

Final Reflection Paper on Teaching ESL 118G on April 4 and 6:

Managing Time, Monitoring Students, and Asking Questions

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As a teacher, I believe some of my greatest strengths are my creativity when I plan lessons and my ability to build rapport with students, but in this reflection I would like to focus on opportunities for improving my teaching style. After conducting a self-evaluation based on a video of myself teaching a lesson in a graduate level ESL course, I have settled on three areas I aim to work on in the coming months: how effectively I manage time and activities in the classroom, how closely I monitor students when they are doing activities, and how effectively I pose discussion questions to the class.

I am now much more aware that my tendency is to overplan and squeeze too many activities into the time frame of a lesson, and this is going to be a hard habit for me to break. It will take some conscious effort to do what feels like “underplanning,” and then I can just keep an extra “expansion” activity in my back pocket in case there is time. Second, I need to be more engaged in monitoring students in a balanced manner. I need to circulate more around the class and be constantly aware of everything going on, and not let myself get distracted by interacting with one group for too long. Lastly, observing myself teach has taught me that I need to pose discussion questions that are shorter, louder, and more focused, so that I can wait patiently with confidence for students to think about their answers and then volunteer to respond.

In this paper, I will explain how I came to these conclusions through observing my video of myself and through reflecting on the feedback given to me by two of my observers: my host instructor, Katie Masters, and my own supervisor at Penn State, Deryn Verity.

Background about Teaching Site

I taught class on two days, April 4 and 6, for a course entitled ESL 118G: American Oral English for ITAs III, which was taught by Katie Masters, a PhD Candidate in the Department of Applied Linguistics at Penn State. The purpose of ESL 118G is to prepare international graduate students for working as Teaching Assistants at Penn State. When they arrive at Penn State, International Teaching Assistants are required to take the American English Oral Communicative Proficiency Test (AEOCPT), and if they do not pass they must take at least one course in American Oral English. Courses such as ESL 118G emphasizes the communicative skills that TAs need for interacting effectively and appropriately with undergraduates in their future classes. At the end of the course, the TAs have to take a test that includes an Office Hour Role Play component, in which they have to simulate interacting with an undergraduate coming to office hours with a problem. The lesson I designed targets this component of the test, so I entitled my lesson “Office hours role play: Stern, caring, and reasonable.” Katie and I settled on one overall goal for the lesson: to help the TA's feel confident and able to adapt to any kind of office hours situation in the future. I decided to have the students perform mock office hours dialogues simultaneously in pairs. Before the dialogue activity, I presented my personal philosophy of how an instructor conducting office hours needs to balance being stern, caring, and reasonable—depending on the context—when interacting with undergraduate students. I also instructed the TAs to use the activity to practice asking clarification questions and listening to students' problems. From teaching this lesson and observing a video of myself teaching it, I have learned a lot about myself as a teacher, and I have identified areas of improvement that I want to target in the coming months.

Theme 1: Time Management

Almost every part of the lesson—the introductory orientation and presentation, the instructions for the activity, the dialogues themselves, and the reflective discussion—took longer than I had anticipated (see Figure 1). After the lesson, I kind of lamented to Deryn that I know I often plan to do too much during a lesson, and it happened again that day. She asked me why I think that happens, and I replied in a frustrated tone, “I guess it is because I am not learning from my mistakes!” I had originally planned to have the class members role play through six

Original Plan for Timeline		Actual Lesson Timeline	
4:40	5 mins: Orientation (self-introduction)	4:40	Katie passes out the week's homework assignment
4:45	5 mins: Presentation	4:45	2 mins: Orientation (self-introduction) 11 mins: Presentation (lecture/ dialogic discussion)
4:50	15 mins: Engagement (Scenarios A, B, and C)	4:50	
4:55	(Scenario B)	4:55	
5:00	(Scenario C)	5:00	5 mins: Instructions for Engagement/ Activity
5:05	5 mins: Assessment/ Evaluation	5:05	5 mins: Role Play Scenario A
5:10	15 mins: engagement: Scenarios D, E, and F	5:10	4 mins: Role Play Scenario B
5:15	(Scenario E)	5:15	7 mins: Evaluation/ Reflection
5:20	(Scenario F)	5:20	
5:25	5 mins: Assessment/ Evaluation	5:25	2 mins: Transition into Scenario C 3 mins: Role Play Scenario C 1 min: Wrap up the period
			NEXT CLASS PERIOD

Figure 1. Comparison of Original Plan and Actual Lesson

scenarios, but partway into the class I realized we might only have time for four scenarios, so I tried to re-adjust the schedule while students were working. In the end, we only ended up going through three scenarios, but Katie and I continued the same activity the next class period and then we did the other scenarios. However, even during the following class period, I still

underestimated how long the reflective discussion would take, but Katie says my dialogic discussion with the students was still excellent, and even better on April 6 than it was on April 4.

