

Important Awarenesses for Student Teachers of English

Reflections on Mentoring Five Student Teachers

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Over the last year, the author has had the opportunity and the privilege of working with five future teachers of English during their student-teaching experiences. They have taught him a tremendous amount about student-teaching and what challenged them as student teachers (ST's). While all of the ST's taught in a variety of different situations and environments, the challenges they faced were in fact quite similar. The purpose of this paper is to explore those challenges and through that exploration look at certain awarenesses that need to be brought about by mentoring teachers like the author in order to help ST's overcome them.

Before beginning, let us look at the student teaching experience at Yamaguchi Prefectural University (YPU), the university where the author teaches. This description will provide the context in which the following discussion will take place and in fact, is related to many of the challenges the ST's faced during their individual experiences.

Students at YPU who are interested in obtaining the credentials necessary to allow them to gain their teaching licenses must complete a student teaching experience at the level they plan to teach, e.g., a student who is planning to apply for a high school English teaching license must practice teaching English at a high school. Currently, students are able to choose between junior and senior high schools depending on the credentials they are seeking. The duration of the student-teaching experience at YPU is approximately two weeks in length. During that period, the ratio of classes observed and actually taught by ST's varies a great deal according to individual host institutions, the institutions at which the ST's will student-teach.

Host institutions are determined in a very simple way. ST's who will be teaching at the junior high level approach the junior high from which they have graduated and request to student-teach there. ST's wishing to teach at the high school level follow the same process. Traditionally, all requests are accepted. Host institutions are given a time frame (usually between the middle of May and the middle of June) during which the university would like the students to begin and complete their experience and each individual institution determines exactly when they will host the ST's.

ST's are assigned two mentors, one at the institution they will be teaching, an institutional mentor (IM), and one from YPU. IM's are usually experienced teachers in the field the ST has chosen. It is this teacher's classes that the ST's will in most cases first observe and then later teach at their host institution. Mentors at YPU are determined by the seminars in which each ST is enrolled. Traditionally, they visit the ST's once during their experience to observe one or more of classes that they teach and to provide them with advice on their teaching. ST's will of course

be observed on a much more frequent basis by their IM's.

Of the five ST's mentored by the author, two taught English at the junior high level and three at the senior high level. All five were based at their host institutions for two-week periods beginning in the third and fourth weeks of May. All of the ST's worked with IM's. In all cases, the IM's were experienced teachers of English. The amount of time the ST's observed their IM's classes varied for each ST. Some observed for a week's time before teaching while others observed almost the whole time. One had no chance for observation and began teaching immediately. The five ST's taught from as few as three classes during the two-week period to as many as 20 classes during the same period. Despite these facts, almost all shared similar challenges during their tenures as ST's.

Challenges faced by the ST's fall into a number of categories. First and foremost were challenges related to their complete absorption in their own performances. Second, confirming what students in their classes could and could not do. Third, maximizing the time the students used English. Fourth, the ST's inexperience with teaching methods. Fifth, tensions between the ST's and their IM's. Sixth, ST's lack of confidence in the English that they were expected to teach. And finally, the lack of opportunity to actually practice teaching.

Let us look at each of these challenges individually in the order that they have been given. First, all of the ST's that were observed were so completely absorbed in what they were doing or planning to do next that they literally could not see what the students in their classes were doing. This created a number of problems in their classrooms. First and foremost, ST's were unaware of when students were ready to move on to the next task or needed to stay with the one they were working on for a while longer. As a result, they consistently lost or left many students behind. In addition, the ST's were so focused on getting through their lesson plans that they were hardly even aware of whether students were learning or tuning out. For them, getting through the lesson rather than students getting the lesson was their primary goal. As a result, not much was accomplished in the classroom.

Along similar lines, the ST's had no criteria for determining whether students in their lessons could actually do what they were trying to teach. Nor did they have the ability to notice such things. For the most part, any feedback from the students regarding their lack of understanding or inability to produce the target language of the lesson went unanswered. The opposite was also true. Students were required to demonstrate their understanding long after they had made it clear that they had indeed understood. In the former case, students turned to other students for help or in some cases muttered to themselves that they could not understand before tuning out or engaging in an activity other than what was being done in the classroom. In the latter, the meaning of the activity completely lost its meaning after the first indication of comprehension took place. In addition, feedback, such as questions about the target language for the lesson, which should have prompted a further and deeper probe into whether students actually "got" the target language went unnoticed. Again, students looked to other students for help or tuned out.

