Addressing the Conversational Needs of IEP Students in the Classroom

Julian Cervantes
Savyonne Steindler
Kejun Wu
Talk with a partner:

- What do IEP students think they need?
- What do IEP teachers think their students need?
An intensive English program (IEP) in California approached the researchers last year and asked them to develop a new conversation class.

The administrators felt that students needed additional conversation practice and exposure to American culture to prepare them to matriculate to university degree programs.
Before building the curriculum, the researchers conducted a four-part needs analysis to identify students’ objective and subjective needs pertaining to *conversational abilities*, *cultural awareness*, and *integration into the broader campus community*.

The results of this needs analysis were useful to the researchers in curriculum building but are also relevant to program directors, administrators, and teachers working in IEPs and with international students more broadly.
• There were about 130 students in the IEP.
• Out of the 59 students we surveyed across all levels, 18 were from China, 16 from Japan, and 10 from Kuwait.

Figure 1: Countries of origin of the IEP students
Most students were in their late teens or early twenties. Out of the 59 students surveyed, the mean age was 23.1 years old, the median and mode age were both 20 years old. The range of ages was from 18 to 58.
Most students were fairly new to the IEP. The mean amount of time in the IEP students reported was four months, the median was two months, and the mode was one month. A good number of students had been in the IEP for a year.

Figure 3: Time students had spent in the IEP as of late September/early October, 2017
The highest level of education completed by most of the 59 students surveyed was high school.

- 17 had their bachelor’s degrees.
- 2 had their master’s degrees.

Figure 4: Highest level of education completed by the IEP students
81.4% of students wanted to study at an American university after improving their English.

Some of the other students may have been studying at the IEP for personal enrichment or on an exchange program through a university in their native country.

Figure 5: Answers to: “Do you want to study at an American university after studying at the IEP?”
The fields most IEP students are interested in pursuing are engineering (12 students) and business (10 students).

Otherwise, students’ interests were quite diverse.

Figure 6: The academic fields the IEP students are interested in studying
Needs Analysis: Four-Part Procedure (1/2)

- **Behavior observation**
  - 10 classes across all levels
  - Provided information on the objective needs of the students
  - Included descriptions of students’ limitations and difficulties, particularly concerning their speaking skills
  - Informed the creation of the other three methods

- **Student surveys**
  - 59 students in classes at all levels
  - Biodata questions, multi-item Likert-scales, and checklists
  - The multi-item scales and checklists pointed to subjective needs concerning students’ challenges and their feelings about talking with Americans, working in groups, learning about American culture, and speaking in class.
  - The objective needs addressed were the extent of English use and frequency of communication with native speakers.
Teacher surveys
- Administered online and collected information from eight teachers
- Provided information on objective and subjective needs of the students
- Some examples of objective needs addressed were students’ speaking abilities, speaking challenges, and use of English while a subjective need that the survey touched upon was students’ attitudes toward group work.

Interviews with IEP program alumni
- Conducted in person with 10 alumni from various cultural backgrounds
- Provided information on what they believed the IEP was doing well and what needed to be improved
- Provided information about the subjective needs of the students, such as which challenges these students felt unprepared to face
- Offered some insights into some objective needs, such as the necessity of frequent communication with native speakers
Behavior Observations Results

- The presentation stage occupied a significant amount of class time, even in fairly communicative classes, perhaps because the length of classes was quite short.
- Students’ speech in this stage was often limited to a single phrase or sentence, and few students voluntarily replied to the teacher’s elicitations or asked questions.
- There was a fair amount of pair work and group work, and these activities were successful. In this context, extended production was sometimes possible.
- Students were particularly eager to discuss cultural issues and their hobbies and interests.
- While there were opportunities to practice conversation skills, there did not appear to be a significant amount of class time devoted to extended production as teachers needed to present and cover a large amount of content in short class periods.
# Student Survey Results: Multi-item scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Across Levels</th>
<th>Comfort with talking with Americans</th>
<th>Positivity Towards Working in groups</th>
<th>Positivity Towards Learning American Culture</th>
<th>Frequency of Communication with Americans</th>
<th>Positivity Towards Speaking English in class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skew</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>-0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurt</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>-1.2</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 7: Descriptive statistics for multi-item scales across all levels.*

4: Strongly Agree  3: Agree  2: Disagree  1: Strongly Disagree
Student Survey: Difficulties living in the U.S.

