

Interpersonal skills in the Canadian cultural context

Teaching ESL presents a variety of challenges, not least of which is helping learners understand the nuances involved in getting others to respond positively to them. It's difficult to describe what it is that we say or do in Canada that elicits a positive response and a common understanding. In the classroom, the challenge is finding ways to illustrate the nuances and the subtleties of English that we use here in Canada.

The journey to discover a method of conveying this knowledge to ESL speakers in Canada began for Gwen Zeldenrust, an ESL teacher and Lynn Schneider, a part-time ESL teacher and anthropology major. Designing lesson plans to teach communication skills in a culture-based curriculum brought about the realization that there were very few existing resources upon which to draw. Gwen Zeldenrust had learned a great deal from her students about their needs but found that fulfilling their needs through effective instruction was often challenging. Gwen knew that it was necessary for her students to increase their vocabulary, but as high-level ESL speakers they required something more—and determining exactly what would help these students succeed was a key element.

Through observation and experience with her students in the classroom, Gwen came to understand that her students needed to improve their language skills in general, but also began to clearly see that the reality was that they needed to understand language from a cultural perspective as much as they needed to

understand it from a structural perspective. It was important for them to know what it is we do in Canada that makes people respond positively to us and want to cooperate with us. The difficult part of the equation was that as native English speakers, Canadians are not always aware of the techniques and strategies they employ to achieve good interpersonal interactions because these skills are so implicitly learned rather than explicitly taught. They are part of the Canadian cultural experience and therefore explaining exactly how we do what we do to achieve good interpersonal communication is very challenging.

Gwen began to research and read everything she could about teaching communication with the hope that she would find something tangible to lead her to the path that would allow her to show her students what it is we do in Canada to interact well with others, especially in high stakes situations like job interviews or in the workplace. What she found was that there is a tendency for English-speaking Canadians to prefer a distinctive style of interaction. Gwen was able to isolate five important characteristics of “Canadian” speech. She concluded that interactions should be:

- Indirect
- Soft and undemanding
- Flexible
- Embedded with indicators/warnings
- Positive

These characteristics are often used particularly in formal or goal-oriented exchanges where the outcome of the interaction is critical. For example, someone who is trying to make a positive impression in a job interview, or is perhaps asking an employer to serve as a reference may format speech according to the five characteristics outlined above in order to have a successful interaction. However, in less formal situations, speech tends to be much less formal and contains less of the five characteristics. So, in situations where we desire a positive response and where we want our interactions to go smoothly, we change our communication style to one that not only involves the words we say and how we say them, but involves tone and body language as well. This has been referred to as “communication accommodation” (Hornberg, 2010 p. 463).

As Gwen learned more about communication in general and communication accommodation in particular, she discovered that we use a number of “speech act strategies” (Goodale, 1987), often without even realizing we’re doing it, in order to soften our language, appear flexible, positive and indirect and use indicators or disarmers when we are speaking. While a variety of these speech act strategies exist, Gwen narrowed down eight in particular that she believed would be beneficial for her students to utilize in their interpersonal interactions. They are:

- Using conditional language
- Using warning phrases
- Transforming statements into questions
- Using downgraders

- Negating verbs when using imperatives
- Using continuous forms of verbs
- Using comparative rather than superlative adjectives
- Offering criticism by negating positive adjectives

For example, to get a positive response, one would say:

“Could you open the window?” rather than *“Can you open the window?”*

Additionally, a listener would prefer to hear:

“To be honest, I can’t help you” rather than *“I can’t help you”*

The following chart illustrates eight speech act strategies that Gwen was able to contextualize and explain. She grouped them into effective (preferred) and less effective examples of phrases illustrating eight speech act strategies. While they are all grammatically correct, the “preferred” column can be used to communicate more effectively in what is typically Canadian language sensibility:

	Preferred	Less Effective
Conditional	<i><u>Could</u> I talk to you?</i>	<i><u>Can</u> I talk to you?</i>
	<i>You might want to try emailing rather than calling.</i>	<i>Try emailing rather than calling.</i>
Warning Phrase	<i><u>To be honest</u>, our company doesn’t offer that product.</i>	<i>Our company doesn’t offer that product</i>
	<i>Unfortunately, the answer is no.</i>	<i>The answer is no.</i>
Statements as questions	<i>Would it be possible to meet with you?</i>	<i>I want to meet with you.</i>
	<i>Why don’t you send me an email?</i>	<i>Send me an email.</i>

