



Article: Content Area Photograph Conservation: Teaching Conservation to Non-Native English Speakers

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Topics in Photographic Preservation, Volume 15.

Pages: 51-59

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Content Area Photograph Conservation: Teaching Conservation to Non-Native English Speakers

Jessica Keister

Presented at the PMG session of the 2012 AIC Annual Meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Introduction

Multiple international outreach projects are currently underway, the goals of which are to help train photographic materials conservators and to establish photograph conservation as a profession in nations where it does not yet exist. As conservation is a highly specialized field, a major variable in the success of such projects is the English-language skill of the participants. Techniques for facilitating effective communication between American conservators involved in international teaching initiatives and non-native English speakers can be appropriated and adapted from English as a Second Language (ESL) education specialists.

This paper will discuss one such ongoing international outreach project and the language-based challenges faced by all involved. Advice from an ESL specialist was sought, and several tools and techniques successfully implemented. Even so, dialogues between those involved in outreach projects, ESL educators, and non-native English speaking conservation professionals should continue in order to improve teaching tools/techniques and to help ensure the success of such international projects.

Case Study: Training in Photograph Conservation for the State Hermitage Museum

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation project to establish photograph conservation at the State Hermitage Museum, in Saint Petersburg, Russia, began in 2010. Prior to this project, an in-depth survey of the Hermitage photograph collections was conducted and a number of needs were identified. One was the lack of dedicated staff to care for these photographs. The Mellon-sponsored and FAIC-managed project aims to rectify these deficiencies by establishing a photograph conservation department at the Hermitage and by providing training in photograph conservation techniques for the new department's staff. American institutions participating in the staff training include the following: the Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts (CCAHA), the University of Delaware, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Weissman Preservation Center, the George Eastman House, and Paul Messier LLC (Bogel, 2011).

Four Hermitage staff members were selected by the Hermitage to become the core of the newly established photograph conservation studio. Three of these individuals first visited the Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia for a week of training in July 2010: it was at this time that CCAHA staff first realized that the language barrier would be a challenge. CCAHA staff involved in the project included all of the photograph conservators, a paper conservator and preservation consultant, a senior conservation technician, and the housing/framing and digital imaging specialists.

All four Hermitage staff would be visiting CCAHA in June 2011, this time for over a week. Based upon the 2010 teaching experience, staff endeavored to address the language obstacles before their arrival.

This was done by seeking the advice of a Kathy Keister, an English as a Second Language (ESL) education specialist. Ms. Keister has been a public school teacher in Pennsylvania for over 35 years, and has been a certified ESL program specialist since 2006. Apart from teaching English, part of an ESL teacher's less obvious tasks involve 'outreach' to other teachers within the school district regarding best practices for teaching ESL students and explaining cultural differences to both the regular classroom teachers and the ESL students. She has worked with students whose native languages include French, Spanish, Urdu, Chinese, Russian, and Vietnamese.

A packet of handouts was prepared for every CCAHA staff member who was going to be working with the Hermitage staff. These handouts included a list of challenges for ESL students within specific subject content areas and tips for communicating with ESL students (see Appendices I and II).

Initial Language Skill Evaluation

Prior to the Russian's first visit, CCAHA was informed that the students had good English language skills. Since CCAHA has regularly and successfully welcomed international interns and fellows, the staff felt confident of their abilities to effectively communicate with the Russian guests. However, the word-of-mouth evaluation provided did not meet the level of language proficiency that was expected.

This mistaken assessment in language skill level is not surprising, as a student's language skills are frequently incorrectly assessed by non-specialists. This is because basic communication skills are very different than technical English, and it was necessary to communicate with the students using technical English in order to teach basic photograph conservation techniques.

BICS versus CALP

ESL specialists differentiate between two different types of language skills - social and academic - which are termed **BICS** and **CALP** - to better discuss the language proficiency of an ESL student. Problems arise when social language skills are mistaken for academic language skills.

