

SLS 499

Reflections of a Teaching Assistant at HELP

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Introduction:

This paper is a reflection of my time working at the Hawaii English Language Program (HELP) from January to March 2013. HELP is an English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching program at the University of Hawaii for nonnative English speakers, helping them to improve their English skills for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and college preparation. I worked as an assistant and observed classes from 12:55 to 2pm daily, for four days per week taught by a veteran teacher, Julie. I specifically assisted with Grammar 150 (basic grammar), assisting in one-to-one, pair-work and activity groups with Korean and Japanese nonnative learners of English.

I have chosen to use the framework of the ALACT model as the tool for my reflection as I believe it will help me to implement strategies to improve my teaching skills. The reason I chose to use the ALACT model is because it is a simple five step process of reflection that defines key areas in a teacher's professional development to prevent stagnation through a structured process of reflection.

ALACT Model:

The ALACT model (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005) is a theoretical framework used in the reflection process for teachers to reflect upon their experiences. The aim of the ALACT model is to provide a structured approach to reflection. The acronym ALACT draws from the first letter of each of the five steps. These five steps are; 1) Action; 2) Looking back on the action; 3) Awareness of essential aspects; 4) Creating alternative methods of action; 5) Trial. All of these components are essential to professional growth and they are presented in a in a straightforward method that is easy to follow for teacher educators and mentor teachers. I am using this

framework in order to organize my thoughts and experiences while working at HELP as a teaching assistant. I believe that the ALACT model will help me to become a better teacher through organized reflection of my experiences.

Action:

This area covers the experiences and/or problems that are encountered during the situation or period of instruction. In terms of my experiences at HELP, the “action” would be my actual teaching. In this section, I discuss my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher and the particular aspects that emerged, such as classroom management and teacher talking time. All of these experiences are fundamental in my development as a teacher.

*Teaching:*

During my time as a teacher’s assistant, the one thing that was somewhat stressful, but also encouraging was that I had been given the lead for teaching one class as well as creating a worksheet for the students. I feel like I had a moderate degree of success in teaching this class and creating the worksheet. The biggest problems that I learned about after teaching this class was that I continue to use vocabulary that is at a level too high for the students and that I need to pace myself. The worksheet was also very good in that Julie had only made a couple minor changes on the form. These tasks are in line with my continued development as a teacher. So long as I continue to feel uncomfortable or stressed within the classroom, I will need to spend more time in front of students, educating them in both productive and receptive English language skills. I was very happy to learn from Julie as she is an excellent teacher who is a subject matter expert in the classroom, and she is also talented in teaching me about the classroom. While teaching, I have learned the importance of having a lesson plan/activity list in order to stay on

track and within the time constraints. These are also important to keep me reminded of the specifics of the various activities being conducted during classes. Going and staying with a plan also help to keep me from being distracted during the class or forgetting to instruct any of the materials or activities. As class times are limited, it is important for a teacher to use a lesson plan, or some other written plan providing each activity with adequate time in order to provide as much instruction as possible during the limited time.

*Classroom Management:*

Classroom management appeared to be among the easiest tasks for me as a teacher up to this point. Organization and utilization of the space have been more than adequate and provide a positive learning environment. There are two negative impacts within the classroom, one being noise and other distractions from outside the classroom (cars, mopeds, people talking), and the lack of a heating and/or air conditioning unit, as the classroom can sometimes be too cold or excessively hot depending on the current weather. We would close the window shutters, and close the door to reduce outside noise or cold, and when hot, we would have to open the door and shutters. Closing the door and shutters was usually effective in noise reduction. Being that the buildings are mobile structures they do not have heating or air conditioning, so it is upon the teacher and students to be proactive by dressing appropriately for weather. During times of excess heat or cold, there was very little to be done in managing this due to a lack of resources. In regards to the students, most of them appear to have a vested interest in learning English, there was one student that appeared to have a lack of interest, but I provided more one-to-one time with this student, which appeared to encourage him to be proactive in completing his homework and working on tasks within the class. Motivated students helped to reduce distractions in the

classroom and allowed the teacher to focus and give special attention to those students that may have had some difficulty with the instruction being provided.

There are other practices conducted within the classroom which are discussed in Harmer (2007) Ch. 3 which help to facilitate management of the classroom in such a manner as to create a positive learning environment. It was standard for Julie to use the horseshoe arrangement of desks within the classroom and I have seen the value in doing so as it allows the teacher to have easy access to the students and for the students to break into pairs for pair-work. Other important factors we followed in the classroom as recommended by Harmer (2007) was to encourage the students to speak English while at the same time discouraging the students from speaking in their L1, which helped to facilitate the learning of English for the students. Though this can cause hardship for students who are not as proficient in English, we did not have a problem as either Julie or I would provide one-to-one instruction with the student and also had him paired with one of the more advanced learners. Pair-work was an important aspect in the daily function of our classroom, it appeared to provide many opportunities for the students to work with each other and resolve problems. The students were also given plenty of homework daily which allowed them opportunities to do solo work at their own speed allowing them to meet their needs and manage their own progress, which are important aspects mentioned by Harmer (2007).

