

Looking Back: Reflecting on My First Two Years as a Teacher

Timothy H. Ellsworth

Kansai Gaidai University

Contact: timothy.h.ellsworth@gmail.com

Introduction

Like a lot of people who teach here in Japan, I got my first experience teaching in a both an *eikaiwa* and as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in a number of Junior High Schools. This was a short but rewarding experience that prompted me to continue teaching English when I returned to the United States, first as a volunteer, then as an intern/graduate student, and finally as an instructor in both the Intensive English Program and English as a Second Language program of a local community college. I have since returned to Japan to teach at the university level, and while I have overwhelmingly enjoyed the experience, there have been some issues. Fortunately, the two years I spent working at the college provided me with similar experiences that I was able to learn from, and I have since been able to apply what I've learned here in Japan. This paper will describe these experiences, discuss the lessons learned, and then show how they have helped me here in my current position.

The IEP

I spent my first year teaching in the college's Intensive English Program (IEP). The focus of this type of program is to give students the skills necessary to transition into mainstream college/university classes. As the name implies, the course work is quite demanding. For example, in my Grammar/Writing Course, students were expected to study eight grammar points and write three five-paragraph essays out of class, as well as semi-regular in-class writing tests that built up to writing a five-paragraph essay in class. Likewise, in my Reading/Vocabulary class, we would cover a chapter a week in their reading textbook and students would be responsible for learning 25-30 words per chapter (including their word families) and finish a graded reader each week. Speaking/Listening classes were centered on three presentations as well as regular visits to the library to speak with native speakers.

The students in this program all came from overseas and were in the US on student visas. They tended to be younger (16~23 on average with some older students and their families). Students came from a number of L1 backgrounds, but the majority in my program came from China and Saudi Arabia. As mentioned, their goals centered around entering mainstream university courses - usually at the undergraduate level, with some older Saudi students hoping to enter graduate school. This program was also quite expensive since the students were paying out-of-state tuition, which is roughly three times the price a local student would pay.

With its set curriculum, strict time frame, and demanding students, the IEP was an excellent way to begin teaching at the tertiary level. With constant feedback from my students and supervisors, as well as plenty of help from more experienced colleagues, I was able to learn a lot in terms of explaining grammar, teaching the four skills, and how to manage my time both in and out of class. After a few quarters, I felt like I had teaching down. I knew how to plan a lesson, how to teach what were once difficult grammar points, and how to build a good rapport with my students. Then, at the beginning of my second year, I was given the opportunity to teach in the college's English as a Second Language (ESL) program.

Speaking/Listening 5a

I had been asking to teach ESL classes for most of my first year, but there isn't a lot of turnover in ESL. From my experience, people get those classes and hang on to them until they retire. Fortunately, one of the teachers in our program wanted to take some time off, so they offered me a class. It was ESL 5a: Speaking and Listening, and it met twice a week from 6:15 to 8:45.

Like the IEP, the students in this class came from a wide variety of L1 backgrounds; however instead of students mainly coming from East Asia and the Middle East, I had a lot of students from East Africa (Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea), Latin/South America (Mexico, Uruguay, Panama, El Salvador) as well as small groups from Russia, Ukraine, Fiji, Iraq, Vietnam, Thailand, and number of others. These students were also much older (the age range ran from people in their 30s to their late 70s). The main difference between these students and their counterparts in the IEP was the fact that they were adult learners who actually lived and worked in the United States. Therefore, their coursework reflected both academic and life skill needs. While many of the students needed English skills for similar goals like entering mainstream university classes or licensing programs (usually in the healthcare field), they also needed English for everyday use. Another huge difference was that almost all of my students worked outside of class, which was impossible

for IEP students on a student visa. Many of my students came to class after working all day, and wanted to study English to make their daily lives much easier.

One of the first things I learned in the ESL class was to make the materials reflect the students' needs. This may seem a given, but I was coming out of a year of working exclusively in a very structured curriculum. I remember thinking about how I would manage a class of 32 students on my first night of class, and then panicking on the second night when only 18 returned. I learned that this wasn't unusual in an ESL night class. Over the next couple of classes, I noticed that while there was a core group that would come for every lesson, some of the students would come and go. Usually this had to do with their lives outside of class, but it also had to do with the types of assignments I was giving them. For example, I wanted the students to practice the grammar points we studied in class for homework, so I assigned them activities from the textbook alongside activities from websites like ELLLO and VOA news, like I did with my students in the IEP. For some, this was too much homework, and they would either not show up if they hadn't done the homework or drop the course. Others would come, but without having done the homework, which made follow up in class difficult.

