Navigator on a Boat

It has been an invaluable experience that I can teach in this prestigious American university, even for one semester. I learned so much from my fellow colleagues, my students, and my own reflection in various aspects, such as building rapports with students, classroom management, designing lessons, and teaching classes.

Most of my students either graduated from an American high school or from an international high school in their home country, which requires them to speak English on a daily basis, and in which most of the teachers are native English speakers. They can speak English fluently and are familiar with the American academic culture. When I was trying to raise the awareness of avoiding plagiarism, I found most of them had known what it is, and at least had had a vague idea of how to avoid it. In terms of their fluency, in class, they are willing to communicate with their classmates and with me, feeling comfortable and confident of expressing their ideas.

Nevertheless, their strengths in oral communication also somehow hinder them from writing academically. I can see them using "well" or "really really" in the writing. Although it is my duty to encourage them to write creatively, there are a few rules that cannot be compromised (colloquial language, contraction, and so forth). These bits of details are hard and boring to enumerate one by one in class. The difference lies between speaking and academic writing is fuzzy and hard to grasp for them.

Another challenge that most of them are facing is the lack of coherence, which is also partially related to the high oral proficiency. Many of their writings flow with their minds. I see

paragraphs with two or three sentences without enough elaboration. I see paragraphs long enough to occupy one and a half page discussing multiple ideas. Moreover, when I gave them prompts for an assignment, they sometimes simply answered all the questions without any transitions between the paragraphs.

Every coin has two sides. Their high oral proficiency as well positively makes the classroom interaction smooth and active. Engaging them is usually easy to accomplish due to their confidence in speaking, although it may not be the sole contributing factor. They can freely express what is in their mind, and that helps build an active learning environment. I would not worry about if they could not have a fruitful discussion because of language barriers. After the discussion, each group's debrief is concise and fluent.

Another facilitative factor to the engagement in classroom is the rapport between my students and me, and among students. I see my students as friends and I believe they do so as well. This subtle teacher-student, friend-friend relationship is beneficial to class. It will be more difficult for them to refuse to participate in class, when I ask them as a friend. They will feel guilty if do not help a friend.

Building rapport among the students too helps the engagement in classroom. When students become friends, they are more willing to cooperate, discuss and contribute. There will be less awkward silence; they feel less nervous to talk their ideas aloud; they will not feel embarrassed if they say something "silly". In order to accomplish that, I did an ice-breaking activity in the first class; I pre-assign groups so that they can know different people every class; I did student-based workshop so that they can learn from each other.

In addition, making the activities interesting enough and closely related to their life is another factor contributing to the classroom engagement. To take an example in the debate during the class, I chose two topics for the debate, "Is general education worthy in college" and "Should government fund art". Apparently, the debate of the first topic is much more heated than the second one because it is closely related to what happened in their academic life and they have their first-hand experience.

When I plan a lesson, "interestingness" and "relatedness" is two of the many aspects I first take into consideration. If I cannot attract their attention to listen, and to learn, no matter how useful the content is, it will be useless. The content itself is either directly related to the major assignments they are going to finish, or the basic writing elements they need to master. Each time I start to teach a new concept or a new skill, I will make sure to explain why we need to learn this. This is especially important for students, as I want them to learn with purpose.

After I had decided the content I would teach at the beginning of the semester, as a novice teacher in ESL015, I heavily drew on the materials available on the ANGEL site. However, when I became more confident as a teacher, I started to search for and create my own teaching materials. In addition, in order to create a multimodal-learning environment, for the fact that students usually have different learning styles, I started to incorporate videos, pictures, activities of various dynamics (in-class writing, text analysis, group discussion, critique, debate [from low to high]) into the class. I strived to plan my lessons in order that every student can learn in various ways in class.

Besides planning before the class, the most rewarding and powerful moments in this semester in terms of teaching are the one hour and twenty minute gaps between my two sections, during which I can revise my plans, and my other teaching materials. There were a few moments when I only complicated the situations, but most of the times, I could make my classes smoother and more sensible. This reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action (Murphy, 2014) stimulates me to present a better-planed class to my students. Meanwhile, reflection-in-action (Murphy, 2014) pushes me to make in-flight changes.

"When you see me jumping from one slide to another, and then come back to the other one, that means something is wrong!" I said this to my students when I asked them to organize their presentations in class. There are always times when flaws still exist after careful planning. At the beginning of the semester, I always wrote down each step on my notebook, and strictly followed what I had planned. However, my intuition and the situation in class sometimes told me I was wrong. When students did not react in the way you expected, when the connections between activities seemed abrupt, when students did not know how to answer my questions (shown as awkward silence), I know I should change and improvise. I should ask follow-up question, paraphrase my questions, change the order of my instructional activities, or give them more clues. My job is to push them, or give them the fuel to self-propel to the destination. Making these in-flight decisions is adding the lubricant for them, so that they can run faster to the goal.

That being said, making well prepared plans and in-flight decisions still do no suffice to be a good teacher. I have to constantly learn from other fellow teachers and improve myself. I

enjoyed every moment of watching other excellent teachers carry out their lesson plans according to the goals. I saw strategies to teach vocabularies; I saw various ways to engage students, and more importantly, to let them learn by themselves; I saw how teacher's reflection-on-action could make the future teaching elevate to a new level; I saw how teacher's passion and love to his/her students could positively affect students' learning attitude; I saw how teaching English and teaching how to teach can be combined together. All these, not only provided me with new approaches to teach certain knowledge, but also renewed my philosophy of being a great teacher.

My outdated philosophy of being an excellent teacher is to give students shortcuts to answer questions in the tests. For example, I used to teach like this, "You don't have to read the whole sentence! When you see 'already', you use present perfect tense. So you choose C." That was partially a result of the pressure from the institution. The institution wanted me, as a one-to-one teacher, to raise students' scores as quickly as possible. Giving them the shortcuts would be the most efficient way to make the class worth its price (one-to-one is much more expensive than a regular class, which is also called VIP class in China).

Coming to America, seeing how my professors teach, receiving new approaches of teaching, and teaching in the university setting radically changed the way I teach. The number of my students changed from one to eighteen. I now learned how to manage a whole class of students; how to design activities that can engage everyone in the classroom, activities that incorporate speaking, listening, writing and reading. I changed from feeding to facilitating. Teaching is no longer giving them the knowledge. It is providing them enough support so that

they can know what their goals are, and reach their goals by themselves. The activities in the class changed from drilling to discussion and exploration. The goal in the class is not obtaining a high score in the test any more. Designing activities that students can learn, enjoy the process of learning, and reap the delight of attaining new heights is now my priorities. I will not follow them throughout their four years' of study, but I do hope that they can take the learning methods away after the class.

My life goal is to be a college professor, so teaching was, is, and will be a huge part of my life. This practicum experience changed me from a captain to a navigator on a ship. I used to tell my sailors what to do, and where to go. Sailors are carrying out my orders, and I am the sole leader on the ship. Nonetheless, I am a navigator now. My students, together with me, are all members on the boat. The navigator is not the highest authority on the boat, but he is a higher-stake crewmember, and bringing the crew as a team. I still tell the sailor where to go, but I only point out the directions. There is no captain on board, so sailors will have to figure out how to get to the destination on their own. I can see the "real world" through my binoculars, and I am "translating" the information "in the wild" to them so that they can practice their skills on the boat, preparing to cope with the real world.

References

Murphy, J. M. (2014). Reflective teaching: Principles and practices. *Teaching English as a*

   second or foreign language, 613-629.