*Talk Time:*

Finally, another important aspect suggested by Harmer (2007), Ch. 3 is Teacher Talk Time (TTT), which refers to the amount of time the teacher spends talking to the students. And, Student Talk Time (STT), which is the amount of time the students spend talking. It is obvious that in a class focused on productive skills such as speaking, that students should do more of the

talking. But in a class where there is a balance of receptive and productive skills it is important to maintain an even balance of TTT and STT. Our class actually seemed to be very balanced in using TTT and STT appropriately as needed to meet the needs of the students and to reach our teaching goals. Julie and I would speak as much or as little as we needed to in order to provide accurate instructions for the activities and answer any questions the students had. We also spent a lot of time encouraging the students to speak to ensure that they maintained an adequate usage level in speaking English. This was evidenced at the end of the course with the increased use of English, and infrequent use of Japanese while in the classroom or at HELP sponsored events.

*Teaching, round two:*

At the end of the course I was provided another opportunity to teach, create another worksheet and plan a 20 minute review for the students to help them prepare for their final exam. This was an interesting experience. Julie provided me with some strong, very well defined guidance that was also very open for me to be able to have some creative license. Again, this reminds me of the importance of planning, and not only reading, but knowing the materials in which you are teaching. I believe a teacher's level of proficiency will directly correlate to the success of the students. I think it's important to keep in mind that these students are learning English for various reasons (Harmer 2007) as well as the fact that they are paying for their education. This increases the responsibility to do all you can as a teacher to help the students to be successful, though there are sometimes limitations that the students place upon themselves which will deny some students success in English or language learning.

I was definitely exposed to various students, those that are soft spoken and speak in a whisper, other students that are very demanding and ask "why" for the simplest of items, which

can be very time consuming during the limited time allotted for the class. But the most demanding task for me as a teacher was definitely learning how to deal with students that don't do their homework, and don't want to talk or participate in class. These students definitely require more time, which is ok when you have a teacher with an assistant and/or an advanced student to help. Having an advanced student also helped as he/she could be the partner in the pair work, further facilitating a positive learning environment. All of these factors come together to ensure that the class runs smoothly. Both Julie and I would roam the classroom and observe the students while checking their coursework and answering their questions. Having two instructors may not always be possible but is definitely the teaching environment I would desire most.

Many of these actions are just a sliver in the realm of teaching experience, but they are lessons learned which can help me to further assess my skills as a teacher and facilitate my continued education as a future teacher.

#### Looking back on the action:

This area covers my expectations as well as what I had hoped to achieve during my time teaching at HELP.

I had expected to learn a lot about teaching English as a Second Language as this is my chosen profession. My goal was to implement and to experience firsthand the different concepts associated with teaching English as a Second Language that I have learned thus far while working towards my undergraduate degree. I knew from the beginning that it would not be an easy task because it would be my first time teaching nonnative English speakers that are learning at a basic level. From the beginning, I had expected to experience some problems with the level

of language that I use with students as I had already been told by a couple teachers that some of the vocabulary I use is at a level too high for beginning and intermediate learners of English. I had also anticipated having some trouble teaching grammar because grammar is not one of my strengths. Though I am very articulate in my use of grammar, I have forgotten much of the terminology that I had learned during my primary education.

One key achievement that I had maintained during my time teaching at HELP was to relearn key concepts and terminology associated with grammar. **Some of these key areas I assisted in teaching and relearning during this term were adjective phrases, past tense of be, and reflexive pronouns.** One of my reasons for placing so much emphasis on learning and teaching grammar is that I have frequently been told that grammar is an important tool used by some foreign schools in evaluating the strengths of a teacher.

#### Awareness of essential aspects:

In this section I will look at some of my core qualities/strengths/weaknesses that I had noticed from my teaching experiences.

#### *Lessons Learned:*

The classes were a great learning experience in that they helped me to further reflect upon my strengths and weaknesses within the classroom. Some of the weaknesses were my overuse of big words and language that is too high a level for low-intermediate level nonnative English learners. I would also sometimes micromanage the students, I needed to allow them more freedom, and personally feel more comfortable in knowing that they would call upon me to help them if they needed help. I can better prepare myself for a future in teaching by being more selective in the language that I use to ensure it is at a level appropriate for the language learners

as well as improve my abilities/skills in rephrasing the language that I use. I also need to learn to use fewer “yes/no” questions or asking the students to explain the grammar rules to me. Some of these issues are too complex for beginners that do not yet have a firm grasp or true communicative command of the English language. Some of my strengths as a teacher that I have noticed are that I currently try to place emphasis on key words and information that is important to the lesson for the day. I also draw pictures on the board to provide some use of visual aids, although I can preplan my lessons with additional visual aids to assist in my teaching which will save time during the lessons. An additional strength I possessed was that I was very approachable and easy to talk to which helped me to quickly develop rapport with the students and staff at HELP. According to Harmer one aspect that helps in developing rapport with the students is placing lots of effort in remembering their names and I did so making sure that I called them by their names as often as possible during class. This is evidenced by the students frequently calling upon me to ask questions. This in turn provided me with an edge in talking to students and trying to help them with their learning experience.