Overall, I think one of my problems was that I did not fully conceptualize ahead of time all of the different steps that needed to take place during this lesson. Even though my lesson plan was very detailed, in the video it is clear that there were actually more steps than I had anticipated. For example, in the “Engagement/ Activity” part of the lesson, I had to give the general idea of the activity, tell students their individual roles, then remind them of the objectives and concepts they should try to apply, and lastly give them a minute to read the first scenario. My outline for the class gave five minutes for the Presentation part, and a vague 15 minutes for Engagement Part 1. Since I was conceptualizing the time on a superficial level, I was not able to realize that all of the necessary steps would cause this activity to take twice as long as I had expected.

From watching myself teach on the video, I realized that I also need to think more deeply about transitions while planning the timeline for the lesson. Time was needed for students to read the scenarios and to prepare, and I did not build this into the schedule and I had not fully contemplated the best way for them to read the scenarios. For example, once I started by saying, “Let me take a moment to read through the next scenario,” but then a few seconds later I changed my mind and had them read the scenarios silently to themselves. A couple options are that I could have read the scenarios aloud to the students, the students could have read them aloud, or they could have read them silently. However, because I had not mapped out all of these options ahead of time, the transitions seemed awkward in the video.

In the future, I should be more realistic in thinking about how much time is needed to transition to different parts within an activity. I will try to imagine the class’s time period more

vividly in my head to think about whether I am forgetting any steps that might take longer than I initially expected. In future plans, I should map out when exactly I will give the instructions and when the actual activity should begin. In addition, I should overestimate how much time these various steps will take, and then I can avoid squeezing in too many components in the activity. More time should be given to every step: introductory lectures/ discussions, activity instructions, activities, and reflective discussions. Then I can have a backup “expansion” activity to end the class with just in case we finish the main activity early. Overestimating the time for each step in the lesson while also having expansion activities could be the solution that will help me avoid my tendency to run out of time, but it will take some conscious effort to fight against my ingrained habit of over-planning.

Theme 2: Monitoring Students during Activities

Another lesson I learned is to move around more often in the classroom while monitoring groups. In one part of the video, I sat in the front while observing one group for about 2 minutes and 30 seconds, which is probably longer than I intended. While observing another group, I was looking down at the scenario sheeting trying not to intrude, but I was actually listening to the students while pretending that I was not listening. My supervisor at Penn State, Deryn Verity, who observed me teaching this lesson, commented that overall I could improve my level of engagement, since sitting on place for a long time is not very balanced. She says I should consider doing more monitoring since one time I went up to the computer to adjust the schedule on the PowerPoint for about a minute, when it might have been better to circulate around the room.

One idea I have for improving my level of monitoring is that I could simply state at the beginning of the activity that I will be purposely moving around to monitor everyone, and that

way I will not feel awkward about being intrusive, since I made it clear that I intend to monitor them. It is kind of a delicate balance: trying to monitor while not distracting the flow of their role play. Lastly, I need to be aware of all corners of the room—in the video I spent most of my time in the front and on the right side, but I did not visit the back left corner of the classroom very much.

Theme 3: Asking Questions

After the lesson, Katie mentioned that after each question, I should wait longer for students to respond, even up to 8 seconds, so when I watched the video of myself, I carefully analyzed how I asked questions, which I consider to be the single most important speech acts teachers can make in the classroom. Deryn has told me that in the past my speech while teaching has sometimes been hard to follow, though now I am much clearer than I used to be. As a result of hearing Katie's and Deryn's feedback, I wanted to see for myself if my questions were clear or not, and overall my conclusion is that a lot of my questions fell flat. In the IRE sequence (Initiation-Response-Evaluation), I think I do a pretty good job of restating and affirming students' contributions, but I want to get better at the Initiation phase of asking direct questions. Lately I have been trying to make my discussion questions more effective, but even though I think about this, I still tend to make a few mistakes.

In the video, I noticed that I have a tendency to state a question and then restate it in a weaker, more jumbled version. I used to think that rephrasing the question would be helpful to students, but now after watching myself, it appears that since I was focused on thinking about how to restate it, I sounded hesitant and trailed off in volume. After listening to myself ask these hesitant questions, I realized that it might be pretty hard for students to think of an answer while I am reformulating these questions in such a sluggish manner. I unintentionally drop in volume,

and as result I lose the momentum that was conveyed in the original question. In the future, I should try to make sure my discussion questions are short, loud, and focused. A shorter question would be easier to comprehend, and then I need to be confident in my question and force myself to wait a little bit longer, as Katie recommends. Since I am working with L2 students, I need to be cognizant of how student responses might come a little bit slower than I would normally expect when talking to L1 students.

Conclusion: Applying these Lessons in Future Courses at Penn State

In the coming months, when I teach regular English 015: Rhetoric and Composition and English 202C: Technical Writing over the summer, and when I teach ESL 015 next fall, I will try to apply the lessons I learned from my self-evaluation regarding effective time management, engagement/monitoring, and style of asking questions. As a result of many experiences this past semester, including mentoring a graduate student in the Penn State MATESL program, I have built up a strong foundation in teaching English in the L2 classroom, but I still have a lot of areas that I want to work on. With continued professional support and development at Penn State, I aim to continue to develop my teaching awareness and performance.