Another major problem in all of the lessons observed was the imbalance of teacher talk and student talk. In most of the lessons, particularly those observed first, the teacher spoke far more frequently than the students did. As a result, classes were primarily “explanation oriented” with more talk about English than actual talk in English. This was less true at the junior high level than at the senior high level, but nonetheless a problem at both. The ST’s, according to feedback given to the author following such lessons, were concerned about the problem, however, they were unsure of how to correct it. In addition, it was seen to be a part of other challenges they faced, specifically, their inexperience with teaching methods and their relationships with their mentors at their host institutions.

ST’s inexperience with teaching methods forced them to rely on methods that they were most comfortable with, namely the Grammar-translation methods they experienced as junior and senior high students. When they were unsure of how to teach a certain target language, they invariably resorted to explaining that language in Japanese. As a result, they as teachers experienced a two-folded frustration. On one hand, they knew how much they disliked this method when they were students themselves and on the other, they had no idea about how to teach in another way. This combined with an awareness of how passive the students in their classrooms became when using this method was indeed very challenging for them. Furthermore, their relationships with their IM’s played a part in making that frustration even greater.

While most of the ST’s were given “free reign” in regard to how they taught their lessons, they always seemed to be reticent to stray too far away from how their IM’s taught or how they thought their IM’s would have liked them to teach. In some cases there were some reasons for these concerns. While the IM’s did not always address this issue directly, their questions and comments certainly pointed in that direction. In these cases, IM’s did at times encourage the ST’s to use more traditional methods of teaching, e.g., explanations, reading with translation, etc. They also spoke to the ST’s about how much material they needed to cover so that the students would not “fall behind” in their studies for senior high or college entrance exams. On the other hand, the ST’s, possibly because of the balance of power between themselves and the mentor teachers, were sometimes overly concerned about what their IM’s thought about their lessons. Even though their IM’s were encouraging them to try different things they were concerned with doing something similar to what they thought their IM’s would find acceptable.

Finally, the ST’s found their own English abilities challenged. There were some aspects of the language that they were asked to teach in which they lacked confidence and ability. The result of this was much deliberation and anxiety on their parts. This carried over into the classroom with sometimes less than desirable results, e.g., students becoming confused because of the ST’s uncertainties, IM’s interrupting the lessons with corrections causing loss of confidence in the ST’s, etc.

Having looked at the challenges met by the ST’s observed, let us now look at some awarenesses that could be brought about to help ST’s overcome these challenges. First, ST’s need to be made aware of the fact that they are not the only people in the classroom; that there are

two parties involved in any classroom experience, teachers and students. More importantly, they need to become aware that it is the students' learning that should take precedence in the classroom, not their own performance. However, regardless of the number of times they teach, it is almost impossible for the ST's to gain enough confidence in their own performance during their two week teaching experience so as to switch their focus from themselves to the students in their classes. Therefore, it is believed that many more opportunities to teach before beginning the student-teaching experience are necessary.

Currently, ST's have only limited opportunities to peer-teach before student-teaching. These opportunities are limited in terms of the number of times they teach, the length of each lesson and the number of students in each lesson. Most ST's will peer-teach three or four times before student-teaching. Each lesson is approximately fifteen minutes in length and there are only 4 to 5 students in each of these lessons. ST's will face classes of 40 students that are from forty five to fifty minutes in length. ST's need to have more opportunities to teach classes of this length and number of students. Only then will the aforementioned awarenesses be possible.

ST's also need to become aware that students are constantly sending them feedback on their lessons. As detailed above, ST's need to learn to look to the students when deciding whether to continue with or completely alter their lesson plans. Students send them signals when they are confused or have understood. Again, it is here that more practice is needed before the student teaching experience. The role of feedback in the classroom, how to notice it and what to do with it, is something that can be discussed, but actual experience is preferable. Mentors, like the author, can make ST's aware that student feedback exists but it requires practice to notice it and utilize it in order to tailor one's lessons to students.