BICS is an acronym for the **B**asic **I**nterpersonal **C**ommunication **S**kills required for verbal face-to-face communication. This is "survival English" - how to meet and greet, asking for directions, going to the grocery or doctor, dealing with money, telling time, etc. This language is often context-embedded and occurs in a meaningful social context. Studies have shown that these language skills usually develop within six months to two years after a student arrives in the United States.

CALP is an acronym for **C**ognitive/**A**cademic **L**anguage **P**roiciency. This is the English that is required for any type of academic discourse, and includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content material. As a term, 'subject area content material' is

straightforward, rather like the subjects listed on a primary school report card: reading, mathematics, and science.

Academic language is not only memorizing vocabulary lists - it includes skills in comparing, classifying, synthesizing, evaluating, and inferring. As a student becomes older and progresses through academia, the language becomes more cognitively demanding. Proficiency in subject content area language usually takes from five to seven years, but can take up to ten.

Being the ESL Student in a Conservation Laboratory

Two conservators who were non-native English speakers were interviewed in regards to their experiences working and learning in English-only conservation laboratories.

Both conservators had begun studying English as teenagers in their native countries, where the classes were large and focused on reading, writing, and grammar, as opposed to listening and speaking. Though they studied English extensively prior to their arrival in the United States, both found that they were not quite as prepared as they had originally thought they were. They found that reading English was much easier than speaking or writing, and both were surprised by the cultural differences proved a stumbling block. Anything involving small talk and cultural references was a challenge.

They agreed that written information – outlines, notes, articles, vocabulary lists – in English is absolutely vital. Using a dictionary to translate written or spoken words is also extremely helpful. Both also agreed that watching and listening to English films or television shows with captions is the most useful way to improve one's understanding of English. One of the conservators did take a formal language class with an ESL instructor, though only for a short time. She stated that it was quite helpful.

The two conservators were in agreement about what their professors or supervisors did to help facilitate their understanding.

- Taking time to explain the meaning of words.
- Providing vocabulary lists.
- Providing detailed slide lists (pre-PowerPoint) which included a description of each slide, important vocabulary, and notes.
- Not slowing their speech down and not slowing the course work down.
- Books with English/French/German translations.
- Hands-on activities and demonstrations.

Successes and Stumbling Blocks

The thoughtful preparations of CCAHA staff involved the use of a number of effective teaching tools and activities, which resulted in the overall success of the training. However, despite these endeavors, there were still several unexpected challenges.

Planning in Advance, Handouts, and a Whiteboard

As much as possible, all activities and lessons were prepared in advance. This allowed for the preparation of extensive, clearly written handouts for everything. Clear typewritten handouts for all activities and lessons were another way to assist in the students. Having new words and unfamiliar phrases provided on a handout enables the students to use a dictionary to look up terms in the future.

An erasable white board was present throughout the Russians' visit. It was used for drawing and writing by both CCAHA staff members and students, as part of an activity or as a tool to help further their understanding of the material.

CCAHA staff also took care to ensure that any printed handwriting was as neat as possible and that all handouts were typewritten. This was more important than initially thought: one of the four visiting Russians could print the letters of the Roman alphabet at an elementary level and may have had significant difficulty with the potential variation of cursive handwriting.

Check List Reports

One of the goals listed for the Hermitage staff in the initial project proposal was the ability to prepare general and in-depth condition reports and proposals for treatment. Considering the necessary language skills required to do this, having each individual prepare a prose report was a daunting task.

Instead of using the standard CCAHA prose report template, checklist-form condition and treatment reports were created. The forms were based upon a checklist condition report developed and used by John McElhone at the National Gallery of Canada. The checklists also incorporated housing and framing sections, listing a variety of attachment methods as well as various matting and storage options.

