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## Challenges, Chances, and Change: Strategies for the Novice Teacher

Each year, two or more graduate students in the Master's in English Program (Teaching English as a Second Language [TESL] emphasis) at California State Polytechnic University (Cal Poly), Pomona, are selected to become teaching associates. The main purpose of the TESL Teaching Associates Program is to apprentice graduate students with little prior teaching experience into teaching English as a second language (ESL) courses at the university level. Teaching associates are in charge of their own classes; they are responsible for lesson plans, assignments, exams, and grades. They teach one class per quarter (either an intermediate-level ESL grammar course or an intermediate-level ESL composition course) during a three-quarter academic year.

Having come to the TESL Teaching Associates Program as novices, we view our training in this program as invaluable in helping us establish our careers as teachers. Throughout our first year of teaching, we were regularly presented with numerous and varied challenges. We often had questions about such things as course planning, course objectives, students' learning difficulties, classroom management, and departmental procedures—to mention just a few. But as we gained experience, we learned to anticipate situations and to answer our own questions. We became more comfortable making our own decisions and taking chances to meet challenges that arose. As a result, we became more confident, more independent, and more effective teachers.

Sharing our experiences with both new and aspiring teachers may help to alert them to some of the most common issues and concerns we encountered, and specifically, to alert them to the need for a solid support system for novice teachers. In this article, we will also share some strategies that may help novice teachers address and successfully overcome some of the most common challenges both inside and outside the classroom. The main areas we will address are: (a) the requirements for teaching at the university level (both academic and administrative); (b) our growing awareness of our students', our supervisors', and our own needs; (c) the challenges we faced regularly and the decisions we made to meet them; (d) the support system we tapped into and developed; and (e) our professional development.

## An Overview of Our Courses

The ESL program at Cal Poly Pomona is designed to enable non-native English speaking university students to successfully complete assignments in English grammar and composition. The first two courses—English 98, a beginning-level course, and English 99, an intermediate-level course—focus on grammar forms and paragraph development. English 102 and English 103, at the intermediate and intermediate-advanced levels respectively, focus on advanced grammar forms and longer writing assignments, including essays and research papers. During our assignment as teaching associates, we taught two quarters of English 99 and one quarter of English 102.

A teacher-student ratio of approximately 1:20 is typical for English 99 classes at Cal Poly Pomona. We found this ratio to be ideal for us as novice teachers as it enabled us to get to know our students more quickly and to address classroom and individual student concerns more effectively than we would have with a larger class. However, we realize that such a ratio is not universal; in many ESL classrooms (particularly in adult education) it is typical to find upwards of 35-50 students.

Because we were able to teach English 99 twice, once in the fall and again in winter, we had the opportunity to refine, adjust, and change our teaching ideas, lesson plans, and assignments. In addition, we felt much more confident and comfortable the second time around because, for the most part, we knew what to expect and what we could manage. For example, we knew that we could expect a range of proficiency levels in writing, reading, speaking, and listening. Therefore, we became adept at assessing much sooner the students' most urgent language-learning needs. Because we allowed ourselves to stretch creatively, we were able to see improvement in our skills as teachers. Even though we were in familiar territory, we resisted the inclination simply to repeat the past. We had classes full of new faces, different personalities, and varying abilities; we needed to take these factors into consideration regardless of how comfortable or secure we felt with what we had done before.

The third and final course we taught was English 102, College Composition for Speakers of ESL. This course provides a review of concepts from English 99 but at a greatly increased pace. New grammar concepts include noun clauses, adjective clauses, gerunds, infinitives, and conditionals. Students also gain more practice with paragraph writing and are introduced to both dictionary and thesaurus use.

The teacher-student ratio is approximately 1:25 for English 102, somewhat larger than our English 99 courses. Because we had experienced two quarters teaching English 99, we felt ready to teach a larger group of students. As ready as we were, however, we felt strangely like neophytes again. We succeeded in our new challenge both by relying on those techniques and strategies that had worked for us before and by being flexible enough to take different approaches when ideas and plans did not work. For example, as we began planning for our winter quarter, we reconsidered some of our

reading selections from the prior quarter. We took into account previous students' difficulties with or lack of interest in some of the selections and either substituted other readings or changed our approaches to reading preparation and in-class discussions.