This experience was very educational for improving my teaching skills and providing me with insight for classroom management. I had specifically chosen to observe/assist with Grammar 150 because I consider grammar to be a weak point in my own English language proficiency. Having made a few mistakes has also taught me the importance of knowing the materials of instruction prior to actually teaching a class to the students as a teacher does more damage, by educating students in the wrong information.

Creating alternative methods of action:

How can I use my core qualities to improve my teaching? Developing alternate methods can help a teacher to think outside the box, fostering an enlightened learning environment.

I believe that it is important that I focus on my strengths as this will continue to help me in developing rapport with students as well as management of the classroom. These are two very key components of teaching. I feel as though these are some aspects of teaching that some teachers lack, and yet this is how a teacher will get students to approach them with questions or problems that they require help with. Other aspects of teaching that will help me in the classroom are the fact that I am very outgoing and I have an easy time in meeting new people and talking to strangers. I believe I have a very warm and comfortable personality that puts others at ease.

Other key aspects of my reflections are being aware of my weaknesses and being able to work on those limitations to improve my overall ability to teach. I will continue to learn about grammar and other key concepts associated with learning/teaching English to nonnative speakers. I feel that in order to be successful in life and teaching, we (teachers) need to spend our life as students, constantly seeking new knowledge and being open to new methods of teaching. I accept my weaknesses and will continue to work at improving those areas. I try to always stay aware of the language I use in different settings, as the language we use has a time and a place, and it is a teacher's responsibility to use language at a level that fosters a positive learning environment. In this I believe that Krashen's *input hypothesis* (Lightbown, & Spada, 2006) is a key component in second language acquisition for nonnative speakers. Specifically

comprehensible input that contains  $i+1$  which to me is important in all types of learning as it is enough to help students learn without teaching material which is too high a level for the students.

Trial:

This area should cover new behaviors within the classroom.

I have obviously not yet had an opportunity to implement these reflections within the classroom, though I will be better prepared the next time I step into the classroom. Through the use of the ALACT model I will become a better teacher and provide a level of instruction that is beneficial to my students. I am already in the process of seeking other opportunities to teach in order to further develop my skills and improve my weaknesses. I believe that the weaknesses as I have identified are better remedied through experience. I look forward to teaching in an environment again that will allow me to continue the process of reflection.

I am currently trying to maintain awareness of the level of language I use, and though, not in the classroom, I am managing my language use through increased communication with nonnative English speakers attending the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Developing these relationships is a tremendous help to me, as these students/friends are at an academic level, but still possess gaps in their knowledge and command of the English language. It is this recurring exposure that will ultimately improve my language control.

As far as grammar is concerned I have been provided books and found resources online that will help me to improve my overall knowledge in grammar, again, this continues to be a weakness for me that I am aware of and seek to improve through education and personal growth.

Also, developing a greater knowledge of Second Language theory and all of the different research and hypothesis associated within the field of study will provide personal growth and keep me on track as a teacher. Though there are many important theories and hypothesis, I believe that maintaining an awareness of Krashen's input hypothesis can and will help to keep educators on track, as I do not want to be "that" teacher in front of the classroom as the students have blank stares on their faces. The idea of *i+1* is very important in ensuring a positive learning environment that does not leave students behind.

### Conclusion:

Overall, this teaching opportunity has been a very enlightening experience which has helped me to begin the continuous process of development to become a quality teacher. As teachers we are entrusted with the minds of those who want to learn, and given the opportunity to foster an environment in which students that are otherwise disinterested, develop an interest in learning. It is important that we as teachers maintain an awareness of our core qualities, and how these qualities impact our behavior and how we react within our environments, as this can and will either create a positive or negative learning environment.

In relation to my own experiences in teaching and my reflections of these experiences I have learned how to better identify my strengths and weaknesses. Using a formal model of reflection is the best way for me to improve and I am certain that I am embarking on a long journey of self-discovery which will help me to be an ambassador of learning.

One other important aspect of reflection in teacher development is so that I (we) do not lose sight of my (our) responsibility to educate those that are entrusted to us. In an era where many teachers teach to the test, neglecting the students that are performing high or low and

focusing on those in the middle we need to remember, that all of the students are there in our classrooms for the same purpose, to learn. Through reflection I will better learn how to meet the needs of all of my students, to ensure that I do not leave any of my students behind, even if that means ensuring they are placed in a classroom that is more complimentary to their level of knowledge in English. It is my goal to be the best teacher I can be.

References:

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