These checklists were ideal. As the forms did not require forming complete sentences, they put less stress on the students. Conservator Mary Schobert, who worked with the Russian students to prepare their reports and proposals, was able to focus on defining the terminology used in the checklist and working with each student to examine their selected treatment projects. Ideally the students could then take the checklist forms back to the Hermitage and, after translating them into Russian, use them as the standard forms for projects within the new photograph conservation studio at the Hermitage.

Hands-On Activities

A second the goal listed in the initial project proposal was that the selected Hermitage staff become familiar with basics photograph conservation treatment techniques. The typical American student's experience might involve some brief lectures and demonstrations by the teacher before the students progressed to hands-on experimentation. Because of the limited English-language skills of the Hermitage staff, the bulk of a lecture component was omitted and the focus was placed onto demonstration and hands-on activities.

Similar Projects

One of the primary goals in having the Hermitage staff visit CCAHA was to increase their experience in the treatment of paper-based photographic materials. Towards this end, each student selected a project photograph from a group of study collection materials.

Prior to the arrival of the Hermitage staff members, CCAHA photograph conservators had carefully selected the items included within the group. The photographs were a range of processes and ages, but all exhibited the same broad condition issues.

This allowed the students to progress logically through their treatment projects over the course of the week, and ensured that they all learned the same material. They could have lessons and workshops on various conservation techniques together, but there were enough intrinsic differences between the photographs that slight alterations of the treatment approaches would be necessary. It also allowed them to observe how condition issues manifest in different photographic processes.

CCAHA Staffing

The CCAHA conservator working primarily with the Russians was Barbara Lemmen. Having one person as the primary instructor provided continuity, allowing the students to become more comfortable and relaxed than they might have been with a new instructor every day. Ms. Lemmen was assisted everyday by one of the other photograph conservators – the position rotated between Rachel Wetzel and Jessica Keister. The assistant was responsible for assisting Ms. Lemmen with anything required throughout the assigned day, and led a half- or quarter-day workshop. The portion of the day that the wingman was in charge allowed Ms. Lemmen a chance to relax.

Regular Breaks

Regular coffee and tea breaks were scheduled into the day. This allowed for the students to relax and talk to each other in Russian; it is fatiguing spending an entire day intensely focused in a foreign language.

Regular breaks also allowed CCAHA staff to work together to make any last minute alterations or modifications to lesson plans, as well as to informally assess how the day was going, gather and prepare materials, and ask each other for any needed assistance.

The Advantage of a Translator

Because specialized technical language is used in conservation, the presence of a skilled translator would have been beneficial. A Russian-speaking photograph conservator acting as a translator would not have been necessary: any translator with excellent Russian/English skills would have sufficed. The instruction for the Hermitage staff while began with the fundamental foundations of conservation practice, and any explanations made to a translator would also have been required for the students.

It was not practical and it was not ethical to have another student with better language skills translate. First of all, none of the four Hermitage staff were skilled enough to function as a translator. Secondly, acting as a translator took a student away from concentrating on her own project. And finally, and most importantly, having one of the four students translate meant that it was impossible to have a private conversation with a student. This severely limited any interactions with the students, especially when it came to critically evaluating a student's work.

Differences in Cultural and Educational Backgrounds

Unexpected cultural differences made it extremely difficult to evaluate the students' level of understanding: were they shy or did they not understand the material? The students also did not appear to have the higher-level scientific background found in conservators who have been trained in Western Europe or North America. The training needed to build upon this foundation of materials, techniques, and ethics, and because of the communication handicap, this basis could not be established with any certainty. It was also difficult connecting with the students beyond a superficial level: trust and empathy are built in informal settings and require time.

Conclusion

It is clear from the experiences of the CCAHA staff that the key to the effectiveness of an international educational outreach project is clear communication between all parties. This includes communication between students and instructors, between individual instructors, and between the supervising agency and all involved at every level of the project.

In the future it would be beneficial to have a series of informal meetings or workshops that focus on strategies for teaching conservation and preservation to non-native English speakers. Such events should involve conservators who have experience with international outreach projects, those who are interested in becoming involved in such initiatives, and with ESL teaching specialists. A second goal of these meetings would be to gather the information on the necessary training and level of competency expected for photograph conservators, and to synthesize these materials, devising a basic curriculum for photograph conservation.