### **Developing a Teacher's Awareness**

One of the most important aspects of any classroom environment (and one that the new teacher must be keenly aware of) is that each class will be different, with a personality of its own and its own challenges. The personality and atmosphere of each class reflects the unique combination of the individual students with the teacher. Together, they create and operate in a classroom community within the larger university.

Over the year, we became increasingly aware of the ways in which we interacted with our students, both inside and outside of the classroom. We realized that the things we said and did had a tremendous influence on their lives. We understood that we had become guides in their lives. In addition, we understood that our classes were like stepping stones to proficiency in writing, reading, speaking, and listening in English. Our students would need to incorporate these skills in their university coursework, regardless of their majors or specific discipline emphases. This realization, at first, seemed a daunting challenge and responsibility. We wondered how we could effectively balance our own skills and knowledge (and lack thereof) with the demands of the classroom, the objectives and requirements set by the department and the university, and the needs and concerns of our students. We discovered that the best way to meet such challenges was to develop a kind of "omnivision"—an ability to see both the short-range as well as the long-range.

As new teachers, we learned that to overcome challenges we had to take chances, to step just outside of our zones of comfort and security, and to risk both success and failure. We took chances by trying out new lesson plan ideas and by making changes when we realized they didn't work. We took chances by asking more seasoned instructors what they thought of our ideas and by being open to their constructive criticism. By understanding the unpredictability and the particularity of each classroom community, we avoided being hemmed in by our own best-laid plans. In addition, we learned not to see our students as passive observers with minds like bank accounts waiting for deposits (to use Freire's [1970] analogy), but as human beings from whom *we* could learn a great deal. We faced the task of helping our students to develop their critical thinking skills so that they could take a more proactive role in the creation of knowledge and meaning within a community of their peers.

### **The Classroom Environment**

It is difficult to characterize a single class as representative of our teaching experiences. Each class was unique for a variety of reasons. Sometimes students in our morning classes were alert, energetic, and willing to partici-

pate; on other occasions, they were sleepy and prone to dozing off. In our afternoon classes, students sometimes were lethargic; at other times, they were too energetic and had difficulty concentrating on classroom matters. To help offset these situations, we realized we had to attract their attention and get them involved immediately. We needed to “hook them.” With this goal, sometimes at the beginning of class we gave quick-writing assignments, quizzes, and dictations. Sometimes we put a puzzling grammar question on the board and challenged students to quickly provide the correct answer. By getting their attention immediately, we established control and created an effective learning environment.

We discovered that our students were from backgrounds as diverse as the range of subjects taught in the university. We had students whose first languages included Chinese, Burmese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Tagalog, Portuguese, Spanish, French, Korean, and Japanese, just to name a few. Our students’ areas of study included business, computer science, hotel and restaurant management, architecture, civil engineering, electrical engineering, biology, graphic design, accounting, and management and human resources. Some of our students were internationals and some were immigrants. They came from all over the greater Los Angeles area; some lived on campus, while most commuted every day from nearby cities. This diversity was, for us, one of the most rewarding and enjoyable aspects of teaching.

Most of our students had been speaking English for many years, although we occasionally had a student who had only been in the country for a couple of years. The range of language proficiency presented a challenge because we had to balance course requirements and objectives with individual or class needs. For example, because we needed to cover particular grammatical concepts in 10 weeks, we sometimes felt pressured to make decisions about whether to introduce a new topic or continue to work on previous material. We found such ongoing decisions quite difficult.