Difficulties Living in the U.S.: Total Across all Levels

- Going to the doctor/dentist
- Doing things at the bank
- Going to the store/supermarket
- Understanding jokes
- Talking on the phone
- Knowing where to go hiking/run
- Ordering food at a restaurant
- Using the transportation system
- Knowing where to go to have fun
Student Survey: Difficulties using English on campus or in classes

Difficulties using English on campus or in classes: Total Across all Levels
Student Survey: Common difficulties talking to Americans

Difficulties talking to Americans

- Americans speak too fast
- I am too shy to introduce myself
- I cannot understand the slang and I...
- I do not know what to say
- I am too shy to talk for very long
- My pronunciation is bad
- I cannot understand many of the words
- I cannot continue conversations yet
- I do not understand the culture
- I speak too slowly
Student Survey: Students’ Interests

Interests: Across All Levels

- University life: 70.00%
- Sports: 60.00%
- Learning more: 55.00%
- Exploring: 50.00%
- American TV: 65.00%
- Exploring new: 55.00%
- Traveling: 60.00%
- American understanding: 45.00%
- News stories: 20.00%
- Politics: 10.00%
Teacher Survey Results

- Instructors believe that students use very little English outside of the classroom.
- They think that opportunities for English conversation, native speaker involvement, and extracurricular activities are missing from the program.
- Instructors implement a considerable amount of pair and group work and find that students tend to respond positively to it.
Teacher Survey Results

- They think students’ biggest difficulties are: shyness, lack of vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and lack of opportunities for authentic practice. To improve, they think students need more practice and contact with native speakers.

- Instructors anticipate that note-taking, listening to natural speech at regular speed, making friends, dealing with a heavy workload, making presentations, and composing assignments will be the biggest challenges for their students when they transition to degree programs.
2. How much do you think your students use English outside of the classroom?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For about an hour</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It varies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not much</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vary little</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very little</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I would say some of them don’t use it at all. A lot of them not much at all. A very few, for some reason, really get into it and have a lot of opportunities and pick up slang and vocabulary quickly.
6. What are common challenges your students have when it comes to speaking?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They are shy and lack authentic practice/experience in English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary choice, pronunciation, grammar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of vocabulary and pronunciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They talk to the same classmates every day, usually in own language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes they lack the vocabulary that they need to express their opinions, sometimes they are shy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low level vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation, vocabulary, listening accurately, expressing their ideas clearly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certain languages, like Vietnamese, have a lot of trouble that I don’t know how to help. That is the toughest thing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7. What do you think your students need in order to improve their speaking skills?
8 responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More real interactions in English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More natural practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various opportunities to experiment academic and non-academic English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more chances to practice outside of class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary and opportunities to practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice, vocabulary and idioms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More opportunities to practice would definitely help.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Needs Analysis Results: Alumni Interviews

- Most of the ten students felt that their speaking had become more fluent since they began studying at the IEP. However, after leaving the IEP, they still struggled with understanding native-speaking classmates and professors and appropriately phrasing their thoughts.

- Most respondents did not feel that the IEP helped them build contacts with native speakers outside of teachers and staff. Many felt shy talking to native speakers, and very few associated with native speakers outside of class and survival situations. Subjects who did have American friends made an effort to make these connection by joining churches or campus clubs.

- Most students were interested in learning more about American culture and the cultures of their classmates.
Needs Analysis: Results - Alumni Interviews

- Students struggled with the following when they begin taking content classes:
  - Field-specific vocabulary
  - The speed of professors’ speech
  - Expressing opinions in the classroom
  - Idioms and cultural references
  - Producing accurate speech and writing
  - Talking to professors in office hours
  - Note-taking
  - Group projects
  - Citation styles
  - Asking questions in class
  - Making native-speaker friends
Comparison to your Opinions

Now let us compare these results to your opinions...

Find a partner and discuss:

● How do the results support or diverge from your predictions?
● What surprised you?
The IEP students have very few opportunities to interact with native speakers, but they have a strong desire to do so. Even the IEP alumni rarely have native speaker friends they socialize with outside of academic contexts. They often have anxiety about interacting with native speakers.

After transitioning to degree programs, the IEP alumni often struggle with understanding speech at a natural speeds and rhythms.

Students and alumni often said they struggled with putting their thoughts into English words in a fluid way.
Summary of Major Insights (2/2)

- Most IEP students and alumni felt learning about American culture is both interesting and necessary for successful language learning.
- The IEP students often struggle with understanding informal speech, full of slang and idioms.
Implications (1/4)

In class:

● In traditional IEP classes, there rarely is enough time for significant opportunities for extended production. **There is a need to build opportunities for practice into the curriculum.** Such opportunities need to focus both on academic and daily informal communication.