Ideally, this would tie in with the larger international discussion about unifying the curriculum in photograph conservation education. To what standards are students being taught? How is a student's progress measured and evaluated? If the goal of such projects is to meet the highest contemporary standards of practice, those high standards must be set for teachers as well as students, ensuring that the tools and training given to the students allows them to meet those standards.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Kathy Keister, ESL education specialist, for her invaluable advice before and after the arrival of the Hermitage staff members and for her assistance in preparing this paper. Thanks are also due to Monique Fisher for her advice and encouragement; to Marion Verborg, Soyeon Choi, Minah Song, and Hye-Sung Ahn; and to the staff at CCAHA.

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Papers presented in *Topics in Photographic Preservation, Volume Fifteen* have not undergone a formal process of peer review.

Appendix I:**Challenges for ESL Students within Specific Content Areas****English**

In an English class, difficulties include the use of regional dialects and accents, homonyms and synonyms, and an abundance of idioms and figurative language. Idioms such as “he got away with murder” or “it will knock your socks off” may be interpreted literally, and will often cause confusion. It is also important to remember that European students are often taught the pronunciations of British English, as opposed to American English.

Mathematics

In mathematics, the way numbers are written can vary - for example, an American may confuse numbers written by a Frenchwoman, as the style of a ‘one’ and a ‘seven’ are very similar. Also, the placement and function of decimal points and commas can vary, and the stubborn American adherence to illogical units of measurement such as inches and feet can be a significant stumbling block.

Science

Science courses are among the most difficult. The vocabularies are immense and highly specialized, and simple ordinary words may have very different scientific definitions. Passive voice in scientific texts is standard, and cooperative problem-based learning is the prevalent teaching style.

Social Studies

The heavy use of passive voice continues into social studies. ESL students also might not be used to expressing personal opinions or questioning those perceived as authority figures. For them, history might be broken down not into segments on a timeline, but into reigns, regimes, or dynasties.

Appendix II:**Tips for Communicating with ESL Students**

- Use every non-verbal means of communication that you can: drawings, gestures, demonstrations, and hands-on activities. Such communication techniques can be highly effective, though it may mean that you end up attempting to mime something like ‘suction table.’
- Write everything down or supply as many handouts as possible, so that a student has both visual and auditory input. Use of a large whiteboard or a tablet on an easel is recommended for larger groups so that the whole group could benefit from any words, drawings, and diagrams written.
- For students coming from a non-Roman alphabet background, avoid writing in cursive and stick mainly with printed text. Whenever possible, supply clearly typewritten handouts. Remember that such students are not just learning new words, they are learning new letters as well.
- Don’t be offended if your student does not make eye contact with you. It is considered rude in many cultures.
- When speaking, avoid mumbling and speak clearly. Don’t dumb things down and don’t distort the natural rhythm of the English. Don’t speak louder: this just makes people nervous.
- Avoid using the passive voice as much as you can. This is difficult in conservation, as the typical style of report writing can be found at the intersection of passive voice and ambiguity.
- When you have something important to communicate, and especially if critiquing or correcting, speak with the student one-on-one. Don’t embarrass her by calling her out in front of the entire group.
- Ask yes and no questions as much as possible. This will allow the student to feel comfortable answering questions without worrying about proper sentence construction.
- Be an active listener: be patient with student’s responses, don’t jump in immediately to supply words, don’t over-correct, and don’t embarrass a student by asking her to repeat your corrections.
- Check the student’s comprehension frequently, but don’t ask, “Do you understand?” unless you have taught that question. This is not a reliable check for understanding, as students will respond yes, even if they don’t understand. Anyone who has ever been the foreigner will understand this. Check for understanding through demonstration of skills or through asking multiple choice questions.