We learned to make informed decisions through assessments. By giving a quiz or a test, for example, we could get an idea of how well we had taught the material and how well our students understood it. If most students did poorly, we interpreted that as a sign of trouble, perhaps on both fronts. We asked students where they were having problems and used their responses as a guide for review, sometimes altering plans for subsequent class meetings when we felt that students needed additional practice on critical concepts. In addition, we spoke with our students’ tutors<sup>1</sup> when necessary to gain additional insight into where our students were struggling and asked tutors to focus their efforts on those areas. We reviewed the twice-quarterly reports generated by the tutors to monitor whether students were working on the areas needing their greatest attention. We also became aware of student needs during office hours, special appointments, e-mail communication, and telephone conversations.

While the majority of our students were college age (19-22), we occasionally had students whose ages ranged from the mid-20s to the mid-60s. We often found that our older, returning students added to an already

interesting mix of individuals. These students frequently had unique insights and experiences to share with the class and the inclusion of their voices in writing assignments and class discussions greatly enriched the learning environment for teacher and students alike.

Despite the inclusive atmosphere that we tried to establish, we found that students were not always comfortable expressing themselves. While some of our students were willing to participate during class discussions, many others remained silent out of shyness, uncertainty, or fear. Pushing a shy or unconfident student to perform verbally in class can sometimes cause the student to withdraw further and become more apprehensive. To offset such situations, we attempted to build a community in our classrooms in ways that would encourage these quieter students and not intimidate them.

### **Making Connections: The Importance of Knowing Our Students**

One way that we established connections with our students was to learn their names as quickly as possible. For example, we usually engaged in an ice-breaking activity during the first class meeting. One activity we learned from a colleague is called the “name game.” The first student begins by stating the student’s own name. The second student states the second student’s name plus the first student’s. This pattern continues until all students have introduced themselves and have stated all the names that came before theirs. It is a good idea if the teacher is the last person to participate because this requires the teacher to memorize every student’s name in the circle. Our students were always entertained when the teacher tried to remember all the names under pressure!

Another strategy we used to get to know our students was to incorporate information from their lives into classroom demonstrations and examples. At the beginning of each quarter, we administered to students an informal questionnaire that asked about their major areas of study, their first languages, other languages in which they were fluent, whether they worked, and for how many hours per week. Sometimes we used this information to illustrate particular grammar points. For example, Diana taught the simple future verb tense by using the name and career interests of a student whose major was hotel and restaurant management. She put the following sentence on the chalkboard: “Mae Ling is going to be a chef and is going to own a restaurant someday.” The student really enjoyed seeing her name on the board in a sentence that made an imaginative projection about her future as a world-renowned culinary expert! David was able to generate an in-class writing assignment from a casual discussion about a student’s auto accident. Students were able to shift from focusing on another person’s experience to expressing their own feelings about how others should behave while on the road. We found that these kinds of strategies not only captured students’ attention but also helped make lessons relevant to their lives.

A word of caution about sharing students’ information in class: Some students might not think this is a good idea; some may even believe it as an

invasion of privacy. Teachers must be careful not to embarrass students. We urge all teachers either to check with students before mentioning personal information about them or to add a disclaimer on the questionnaire form that authorizes the teacher to do so.

In addition to making connections with students inside the classroom, we also tried to connect with students outside the classroom. Since our university provides all students with their own e-mail accounts, we took advantage of this opportunity to extend the teacher-student relationship. We included our own e-mail addresses on our syllabi and encouraged students to contact us with any questions or concerns. To our delight, they did so, but we often needed to remind them that they had this resource at their fingertips.

We found that, at times, having this type of technology brought unexpectedly rewarding experiences. For example, once when Diana was responding to e-mail, one of her students found her on-line and began a conversation. After they chatted casually for several minutes, Diana asked the student about a recent reading assignment and class discussion. The student mentioned that she sometimes had difficulty understanding the readings. As a result of this conversation, Diana increased the amount of class time she allotted to discussions of the readings, and she also decided to alternate whole-class discussion with small-group discussion. Many of her students responded positively to this change because they felt they were able to comprehend much more of the material. The benefits of this approach were evident at exam time in that students' responses to short-answer questions about the readings were more thorough and more insightful.

