

Stepping Stones to Questions and to Answers

While reflecting on my experience of teaching iLEAP ESL 015 course during the summer, I cannot help myself going back in time when I first started this MA TESL program. The tutoring experience I had in APLNG 595: Internship course and the practicum experience I had in APLNG 500: Practice Teaching ESL both provided me unique opportunities to develop more as an individual and as a teacher. Reading my reflection papers from these two courses and now looking back of the experience I had teaching ESL 015 for the summer, I recognize how much I changed and improved in such short time. Not only did I improve, but I also began viewing my experience in a wider perspective than I did before. After finishing my tutoring experience in fall, 2013, I found myself more improved in teaching skills and techniques. The practicum experience in spring, 2014 made me realize my priorities and principles in teaching. