

**SAWSAN ZAHARA
SPRING 2005
NECIT**

What I learned from being a participant in the NECIT Seminar.

How I heard about NECIT

A fairly newcomer to the college, I often heard the word NECIT mentioned in my small modern languages department meetings. I asked and was told that it was a program to help improve teaching. Later in the semester, I saw a session assigned to NECIT in the brochure for the faculty development day back in 2003, and decided to attend. If memory serves, Tim discussed findings of a survey that had been sent out to full time faculty in the college about teaching practices. I was intrigued! Hearing about it again last semester, and looking at the topic “Diversity and Inclusiveness”, words that I struggle with often, I decided to apply for the seminar.

Expectations

I knew I had to come up with a plan, but still couldn't really pinpoint it. I teach ESL classes, and at any given semester, I have at least four nationalities represented in my class. So, I am already “diverse.” I also teach these students English language in order to help them matriculate into mainstream classes in the college; hence, I am teaching for “inclusiveness,” right! So, what can I contribute to, or how can I benefit from being a participant in the NECIT seminar? Well, the Dean of humanities had observed my class one time that semester, and in an after observation discussion, mentioned to me that he was interested in how my ESL students were comfortable speaking up in class, and learning as well as even joking sometimes in the environment I had created for them in class. He also commented that he often saw them withdrawn in other classes. I shared that thought with my fellow NECIT seminarians, and the concept made it to “the pearl of the day” status. Coincidentally enough, a Speech communication teacher voiced his concern to me about one of my ESL students and her ability to speak up in his class. So, I adopted the concept of enabling my ESL students to speak up not only in my class but also in all other classes and made it into my pearl of the semester.

Application

My focus now is not on developing diversity and inclusiveness in my classroom anymore but on developing strategies to help my students spread their diversity and become included in other classes. As Pepp often commented, my ESL students needed to develop better vocabulary skills, and as Rebecca indicated, my project should be about “preparing ESL students for real life experience in America,” so I set out to try and bring my NECIT-learned concepts into my classroom without having them interfere with my curriculum.

With the Speech communication class in mind, I adjusted my Reading for ESL course syllabus to introduce a small group session where the students interviewed each other and wrote about where each person was from as well as some characteristics about them. All interviews were presented to the class in a “Speech” fashion. This exercise, although not relevant to my class material for Reading in ESL, proved to be interesting and created quite a spark, and opened up a big discussion as we read an article entitled “Can English Be Dethroned?” Students needed to give their opinion on whether English was the dominant language in the world and to give examples in support of their ideas in, again, a “Speech” fashion to the class. Later during the week, the Speech Communication class teacher sent me a note with one of the students to report to me that my ESL students in his class were doing fine. My students’ accomplishments in other classes made me feel great. I bridged a gap in their educational goals and reminisced about mine.

In preparing my students to deal with the American language and culture, they tell me that English is not their first language, they express loneliness and discrimination, and I, sympathetic to their stories, get asked about my own experiences, and I share with them my own arrival and struggle stories. For those of us who remember, in 1985, a TWA airplane was hijacked to Beirut Airport where some Americans were shot to death in an incident that outraged the American population and resulted in backlash at some of the Arab Americans here. I arrived in the U.S shortly after that incident. I was one of a group of Lebanese students that arrived at Boston University then. I remember how we often had to be escorted by the campus police from our dorm rooms into classes and into the cafeteria and back. I remember all the name callings and the protest signs around our dorm areas. I remember roommates leaving and asking for new room assignments because they didn’t want to be rooming with terrorists. I remember alienation; I remember discrimination.

My reading for ESL class this semester turned into an experimentation zone, and well it should be. It is the most diverse class I have taught recently. Enrolled in that class are students from China, India, Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Bulgaria, Haiti, and The Dominican Republic, along with me, an Arab. Although my class is far from being reshaped as my class syllabus is, it is a work in progress, still an experimental zone rather than a Model. I have tried every chance I got to make my students more engaged and confident with knowledge and language skills to speak up in class. An internet search assignment in scanning and skimming for the needed information on a web site turned into an assignment in designing a travel brochure to places that you would want your classmates to visit in your country and why, presented again in class in a speech format. I learned along with all my students about the wonderful places they all come from, loved and missed.

A story I regularly assign for the reading class is “The Lottery,” is a story of sacrifice. I had always asked the students to read it at home over the weekend, and required them to write in reaction about a couple of questions in class. One of the questions was: Was the Lottery fair? And I often get similar answers about how the lottery is fair and it’s a matter of luck when you win the lottery and the money you get, always an indication that not all of the students in the class had read the story. This semester, instead of turning the class

session into a discussion in order to explain the story, I took a piece of paper, folded it into as many pieces as necessary, and asked the students as they read the story paragraph by paragraph in the class to act out what they understood of it. Surprise! All but two students, who had read the story till the end, were shocked when I asked them to stone Rita to death because she picked the paper with the black dot, or in their own words, she won the lottery. The lesson turned from stories of sacrifice that we as human beings make every day, to stories of sacrifice they as foreigners have made in order to come to this country. I always try to detach myself from certain situations, and my students always ask me for my own sacrifices.

Growing up in war torn Beirut was never easy. In 1984, my youngest brother, Fadi, was 17, a senior in high school, with an acceptance to the University of Ohio in Toledo, and a grant in hand. He was expected to embark on his journey in late June that year. One day in late March, as a boy scout, he was helping deliver some food supplies with an EMS van to some displaced families sheltered at the local school, when the bombing started out of the blue. A bomb fell close to their location, and my brother was severely injured. He died a few days later as a result of shrapnel, which had rendered him brain dead for about a week in the hospital's intensive-care unit. Guess what, few years later, after I nursed my parents back to life and acceptance, I decided to keep the grant in the family and accept it myself. I arrived in the United States to fulfill my brother's dreams, and along the way I found my own.

Around the room I hear stories of gang problems in Praia, rape and torture in Port au Prince, and poverty in India. I share my stories unwillingly, often, and we bond. We bond in pain and sorrow, and in joy and relief as we share our life experiences and learn and grow and persevere. Yes, along the way, I manage to introduce a lot of English vocabulary and grammatical structures as well.

After hearing my struggle, they look at me and see what I have overcome, and most importantly, that I am in a position that is much different from where they're at now. I feel a sense of bonding, and I start to help them to cross the bridge into inclusiveness and acceptance.