### **Understanding Differences in Students' Learning Style Preferences**

In our graduate studies, we have learned a great deal about students' preferred learning styles. We know from the ethnographic studies done by Philips and by Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp (as cited in Reid, 1995) that differences in learning styles are often culturally determined and reflect variations in the ways that groups are socialized. Because the culture of the classroom may sometimes reflect socialization patterns that contrast with those of a student's home culture, it is important that teachers be aware of their students' preferred learning styles so that students can be exposed to the optimal learning environment.

In her questionnaire "Perceptual Learning Style Preference," Reid (1995) outlines four distinct learning-style preferences: (a) visual—learns by seeing words in text or written on a board, and understands information best by reading; (b) auditory—learns by hearing words and from oral explanations; (c) kinesthetic—learns by doing, or by being physically involved in movement; (d) tactile—learns by working "hands-on" with materials. Since all students have a preferred learning style, it behooves the teacher to be aware of such preferences when preparing class activities. By doing so, the teacher is more likely to maintain students' interest, keeping them engaged and motivated. A learning environment that reflects an awareness of students' learning styles



will also be a more equitable one in which no particular learning style is favored over another.

During the year, we were particularly interested in discovering our students' preferred learning styles. We wanted to know whether our students liked working by themselves, in groups, or as a whole class, and whether they learned best through auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, or visual approaches. After administering a learning-styles survey (Reid, 1995) to one of her classes, Diana discovered that out of a total of 16 students, 7 had an auditory learning style preference, 4 had a kinesthetic learning-style preference, 3 had a visual learning-style preference, and only 2 had a tactile learning-style preference. Ten out of 16 sixteen students preferred to work in groups, while only 6 reported that they preferred to work individually. Even though this mini-research project could not be generalized, it did offer us insight into the learning style preferences of the students in that particular class.

As a result of this and subsequent administrations of the survey, we became much more proactive in attending to these different learning style preferences. We addressed these variations when we delivered our lessons and when we structured classroom activities. For example, if we wrote something on the chalkboard, we also read it aloud to the class. We used dictation as a means of reinforcing students' listening skills. We asked students questions to help them practice their oral skills. We put them in groups and in pairs so that they could learn from one another. We allowed students to work individually and as part of a whole class. All these approaches added significantly to the dynamics of the classroom and kept our teaching from becoming stale and boring. They also exposed students to alternative ways of learning. We provided our students with significant variety and avoided favoring one particular learning style.

### **Lesson Planning, Workload Management, and Student Feedback**

Lesson planning, we discovered, takes a great amount of time and consideration, especially determining how much can be feasibly covered in any given class period. We learned, however, that it is always better to over-prepare than to under-prepare; if the teacher has material left over, it can always be used during the following class period. If the teacher hasn't prepared enough material, it is no easy task to make up a lesson on the spot.

Even the carefully planned lesson, however, may not always evolve as envisioned! Sometimes an idea for a lesson backfires completely. So it is always a good idea to have a back-up plan. At times when our lesson flopped, we learned to think on our feet and revamp our plans under pressure. We learned, too, that when planning lessons we could not accurately forecast how effectively students would get through the material; nor could we always anticipate the time we would spend answering students' questions and reviewing concepts previously presented but not completely mastered. We continually had to balance students' immediate concerns and questions with staying on-track with our lesson and course objectives.



For every hour spent on lesson preparation, we spent an equal number of hours on paper grading. We crawled over those first assignments because we wanted to be thorough. However we paid a price for our diligence because our workload increased rapidly. For a while, we could not get out from under a paper pile; assignments were coming in faster than we could grade and return them. The more papers we read and graded, however, the more efficient we became in managing our time and the workflow. Because we realized the importance of returning student assignments in a timely manner, we constantly created and revised deadlines for ourselves. Our goal was to return graded work while the concepts were still relatively fresh in the students' minds. It was also, then, easier for us to determine if students were learning or struggling, and we could make better judgments about altering the next class plans to include additional review and practice when necessary.

Our remarks on writing assignments were not limited to grammatical corrections; we also critiqued the content, organization, and structure of the composition. We always began our comments with words of support and encouragement, commenting first on writing successes and strengths. It was only after making positive comments that we tackled areas needing improvement, always including suggestions for making the writing stronger, more detailed, or more focused. We were always aware of the power of our written remarks; we were, therefore, careful not to be overly critical while urging our students to explore their ideas more thoughtfully.