I learned pretty quickly that I had to start planning lessons that didn't rely on the previous lesson or would need to carry over to the next one. Everything had to be started and finished in that class. This wasn't completely impossible in a 2.5-hour class. It meant that I would do a quick grammar activity in the beginning of class, usually something that I had done or covered earlier in the IEP, and then spend the second half dealing with a specific situation from their life skills book. Homework assignments like ELLLO were dropped (as their speaking and listening skills were actually far beyond anything in the IEP, and that purely skill-based work was better handled in class). On the advice of a colleague, I also ended the week with a 5~10-minute TED Talk that tied into what we were studying. This proved to be quite a popular activity as students brought much more life experience to this activity, which helped them understand the content better and make the discussions afterwards richer. For homework, the same coworker gave me the idea for an assignment called the Speaking/Listening Log, which pushed students to interact with native speakers at their jobs or in their communities and with authentic materials on a weekly basis. Again, this proved successful, since it not only got the students using the target language outside of class, but it got them actively interacting in their communities and reflecting on their learning. Presentations were done on a daily and individual basis, usually at the beginning of each class and two people were scheduled at a time in the event that one person was absent. Finally, things culminated in a speaking test every couple of weeks, the contents of which were derived from the life skills unit we were working on and students own stories and life experiences. Once this pattern was established, I noticed the numbers tended to stabilize, students began to complete homework more regularly, and I created a pretty good rapport with the class. Or so I thought...

Tom

Once I got the course moving along, another issue in the form of a student named Tom (a pseudonym) came up. He and his friend would joke around a lot in class by making sarcastic or ironical remarks to something said, and for the most part it was harmless fun that did a lot to lighten the mood of the class. Sometimes they'd go a little overboard by either interrupting too much or saying something crass, and the other students would look annoyed, and I'd have to ask them to quiet down. Tom didn't like this and would constantly challenge me in class and question my ability as a teacher, either directly or through the aforementioned remarks to the class. For the most part, I tried to avoid responding directly to his comments and keep the class moving along, but one incident prompted me to confront him.

We were having class on election night, Obama vs. Romney, and the class was on a break. I was on my way back to my office when I walked by him and his friends. They were having a smoke, and I foolishly (and perhaps a bit provokingly) asked them what they thought about the election. They all said they hoped Obama won. Tom asked me who I thought was going to win, and I foolishly and perhaps a bit provokingly asked him whom he thought I would vote for. He said Romney, and without missing a beat explained, "because you look like a racist white guy." He laughed, but his friends looked a little shocked and definitely uncomfortable. I wanted to say something, but I nodded and went back to classroom and finished the class.

The next day, I talked to my colleague about him. She had taught him the previous semester, and they had gotten along well. She mentioned that he's an overall nice guy, but he hates his job and he feels stuck. He worked at a car dealership with a bunch of people he often described to her as "redneck, racist, white guys" who say all kinds of demeaning things right in front of him. "So when he says that you look like a racist white guy, he probably means you look like them." When the next class finished, as the other students were leaving, I asked him to stay so I could talk with him. We spent about 20 minutes talking about his job and his life outside of work, and he mentioned a lot of what my colleague had told me. He didn't have his friend there to make jokes with him or the rest of the class as an audience. He explained that he had no intention of being disrespectful and that he had no idea his comments could be misconstrued that way. I was a little skeptical; however, after talking with him, all of the problems I had with him in class seemed to disappear, and at the end of the quarter, he shook my hand and even asked me to eat with him at the end-of-the-quarter party. In the end, I am glad I decided to find out what was wrong and let him explain himself. Instead of responding directly to the Romney comment, I tried to find out what might be wrong. After talking to my colleague about him, I was better able to understand where a lot of his comments and behavior might have come from. Because of this, the situation did not escalate, I did not lose face, and the quarter ended on a positive note. In this way, he taught me the importance of getting to know my students' lives outside of class and to consider them as more than just members of my class.

Japan

Teaching academic English in the states has prepared me for a life of teaching writing and reading classes here in Japan, but the experiences I've had in my ESL class have helped me to deal with some issues here in Japan.