All of the ST's observed spoke far too much in their lessons. The lessons were actually more lectures than they were lessons. Attention needs to be brought to this fact. One factor that contributes to the ST's talking too much is their nervousness. Again, it is believed that more practice before student teaching will help alleviate some of this nervousness. Another factor is that ST's are unsure of how to teach the language they are charged with teaching. Thus, they resort to explanations. They need to be made aware that there are other ways to teach besides explaining. This can be done more in methods classes before student teaching. In particular, ST's should be trained to look at the target language for a lesson and envision teaching it in several different ways.

ST's also need to be made aware of some of the problems they may face with their IM's. The ST's observed were unaware of the reality of their situations. While on one hand they were aware that they would be teaching a class that someone else, namely their IM's, usually taught, they were unaware of the problems that can sometimes accompany that, e.g., a rigid schedule of lessons that may need to be covered, a teaching style that may be in direct conflict with that they want to try, etc. These potential problems need to be addressed prior to the student teaching experience. Role plays or case studies based on previous ST's experiences could be used as teaching materials here. It is believed that successful navigation of these types of personal and

professional conflicts invariably makes for a more successful student teaching experience as well laying the ground for solving problems faced in the future after employment.

In addition, more needs to be done on educating the IM's about recent trends in language education. One of the benefits of hosting a ST should be the opportunity for interaction between the IM's and ST's as well as the university mentors. The exchange of ideas between all three parties should lead to enriching each party's experience as well as to moving English education forward. In order to achieve this, frank conversations between all three parties are imperative. These conversations should of course happen during the student teaching experience and after lessons that all three have been a part of, two as observers and one as teacher, but also before and after the entire teaching experience. Judging by the conversations with IM's during the authors observations, these type of exchanges would be greatly appreciated by most IM's and all ST's. These conversations also relieve some of the burden from ST's to teach in much the same way that their IM's do. It is also believed that a frank exchange between the university mentors and IM's about the goals of the student teaching process, i.e., to allow students to practice what they have been studying, would greatly enhance the ST's position in regard to trying out new things in the classroom.

The final challenge faced by ST's, a lack of confidence in the English they are required to teach, strikes right at the heart of one of the problems with the licensing system at YPU. ST's need to be made aware that it takes a certain amount of competency in English to be an English teacher. While this may appear to be an obvious criterion for becoming an English teacher, it is not necessarily reflected in the course work that ST's do. Nor is it reflected in the type of competencies ST's have shown in the past.

Currently, any student who completes all of the course work necessary for licensing is eligible to become a ST and gains the credentials necessary to apply for a teaching license. A passing grade (sixty or more points on a scale of one to one hundred) is the only criterion used for determining successful completion of any required course. In addition, there is at present time no required level of English proficiency necessary in order to become an English ST. Combined, these two factors make it possible for anyone who has passed all of the required courses to student-teach. As such, completion of all the required course work does not necessarily mean that all ST's posses the necessary skills to become teachers of English. This is particularly true in regard to English competency.

Judging from the author's previous experience with ST's of English, the five students observed and reported on in this paper were of above average in regard to their English abilities. However, none would be classified as completely fluent and accurate in English. While the ultimate responsibility for competence in English may lie with the ST his or herself, the university also bears some responsibility for bringing the ST's up to a certain level of competency before sending ST's out to teach. At present, a plan to accomplish just that is currently under consideration at YPU. One of the tenets of the this plan is the introduction of a competency based English curriculum where ST's will have to demonstrate their fluency and accuracy in listening, speaking,

reading and writing before they begin their student-teaching experience at YPU.

As one can see from the discussion above, the five ST's of English observed by the author, regardless of the level at which they taught, met a number of common challenges during their student-teaching experiences. It is believed that other ST's have met and will meet similar challenges. In order to improve future ST's student-teaching experiences it is believed that the awareness detailed above must be made by ST's before they begin to student-teach. The role of the mentor teacher at the university level in forcing these awarenesses is key. It is further believed that in all cases these awarenesses and subsequent instruction need to take place prior to the student-teaching experience and that the current pre-student teaching instruction system needs to be modified in order to accommodate this.

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