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Final Paper

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Part 1. Videotaped Lesson

For my videotaped lesson, we were working on Reaction Essay writing, which was introduced starting from last lesson. For this lesson, the lesson objectives are getting the students to have a brief idea about reaction essays especially how they should be structured, and letting them to practice writing personal reactions to diverse prompts. My lesson plan process was influenced by the content of last class during which reaction essays were first introduced to students and they did some simple practice on coming up with vocab/sentence-level reactions to certain prompts. Therefore I regarded this lesson as a session to build on what they learned last time and within which the students could work on reaction essays at more advanced level. There was also another thing influenced my lesson plan, which was about some new knowledge about introduction paragraph writing techniques that I introduced to them last time. I had some trouble with showing them the diverse techniques clearly and I was not sure about how much they understood it. So when I was designing the reading questions for the given reaction essay sample, I deliberately put related questions in there so I could know whether the students understood it or not when I check their answers.

If I were to teach this lesson again, I would probably change the way of going over the answers for the reading questions. What I actually did in my videotaped lesson was instead of inviting students do that, I quickly went over the ones I think should be paid extra attention on or the ones they had a little problem with. As I reconsidered it after class, it seemed that inviting students involve in this part instead of me would be a better idea since that would provide them an opportunity to share their opinions with their reasons, which would increase students’ involvement in the lesson. Another thing I would do differently was about being more aware of students’ custom and background. I prepared a song, movie trailers, and a painting as reaction writing prompts for students and showed them in class. And I was told after class that in certain cultures in Middle East countries women are not allowed to listen to music, which I had no idea about. And I didn’t pay attention to their reactions as they were listening to the music so I didn’t know whether all of the students were comfortable with the song I played. So if I were to teach this lesson again, I would definitely make announcement to tell the students that please let me know if they feel uncomfortable with the activity before it is conducted. Making it explicit beforehand could show the students that there is always room for negotiation and they could be assigned other tasks.

I was trying to be calm and clear during my teaching and I needed to move around quite frequently since in this class students should work within groups or individually. I was unconsciously stuck in the front of the classroom at the beginning of their group work, and then I realized I should move around to supervise and provide help if there was need.

There was an “ah-ha” moment in my last lesson during which I was giving a mini lecture about several background information could be used in the introduction paragraph of reaction essay. When I prepared this lesson, I thought it was something really easy to understand so I decided to quickly give the brief explanation of each type of background information and have the students practice by the provided sample prompts. However, it didn’t turn out quite well and the students seemed get lost after my explanation. And I suddenly realized that I shouldn’t take anything for granted, and I should consider the learning content from the students’ perspective. I might thought something should be easy for the students maybe because I have learned about it or I have scanned the related content in the textbook, while the students don’t. They learned everything from zero and the instructor should make the new knowledge as explicit as possible. So I understood that next time I will spend more time on each of the concepts and try to explain them with concrete examples.

Part 2. Practicum Experience

After this semester’s practicum experience, I learned a lot about teaching from diverse perspectives. One thing I learned about my students was that students’ needs should always be taken into account when planning the lesson. In my case with IECP students, their goal is not just improving their English proficiency in general; getting a high score in TOEFL/IELTS is also their short-term and urgent goal. And I can see that how Ruth, my mentor teacher embedded TOEFL/IELTS-related activities in her writing class. It might be just a quick vocabulary exercise at the beginning of the lesson, or provide extra choice when the students have their writing assignments.

Engaging students in classroom activities is a crucial part in language teaching, and we tried to make the activities quite exciting get the students motivated. Group work is used a lot in our lessons and in many cases there would be a competition among them as they were working on certain activities or worksheets. Instead of letting them freely choose their group members, Ruth and I will place them into groups by using different cards or letting them count off numbers. By doing this, the students could get to communicate with different classmates and promote their relationships, and it also helps to develop rapport and the community of the learners. When conducting competition among groups, we will ask them to come up with the names of their groups, by which the students could show their characteristics to the whole class to some degree. I tried to get to know the students’ names and match them with each individual by collecting and handing back their assignments, and sometimes I had some short conversations with some students after class, which was also a good opportunity to get to know more about them.

I think one of the most important things that I learned about lesson planning was always taking the rationale into consideration. As I was planning my lesson at the very beginning, I tried to recall the most commonly used activities and ways of teaching writing when I was taking such courses and applied them into my lesson plan. Now, I will think about my purpose and reason about each decision I make in the lesson plan consciously and see if it helps to reach my goals for each class. Since the in-class time is short and precious, I have to make the most of every second. As for making choices of the materials for students, I would say that my mentor teacher Ruth performed a good demonstration for me. She often chose news articles, events that lately happened at Penn State or in State College. The students were interested in those topics, and chance for them to better know the school was provided. Not just the material selecting, Ruth also suggested that the topics of students’ writing assignments should also be something related to Penn State and State College. By doing so, she tried to narrow down their topics and to avoid the plagiarism due to the specificity of the topics.

Throughout this semester’s practicum teaching experience, I can clearly sense my professional development as a novice English language teacher. I feel more confident and comfortable standing in front of the students and teaching calmly. By observing Ruth’s teaching, our discussion after class, and my own reflection of my teaching, I learned and experienced diverse ways of teaching writing and organizing different activities, after which I also had a chance to evaluate whether they were effective or not and the things to be done to make them better next time. After this teaching experience, and also after my two years’ study in the States, I start to reconsider the role of the teacher in the classroom. The teacher undoubtedly plays a crucial role in classroom, however, the way I experienced in the States taught me that doesn’t mean to organize the class and lesson as teacher-fronted lecture. The teacher’s responsibility is more of facilitating students’ learning, allowing students to think, to discuss, and grasp the teaching moment throughout the teaching/learning process. I think this is a more beneficial way of helping students to make progress. One thing that I learned from this experience is the effectiveness of communicative language learning. Not just the interaction between the teacher and the students, what I saw is how the interaction among students was promoted in class. Activities like pair work, group work, peer review activities were employed quite frequently even in a writing course which seems might have less space to design and conduct such activities. Students could be provided a large amount of opportunities to negotiate and have discussion with their peers, therefore build on each other’s thought by communication, and think collectively. Throughout such communicative language learning process, what the students have learned were not just linguistic competence, but also their communicative abilities.

As for the plan after my graduation in May, I decide to come back to my home country China to teach English. It seems that English teaching in China have started to change from the traditional approach in recent years, and I’m expecting to join it and embed what I learned here in my future teaching. How I could combine my teaching philosophy such as interaction promoting with the textbook content and their goal of passing diverse exams would be a huge challenge. However, I still would like to make the effort since as an English learner myself, I think what Chinese EFL students hope to achieve will be beyond just passing the tests, they also eager to be able to "speak" English just as I did.