### **Making Changes Through Constructive Criticism**

As novice teachers we learned that growth comes not only from doing something well but also from recognizing what can be improved. New teachers have many hurdles to clear, not the least of which is self-doubt and lack of confidence. We saved ourselves a great deal of stress simply by acknowledging that we did not know everything and that we were expected to make mistakes. By giving ourselves permission to make mistakes, we discovered opportunities for learning and making changes. We could honestly re-evaluate our original objectives, see why we hadn't achieved them, and then consider new approaches.

We were particularly concerned about the types of writing assignments we created. We were not always certain that we were helping the students tap into topics that truly mattered to them. To help our students better explore and express their ideas, we introduced journal writing. Journal writing allowed us to open a dialogue with each student; it also allowed the students to express themselves without worrying about errors. Through these brief and informal writing assignments, students freely expressed how they felt about current issues, their own abilities, their fears, experiences, and personal interests.

Another area in which we learned to be self-critical was in creating our written tests. For example, David discovered that most of the students had missed an item on one particular test. Since this item pertained to information that had been clearly presented in class lecture with board work and

other visual aids, he decided to do an item analysis. The results showed that the item needed to be rewritten before he administered that test to a subsequent class. From this experience, we learned that it is important to test what we teach; we also learned that we must take into account whether we have covered test material sufficiently.

Understanding why things worked and why they did not aided us in realistically assessing our own performance in the classroom. When lessons and classes went well, we replayed them in our minds, focusing on what we had done. We went over our lesson plans, our notes, and our timing to review just how we had executed them. Similarly, when lessons and classes were not so successful, we analyzed why our approach had failed. We asked ourselves why a particular lesson had worked so well one time, yet had fallen flat on another occasion, and we consulted colleagues for feedback and ideas.

Continuous self-assessment allows new teachers to view their development as part of a necessary growth process. It also gives them confidence to face new challenges, make changes accordingly, and reward themselves for a job well-done. We believe that self-monitoring our progress as teachers and receiving feedback from others were critical to our own development. Self assessment is one of the most important skills new teachers can learn because it reminds them that their goal is ultimately to serve their students in the best way possible.

In addition to recognizing the value of self-criticism, we also recognized the importance of accepting criticism from colleagues and supervisors. A vital part of our teacher-training program consisted of the guidance and feedback we received from our supervising professor. Every quarter she observed us in our classrooms, sometimes for a scheduled visit but often unannounced. The anticipation of waiting for her to appear was excruciating, not to mention the anxiety we felt while she was there! We handled these high-pressure situations best by simply ignoring her, focusing instead on the lesson we were teaching and on our students.

Through the feedback from our supervising professor we learned about our lesson presentations, our demeanor in class, our handling of student questions, and our overall management of the classroom. These visits provided us with a valuable perspective on our teaching. Even when our supervising professor pointed out our mistakes, she always did so with the tone and manner of an inspiring coach advising and rallying her team players. This very positive approach helped us to gain confidence.

### **The Teacher's Support System**

Balancing the challenge of becoming a teacher with the requirements of graduate-level courses can be extremely difficult. After we began our teaching duties, it was very hard at first to maintain the same level of involvement in our graduate studies. We did not always get enough rest during this time, sometimes teaching after just two or three hours of sleep. Through a support network of peers, colleagues, professors, friends, and family, we were able to

exchange ideas, vent frustrations, share successes, look for guidance, and find inspiration at the most critical times.

Though teachers spend a large amount of time interacting with their students in the classroom, much of the teacher's work is done in isolation, away from colleagues. Because of this isolation, novice teachers need to create a support system early in their careers. Perhaps the most vital, daily support we relied on as new teachers was that of our more experienced colleagues, some of whom had been teaching assistants (TAs) themselves. These colleagues included a number of experienced lecturers in our department who taught Freshman Composition, Basic Writing, and ESL. We also consulted tenured faculty for guidance on certain teaching issues. Some of these professors we had studied with and some we simply asked for advice. They provided us with helpful advice and insight that we could use in our classrooms the next day.