For example, my second semester I taught one particular group where the average class size was about eight students (out of 25), and it wasn't always the same eight students. There were about four that came regularly, but for the most part it was a revolving cast of characters. To make things worse, I had no way of contacting their other teacher. So, I asked one of the more fluent students what was going on, and she said that it was because I wanted them to do homework, use a textbook, and the teacher they had the previous semester didn't take attendance and passed everybody. Also, many students had part-time jobs that kept them working late into the night, and they were too tired to make my 10:45 class. This reminded me of the situation in my ESL class, and I had to take to creating one-off, self-contained lessons. Luckily, I had a textbook that had some interesting topics, but it meant a lot more in terms of prep-time, and discussions instead of formal presentations. Towards the end of the semester, I implemented the same style of speaking tests that I used in the ESL program, with the characters' situations based on what I had learned about my current students. By the end of the semester I had a dedicated six students, and it ended up being a relatively successful class.

Also, in another class there was a student who seemed to be a problem. Like Tom, this student was a high-level learner who projected a kind of cool/tough guy attitude. He often looked almost antagonistically bored. My initial reaction was to be provoked and respond to this, but I'm glad I didn't. I remembered Tom, how he displayed certain behavior as a way of dealing with other frustrations in his life. This student wasn't projecting anything hostile, just indifference, and when I once asked him to share his writing with the class, his voice cracked and shook, and he turned red. He wanted to appear cool, confident, and aloof because, perhaps, this wasn't really the case. His actual work was excellent. His writing showed depth and clarity. Likewise, his ability to relate to characters in weekly book reports always impressed me. I concluded that his attitude didn't affect the flow of the class, he got along with most people, and he produced some very high quality work. Instead of jumping down his throat every time he checked his watch, yawned while looking in my eyes, etc., I let his work do the talking for him. He otherwise seemed completely engaged in the course material, got high marks, and would eventually start coming by my office when he needed help. Through this I learned that he had several native speaker friends, whom he got this attitude from. According to Dornyei (2013) there is both an ideal and ought-to L2 self. Perhaps he saw in his friends his ideal self and felt that aloofness was an attribute he ought to possess to make himself appear more native like. In the end, this situation didn't devolve into an incident because I took the time to talk with him and consider who he was beyond "my student."

Conclusion

As mentioned, my early experience in the IEP gave me valuable experience in the basics of academic instruction; however, what I learned from that first ESL class made my two years at the community college a more holistic experience. Ultimately, I learned the importance of adjusting my expectations to fit the needs of my students. Many of the IEP students were younger, and focused on transferring into a four-year university, which, if they weren't staying at our college, meant they needed to get good scores on either the TOEFL or IELTS. This actually made it quite easy to motivate many of the students since all I needed to do was show how whatever we were working on could help their score on either of these tests. This approach didn't have the same effect in ESL. This was best achieved not through esoteric, strictly academic coursework, but through creating materials and activities that reflected their daily lives and had immediate application. This was basically a shift from a pedagogical approach to an andrological one. To paraphrase Knowles (1988) adult learners are more likely to learn something when they see an immediate need to learn it and the immediate potential to apply it. I had studied this in graduate school, but it really took hold when I saw the difference in student attendance and engagement after adjusting my materials to fit their needs and experiences. Additionally, by taking the time to learn about a student's situation outside of class I was able to avoid a potentially uncomfortable situation. As mentioned, I've been able to use what I've learned here in Japan, where again I have had to modify my expectations. Japanese students have their own unique set of needs, talents and limitations, and some of the methods and assignments I used in the IEP and ESL program simply don't work, however, the fundamental lessons learned during my two years of teaching at a community college have helped me readjust to better fit and find success with my current environment. To quote an interview with Hinkel (The Editorial Board, 2009), "Those who adhere to prescribed methodologies in the face of classroom realities don't last long. (question no. 7)"

References

- Dornyei, Z. & Chan, L. (2013). Motivation and vision: An analysis of future L2 self images, sensory styles, and imagery capacity across two target languages. *Language Learning*, 63(3), 437–462
- The Editorial Board (2009). An interview with Dr. Eli Hinkel, Working papers in TESOL and applied linguistics. 9(1). Retrieved from: <http://tesolal.columbia.edu/article/interview-hinkel/>
- Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Cambridge