● Extended production activities will be most beneficial if they connect to the **real-life tasks** students struggle with most after matriculation, both in and out of class.
Implications (2/4)

- Despite the fact that many students come from cultures in which cooperative learning is uncommon, most claim to **appreciate the value of pair and group work**.
- Instructors at intermediate-high and advanced levels should try to speak with **natural speed and rhythm** so that students are better prepared to transition to mainstream university classes.
Implications (3/4)

Out of class:

- We cannot make the assumption that a second language context will inherently provide students with opportunities to engage in meaningful conversation and cultural exposure beyond survival needs.

- Building relationships with native speakers requires students to take initiative. More reticent students rely on the IEP to facilitate interaction with native speakers.

- Students shared that their personalities (confidence, shyness, etc.) have a large effect on whether they build relationships with native speakers. This factor may be more significant than their desire for contact with native speakers.
Implications (4/4)

- Students who have succeeded in making friends from different cultural groups took the initiative to engage with native-speakers, either in churches, clubs, or university classes.

- Maintaining relationships with native speakers requires English learners to have a high level of **cultural awareness** as they must be able to process the large number of cultural references embedded in everyday conversations. Thus, cultural boundaries may add challenges to students’ oral performance when they interact with native speakers.
IEPS may consider...

- including a **discussion section or lab component** for listening and speaking classes so that students can practice using the language they have learned.
- setting aside a designated time for **facilitated conversation practice** that does not involve teacher-centered presentation of new information.
- creating and implementing homework assignments that can encourage students to engage with the world outside the classroom.
Suggestions for IEPs (2/2)

IEPS may consider...

- having a **mentorship program** that pairs IEP students with university students in their intended fields of study.

- establishing **culture and conversation classes** that help students develop their cultural awareness by focusing on aspects of American culture and campus life.

- hosting **social events** that attract both IEP and native-speaking university students and encourage cross-cultural exchange. IEP programs might invite students from relevant departments, such as anthropology, international relations, languages, and tourism and hospitality.
An Example Plan for a Culture and Conversation Class

- Learner-centered activities with very short presentation stages
- Topics prepare students for both academic and social conversations
- Fluency-focused group and pair work activities ask students to formulate and express opinions
- Many activities introduce information about American culture and ask students to evaluate what they have discovered
- Several activities require that students leave the classroom to collect information from others on campus
# Example Units Addressing Students’ Needs: Upper Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Topics/ Situations</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unit 1 6 hours</td>
<td>College Life</td>
<td>1.1 Getting to know campus, and its clubs&lt;br&gt;1.2 Interacting with professors and peers&lt;br&gt;1.3 Views on education: cheating and plagiarism, roles of teachers and students&lt;br&gt;1.4 Stereotypes, expectations and experiences with American college life</td>
<td>1.1 Finding answers on campus&lt;br&gt;1.2 Role playing student-student and student-teacher interactions&lt;br&gt;1.3 Interview classmates and native speakers about cultural views of cheating and education&lt;br&gt;1.4 Group poster project: Illustrate and present the stereotypical college student in America and in their native countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 2 3 hours</td>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>2.1 Identity&lt;br&gt;2.2 Horoscopes and astrology</td>
<td>2.1 Making a coat of arms: How I see myself, how people see me in my native country, how people see me in the United States&lt;br&gt;2.2 Writing horoscopes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 3 6 hours</td>
<td>Love and Marriage</td>
<td>3.1 Online Dating&lt;br&gt;3.2 Arranged Marriages&lt;br&gt;3.3 Prenups and Divorce&lt;br&gt;3.4 Postponing marriage and having children</td>
<td>3.1 Design your perfect partner&lt;br&gt;3.2 Debate: Are arranged marriages good or bad?&lt;br&gt;3.3 Write a prenup in pairs or groups&lt;br&gt;3.4 Dear Abby: Students will write about relationship dilemmas and then will go outside and ask native speakers for advice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample Unit Plan for Unit Three: Love and Marriage (1/8)

Day 1: Online Dating  90 minutes in total

Warm-up (Obj. 4.1): 5 minutes
T will ask Ss to share how their parents met. Then, T will ask Ss who in the class has a boyfriend or girlfriend and will ask how they met.

Presentation (Obj. 4.1): 15 minutes
T tells Ss they will be discussing online dating and other ways of meeting potential partners. Ss will watch a clip about online dating, and after that Ss will talk with a partner and compare what they heard. Ss will return to their partners and discuss whether they believe online dating could be an effective way to meet a romantic partner.