One of the most fascinating and surprising things we discovered about our professors (and other more experienced colleagues as well) was that they, too, had made mistakes in their teaching careers and that they were very candid about sharing them with us. We found such revelations to be very self-affirming because we realized that even the most experienced teachers are not infallible. We also gained critical insight on other issues including time management, lesson planning, teaching methodology, and grading.

Our colleagues were also tremendously valuable and their suggestions, advice, and encouragement were an important part of our growth as teachers. Very often during one of our office hours we would share a lesson or assignment idea with a colleague in order to get feedback. We were happily surprised that many of our colleagues liked our teaching ideas so much that they asked to try them. They even asked our opinions on their own lesson ideas and then returned the next day raving about their successes. We emerged from these informal meetings and conversations with renewed confidence. Instances such as these let us know that we were on the right track.

### **The Benefits of Professional Development**

As part of our training as TAs, we were required to make several professional presentations in our field. During our first year, we made presentations at a local TESOL/CLAD<sup>2</sup> conference in Riverside, CA, at a Los Angeles regional CATESOL conference, and at a graduate student symposium at Cal Poly Pomona. Without this initial push, we might not have become so active in professional development activities. It was quite daunting to find ourselves at a professional conference as we each had only one month of teaching experience! What we gained, however, was a new sense of confidence and a new perspective on our teaching abilities, which we wholeheartedly brought back to our classrooms.

We also learned a great deal by attending other conference presentations and workshops, often picking up teaching tips, lesson ideas, and interesting research findings. By listening to others in our profession, we were able to increase our knowledge and hone our skills as both teachers and researchers.

We were able to share what we had learned in our own classrooms with others, and we picked up new ideas that reinvigorated our teaching. Attending workshops and giving presentations at conferences also helped us keep abreast of current methodology and theory and provided us with opportunities to be seen as leaders in our field.

### **Conclusion**

As we look back on our first-year experience as ESL teachers, we can see how far we have come. We know that we could not have accomplished what we did without the support of an entire network of people. Through our interactions with each other, our students, our colleagues, and our supervising professor, we have grown in ways that we could not have imagined at the outset of our teaching assignments. We learned that the best teachers are the ones who never stop learning. We learned that we need to be as aware of the workload we give our students as we are of the one we are creating for ourselves. We had to make material relevant to the objectives and goals of the course as well as to the students' particular needs. We had to be aware of our own particular teaching style preferences, as well as aware of our students' preferred learning styles. We had to accept both positive and negative criticism from others, and we had to learn to be critical of ourselves.

We realize, though, that not all first-time teaching experiences are as positive as ours have been. We know that a lack of adequate training, guidance, and support can cause an otherwise well-intentioned and talented teacher-to-be to suffer fear, frustration, and disillusionment. Though teaching is oftentimes an activity that isolates teachers from their colleagues, this does not necessarily mean that the teacher must remain isolated. An endless array of resources such as fellow teachers, professors, family, friends, and conferences can guide the beginner. Many other resources we have not discussed, including those found on the Internet or through listservs.

As a result of our experiences, we moved away from our initial fear and anxiety about teaching toward courage and confidence about what we can continue to do throughout our teaching careers. We recognize that we will be faced with many challenges and will make mistakes along the way. However, we will be able to meet such challenges with increased awareness and an ability to use the tools available to us to turn those challenges into chances for change and improvement.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Tutoring is mandatory for most ESL courses at Cal Poly Pomona; students are required to complete eight 1/2-hour to 1-hour sessions over a 10-week quarter.

<sup>2</sup> TESOL refers to the organization Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. Teachers with degrees in TESOL have training in second-language acquisition, applied linguistics, and ESL pedagogy. CLAD refers to the Crosscultural Language and Academic Development credential. Holders of the CLAD credential have preparation in adapting instruction to meet the needs of English learners.

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