me what “meanwhile” meant. That was a mistake on my part for assuming that she knew what it meant just because of correct pronunciation. This applies to when I see a new word in English; I know how to pronounce it, but I don’t know what it means.

An approach that I mentioned in my first writing assignment is one that I still use in my current tutoring sessions, and is one that Colvin highlights in chapter eight of her book. She mentions that comprehension in reading is important when working in an ESL setting. I mentioned in my other assignment that I stop after each paragraph and ask some questions about

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what we read, new vocabulary, and to answer any questions that the learners have. I also try and explain any deeper aspects of the reading that aren't as explicit. When I read Colvin's chapter that discussed this, I was happy to see that I am taking the right approach with regard to reading comprehension.

Something else that was highlighted in chapter eight of Colvin's *I speak English* were some tips for working on grammar and sentence structure. When I'm working on improving a learner's writing, I usually give them a little prompt that will require something that they're struggling with (e.g. past tense), and tell them to write a little paragraph (three or four sentences) in response to a prompt. I did this with one learner who was struggling with past tense, and had him write a prompt about his favorite vacation and what he did. After he finished his paragraph, I had him read each sentence that he wrote and we went through and corrected any errors together. What I found was that the learner usually caught most of the mistakes when he read through each sentence, and he had some idea of how to correct the errors. I think this active review and correction helps the learner recognize their mistakes easily, and is more effective than marking errors with a red pen and handing it back to them.

My tutoring has thus far taught me that I need to be flexible, and that imperfection or informality in speech is the correct way to teach English to people who want to learn it for everyday use. I've moved away from teaching "perfectly", and moved towards teaching realistically. I have also learned to be more comfortable with asking the learner what they want to focus on for that session instead of following a strict lesson plan, which is what I'm used to. We are, after all, there for the learners. This learner-centered approach is most beneficial. I come into each session excited to work with a learner, and to hopefully learn from them.