



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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EcSL: Teaching Economics as a Second Language

A problem in teaching economics is that instructors concentrate so much on the parts (tools) that students lose sight of the mission of the course. An analogy: if we were teaching students how to raise a garden and the student mastered the use of common garden tools—e.g., spade, hoe, fertilizer—but failed to produce a crop, we would feel that we had failed in our task. In the economics classroom we teach students how to construct various models and how to calculate several statistical conditions. The students also learn many principles and laws, each of which is an important tool—but *only* a tool. John Maynard Keynes once explained that “economics is a method rather than a doctrine, an apparatus of the mind, a technique of thinking, which helps its possessor to draw conclusions.” The “crop” that economic teachers must produce is to enable students to use the tools of economics to make decisions, e.g., to process data and arrive at independent conclusions.

What Is EcSL?

According to Rendigs Fels of Vanderbilt University, the best model for teaching economics is that for teaching a foreign language rather than that for teaching history or English. Literature on the teaching of foreign languages differentiates between instruction in foreign language and in English as a second language (ESL). In both cases, a strong audio-lingual approach is used in which students hear many repetitions of the new language and are encouraged to use their new terminology often. Many games and physical activities are used in the classroom to individualize student participation. The goal is to teach each student the terms, their meanings, and basic applications within the culture under study. When immersion is used as a teaching technique, the class is only permitted to communicate via the language under study. Field trips to restaurants, medical centers, and/or the native country where use of the language can be tested are critical teaching strategies.

In the ESL model, the instructor teaches English to foreign-speaking students (usually in preparation for future study in which English will be the only language). ESL is a preferred teaching situation because students are immersed in English-speaking situations in most activities

and almost all media. ESL students receive constant repetition and rapid feedback in and out of the classroom that reinforces successful usage of the English language. The students are able to apply the language successfully, which motivates them to move more rapidly from simple to complex usage. Because we live in an environment that demands economic decision making from our citizens, encourages movement from simple to more complex economic decisions throughout life, and presents economic data via all media, the teaching approach described herein has been referred to as EcSL (economics as a second language).

The Hazard Community College Approach

Hazard Community College economics students represent a cross-section of all students. Their ages, experiences, abilities, goals, and interests in taking a principles of economics class differ. We have attempted over the past several years to create a situation in which students with various levels of skills and abilities have followed a systematic approach to learning. The results are (1) more students know more about economics after taking the class; (2) they are better able to apply economic concepts in their daily lives; (3) they are more confident about using economic terms and tools; (4) they have learned to work in a more cooperative, less competitive environment; (5) they see a stronger relationship between economics and life; (6) they are better prepared to perform their role as citizens; (7) they use self-questioning study techniques; (8) they use rehearsal study techniques; (9) they use teacher-provided schemas for learning economics; and (10) they prepare their own schema and present it for approval to other students before turning it in for credit in the course.

But Students Must Know the Terms . . . Right?

We have used a combination of mastery learning and personalized systems of instruction to prepare students for recall, understanding, and application tasks.

Class Activities

1. Introduce the class as an exciting but very difficult course of study.



2. Promise students an A, B, or C grade if they succeed at three different aspects of the class.
3. Write each student's family to tell them that the student is taking a very difficult course, and their support is needed if the student is to be successful.
4. Use the textbook's test bank to prepare three versions of each test the students are to take (four tests, 40 multiple-choice items each).
5. Use a Scantron grading machine to quickly score each version of the test. No grade is recorded until the student scores 80% or higher.
6. Students who score less than 80% complete correctives outside of class. They then exchange their old test, answer sheet, and correctives in our learning center for another version of that particular test. They take the test in the learning center. We score it on the Scantron grader and give them the results as they come into the next class meeting. If necessary, they do correctives again and take another version of the test until a score of 80% or higher is attained.
7. After each first exam, we move on to new material during the next class meeting. Students' deadline for scoring an 80% or higher on each test is the next scheduled exam. Students must spend considerable time on economics in order to meet this schedule. Attendance increases because students cannot miss classes and complete their tasks. In addition, student attention and participation change drastically after the first test. Because students recognize the importance of precise language in using economic terminology, they ask a good many clarifying and application questions in class. They want to be specific about the terminology and avoid doing another corrective if possible. In the process they become active learners.
8. We write their advisors (with a copy to the student) and tell them how pleased we are with the students' efforts and their scores to date. We ask them to encourage their advisees as they meet with them.
9. Class time consists of answering student questions about the reading assignment, showing application of concepts, and having them perform tasks—e.g., construct a demand curve, calculate elasticity of demand, or construct a field of indifference curves. For grading purposes, they complete daily application assignments which are turned in at the end of the term in a notebook.
10. To teach analysis, synthesis, and evaluation learning, we require a paper from each student explaining a particular product and its market (timber, tobacco, coal, etc.) This causes the students to search for

economic data from various media, making them more conscious of their existence.

11. When students finish their papers, they submit them to a peer review team of three other students. Each team member will read each paper and offer suggestions for improvement. One student will sign off on the use of language, another will sign off on spelling and punctuation, while a third student will sign off on the use of economic terms, examples, and concepts. The students then rotate assignments on the next paper. The students are responsible for collecting economic data, using newly acquired economic tools to present their data, and, most important, arriving at their own conclusions.

Using this approach to teaching economics, we have found that the focus of the entire class is on learning economics and is more like a work environment than a typical classroom. Our job is one of encouraging, praising, clarifying, and assisting; we have become facilitators.

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Celebrate with us!

The 1992 International Conference on Teaching Excellence and Conference of Administrators is scheduled for May 24-27.

Speakers will include Donald Phelps, Chancellor, Los Angeles Community College District, and Beverly Simone, President, Madison Area Technical College. Six pre-conference sessions will be featured, plus special sessions by Wally Cox, College of the Canyons, who will provide instruction in country-and-western dancing. The Conference of Administrators; 1992 NISOD Excellence Awards presentation; Monday-evening Mexican buffet and dance; and tours of Austin, Texas Hill Country, and San Antonio round out the schedule.

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