

Reflecting on Reflection- Deliberations on a Freshman English Class

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Abstract

This case study examines student and teacher opinions of a college freshman EFL class. Students worked in groups to teach a lesson to the class. After each lesson, the students and teacher wrote about their thoughts on the experience. While feedback suggests that the student teaching assignment is a valuable learning tool, more explicit instruction is required. In addition, through self-reflection, the author could realize practical ways to enhance his own teaching.

Introduction

For the past few years I have not taught one of my communicative English classes. That is to say, I have had my students teach it. All of the participants belong to the Faculty of Education, and many of them will go on to become teachers themselves. During the semester, groups of students take turns in teaching a unit from the text to the class. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this particular class I was guided by the work of Richards and Lockhart (1994). Both students and teacher reflect after each lesson through written tasks.

Method

In fact, I actually *do* teach the initial two classes of the semester, as well as any remaining classes after all groups have presented. These serve as models and give the learners a chance to see what is expected of them. (In this particular class we used the text *Passport Plus*.) Students are randomly placed into groups of four. Next, they are given a lesson planning worksheet. The worksheet is simple, yet very structured. After that, I meet with each group of four students in the week before they will present. I give them some unit presentation tips and they are free to ask me any questions. Before the presentation, they email me a copy of their lesson planning worksheet and I

correct any grammatical or lexical errors and make copies for the class. They proceed to teach approximately one hour of a ninety-minute period in the following class. After their teaching experience they write a *kansoubun* (a summary of their thoughts and feelings) for homework. In this paper, I would like to share the thoughts from this class and highlight both its strengths and weaknesses. Evaluations are based on the *kansoubun*, a university-wide questionnaire, and my own personal class notes.

Assessment 1

The week after teaching their class, students were required to submit their *kansoubun*. They could write in English or Japanese but had to write at least half a page. Their thoughts are summarized below.

Over half of the class (58%) reported that their teaching assignment was very difficult and/or a very positive experience. With regards to difficulty, learners felt that it was very challenging to use English for sixty minutes. Even though they tried to use simple language and had a good idea of what classroom English was, the act of explaining tasks or vocabulary proved a bit daunting. Further, teaching in and of itself was an entirely new event for most. Although students usually followed the sample structure quite strictly, they reported that they couldn't present the material effectively. Despite the many challenges they faced, learners felt that overall it was a worthwhile experience. Since many will go on to become teachers in the future, they regarded this exercise as valuable practice. More specifically, students said that this assignment taught them not only how to work together as a group, but also how to present in front of others.

Several students (25%) also mentioned the following three points: First, teaching in front of others made them nervous. However, they were anxious not just because they were in front of an audience of their peers. Their lack of confidence in their English skills also made them tense. Second, preparation for the lesson was quite demanding. The act of planning a lesson was time consuming and it was not always easy to put the plan into practice in the classroom. Third, this project inspired them to study English even more in the future. Students recognized the fact that learning a second language requires a good deal of study combined with practice.

Assessment 2

At the end of the semester, students also completed a school questionnaire. This particular questionnaire is required by the School of General Education and is administered to freshman in each of their classes. Students respond to questions about the class on a Likert Scale. (See Appendix for a translated version of questions used in this study.) Summaries of the main points are drawn from five different fields. Three points were found to be overwhelmingly positive and two points require improvement.

The items relating to favorable responses corresponded to the instructor's enthusiasm, speech, and availability. On the questionnaire itself 96% of the students responded that I was passionate about teaching, spoke in a way that was easy to understand, and communicated personally with each student. In every class, I try to express my love for teaching to the students. It is hoped that my energy will positively affect their own efforts to acquire English and enhance their love for learning in general. When addressing the class, as well as individual students, I try to always use the target language. In addition, I make an effort to give clear, simple directions and consistently give examples of exactly what I require from my students. While the majority of activities are centered on pair and group work among students, I am constantly circulating around the room to make contact with individual students. In this way, I can answer questions as well as get an idea of the class' overall comprehension of the material. Further, I make myself available to students before and after class as well as through appointment. If need be, they can also contact me through email.

Although responses to the questionnaire were largely approving, there were two areas that may require slight modification. Both items relate to the comprehensibility of the syllabus. The first issue involves class design. Approximately 30% of the students felt that the structure of the class did not necessarily match what was outlined in the syllabus. While I tried to be concise when writing the schedule, it appears that more detail is necessary. Related to the syllabus was the question of grading. Nearly 25% of learners were unclear as to exactly how they would be graded. As this is a key piece of information for the course, efforts will need to be made to improve comprehensibility.

Assessment 3

In addition to student thoughts and comments, I also kept a record of each class taught by the groups. On the whole, students did well to present the target information and follow the teaching structure. It was obvious to me that they had taken time to prepare the class worksheet as well as rehearse their lesson. With regards to upgrading their teaching skill, learners need to work on the areas of presentation and class control. Even though there are less than thirty students in the class and all are required to sit near the front of the room, presenters need to speak in much louder voices. I sat in the back of the class during the lessons and it was clear that volume was sometimes a problem. Unfortunately, no one complained or asked for repetition. Another facet of presentation involves eye contact. Many of the student teachers chose to look at me instead of making contact with the larger class. Perhaps this was due to a lack of confidence or uncertainty on how to proceed. Controlling the class also proved to be a stumbling block for many groups. They were unsure how to get students' attention, monitor students, and deal with an odd number of students for pair-work. In my own lessons I tried to model these behaviors by turning off the lights, circulating around the classroom, and pairing up with the odd student. Nevertheless, it seems that more guidance is required in these areas.

After reviewing all of the student lessons I took the time to reflect on my own teaching methods. Along with the ideas mentioned above I feel that the class can be enhanced in the following three ways. First, I tend to be overly dependent on the text as well as the numerous worksheets I hand out. A sincere effort needs to be made to use PowerPoint or similar to cut down on the use of paper as well as to have students take their own notes. Second, as many role-plays are acted out in class, the use of props and realia (photos, business cards, etc.) could greatly aid comprehension and perhaps make the target language more memorable. For example, if two business people were meeting they could introduce themselves as well as exchange business cards. Third, to make learning more fun and solidify what was acquired, students could take part in games and quizzes to review the material. Although I do make use of a few group games (for prizes such as cup ramen), the content is usually an icebreaker or a topic unrelated to the theme of the lesson. I feel that I could better incorporate the class lessons into a stimulating and competitive review session. In this way, students could more completely master the

material.

Conclusion

This case study allowed both students and teacher to critique themselves and the class. By having students put into writing their own reflections on teaching and learning, the instructor was able to gain valuable insight into each individual learner. Moreover, the class questionnaire helped the teacher to see the bigger picture. These two elements, combined with the instructor's own thoughts; helped to provide a balanced view of the strengths and weaknesses of the class. Likewise, students themselves were made aware of any gaps in skill or knowledge and motivated to improve through further study. It is hoped that this structure of reflection and evaluation will prove useful to future educators in the field of language learning.