Down graders	<i>I have a <u>little</u> problem.</i>	<i>I have a problem.</i>
Negative Imperatives	<i>My idea might cause a bit of difficulty</i> <i><u>Don't forget</u> to respond to the email!</i>	<i>My idea might cause difficulty.</i> <i>Remember to respond to the email!</i>
Continuous	<i>Don't stop!</i> <i>I <u>was wondering</u> if you got my message or I am wondering if you got my message.</i>	<i>Keep going!</i> <i>I wondered if you got my message. I wonder if you got my message.</i>
Comparative	<i>I am hoping you will call me soon</i> <i>I have a <u>better</u> idea.</i>	<i>I hope you will call me soon.</i> <i>I have the best idea.</i>
Negated positive adjective	<i>My child is smarter than the other kids in the class.</i> <i>That's <u>not good</u>.</i> <i>The result is not positive.</i>	<i>My child is the smartest kid in the class.</i> <i>That's bad.</i> <i>The result is negative.</i>

Typically, employing these speech act strategies will have a positive effect.

However, the problem still remained concerning how these strategies could be taught in the classroom. Since these techniques are learned very implicitly, and since classroom time often lends itself more to explicit rather than implicit learning, a method for delivering instruction in a clear and meaningful way needed to be found.

Gwen had observed that her students responded well to a video that she had used in her class when teaching a unit on job interviews (Human Resources Canada, 2009). The students immediately understood what was expected of them in a job interview because the video format allowed them to experience the situation in a meaningful way—the video brought the content to life. The students had a context that went

beyond just the words. It was a concrete, real example that was not something simply abstract. Through this experience Gwen recognized the power and potential of using video to teach the characteristics of Canadian speech and the speech act strategies that she had identified. Unfortunately, there were very few resources available to teach advanced English learners about culture rather than just language and in order to effectively illustrate the theory and concepts that she had identified as being part of the Canadian cultural experience, Gwen decided that she needed to produce a video of her own.

Gwen collaborated on the project with Lynn Schneider and with Lee Hillman of [Double Barrel Studios](#) to create a video program that would help ESL students reach their goals and would also provide ESL teachers who were struggling to bring the cultural aspects of English in Canada to their students in the classroom. The process was complex, and was hard work, but the end result was the production of a high-quality resource that illustrates cultural aspects of Canadian speech in a way that resonates with students. Gwen has used this video with her own students and it has received a very positive response, so much so that another video is in the works for the near future.

This work has been extremely satisfying for both Gwen and Lynn. They feel that they have been able to make a difference to the students that they are truly committed to helping. Their goal now is to be able to share this important information with other teachers and with students, to help provide some interesting

and effective materials designed to enhance interpersonal skills and lead ESL speakers to success in Canada. Lynn and Gwen are passionate about providing ESL learners with the tools they need to help navigate both the language and the cultural landscape. They hope that their contribution to the world of ESL resources can help both teachers and students develop the cultural awareness skills in the Canadian context that are essential for successful outcomes.

The video was recently presented at the TESL Ontario conference and at the TESL Hamilton conference as part of a workshop on interpersonal skills. The response to the video has been extremely positive thus far. The appeal of the video has been broad—ESL tutors and libraries have been interested in utilizing it, as have school boards that wish to use the video and its content as part of their professional development seminars for teachers. Government agencies may also find the program useful for the clients they serve. Most surprising has been the input from conference participants who have noted that the video would be useful even *outside* of the ESL field for native English speakers in general to strengthen their interpersonal skills, especially in the workplace, or in the customer service field.

Overall, the journey that began as a simple idea to help convey the subtleties and nuances and the cultural aspects of English in Canada to ESL students became an exciting project that has been immensely rewarding, both personally and professionally, for both Gwen Zeldenrust and Lynn Schneider. Their hope is that other ESL teachers and students will also find the video and its content beneficial.

To learn more about the work that Gwen and Lynn are doing, visit their website at www.languagefoundations.ca

References:

Goodale, M. (1987) *The Language of Meetings*. Boston: Thomson Heinle

Hornberg, N. H. (Ed.). (2010). *Sociolinguistics and Language Education*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Human Resources Canada (producer). (2009). *Oral Communication: An Essential Skill in the Workplace* (Video). Canada