Practice (Obj. 4.1): 20 minutes
The T will have Ss rank the most common ways they think American couples meet. T will have each pair find another pair and discuss what is similar and different about their rankings. T will ask each group to share the biggest difference they found between the two rankings. T will project a graph with the actual statistics (Brodwin, 2016). Ss will discuss with their groups what surprises them when they compare their predictions with the real statistics.
Production (Obj. 2.1 & 4.1): 15 minutes
T will break the Ss into one group of men and one group of women. The groups will create a list of qualities that they believe people desire in romantic partners of their gender.

Production (Obj. 2.1 & 4.1): 25 minutes
T will distribute the “Create your Perfect Partner” handout and tell Ss they will design their perfect partner. They should draw the partner on the handout and write a description on a separate paper. The description will address guiding questions that the T will project on the board, such as: 1) What does your perfect partner do for a living? 2) What is your perfect partner passionate about? 3) How will you meet your perfect partner?
The T will mix the written responses of the Ss in each group and redistribute them. The Ss will show their drawings and will go around the circle guessing to whom each written description belongs.

Wrap-up activity: 5 minutes- Reflection Discussion: In groups, Ss will reflect on their previous idea of a “perfect partner” and will re-evaluate their opinions of dating and finding the “perfect partner.”
Day 4: Postponing Marriage and Having Children  90 minutes

Warm-up:  5 minutes
T will pair Ss and ask them to share with their partner about at what age their parents got married and had the first child. Ss will also share their thoughts about why their parents got married and had children at certain ages.

Presentation (Obj. 4.1 & 5.1):  15 minutes
-T will have Ss share with their partner their own opinions about what the ideal age to get married is and explain why.
-After five minutes, the T will have Ss watch a video about millennials postponing marriage and having children (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1UcvrkFsRc).
-Ss will discuss possible reasons to postpone getting married and having children.

Practice (Obj. 2.1 & 4.1):  20 minutes
T will have Ss work in pairs to predict at what age most Americans get married and begin having children. T will show Ss graphs about research on rates of marriage and childbirth in the U.S. (Klein, 2013).
T will have Ss work in groups and each pick one fact that surprises them the most and give their thoughts about it.
Sample Unit Plan for Unit Three: Love and Marriage (8/8)

Production (Obj. 2.1): 15 minutes
-Each group of students will be given a “Dear Abby” letter about a person with dating or marriage troubles. Each group will have seven minutes to discuss the problem and decide what advice to give the person who wrote the letter.

Production (Obj. 1.1 & 5.1): 35 minutes
-T will put Ss in pairs and go around campus interviewing native speakers about what advice they would give in response to the “Dear Abby” letters. The Ss will have 20 minutes to collect at least three different pieces of advice from the interviewees.
-After returning to the classroom, T will have each pair share one piece of advice they got from the interviewees and their opinions of it.

Wrap-up activity: 5 minutes
T will have students reflect on themselves and discuss whether their original opinions about the ideal time to get married and have children have changed.
Day Six: Having roommates  90 minutes

Warm-up:  10 minutes
T will ask Ss if they have ever lived with roommates. Then, T will ask those Ss to share any funny or interesting stories they have about living with roommates.

Presentation (Obj. 2.2):  10 minutes
-T will elicit examples of qualities and behaviors of good and bad roommates. T will ask Ss what qualities they would like in a roommate.
-T will play a clip from Friends that shows roommates and their annoying habits. Ss will compare the annoying habits they saw. Ss will discuss whether they have ever lived with anyone with annoying habits.
-After, T will ask the class if they think living with family is easier or more enjoyable than living with roommates.

Practice (Obj. 2.2):  15 minutes
Ss will work together to come up with a list of qualities and considerations people should keep in mind when choosing a roommate.
Production (Obj. 2.2): 15 minutes
Ss will work in groups of three to four to look at roommate listings and talk about which listing they prefer. They will discuss the pros and cons of each listing. Groups will agree on which potential roommate they would want to live with. Each group will select one student to report which listing they picked and why.

Production (Obj. 2.2): 25 minutes
- Ss will work in pairs to create a roommate contract consisting of at least five things they would do and five things they would not do if they lived together. The pairs must agree on every item in the contract.
- Next, pairs will combine to form groups of four and create a new roommate contract that combines items from both previous contracts. All four Ss must agree on every item in the new contract.
- A representative from each group will share one condition from their roommate contrast.

Wrap-up activity: 10 minutes
T will have Ss reflect on whether they would use a roommate contract in real life. T will ask some Ss who would use it and some Ss who would not use it to explain why.
Questions?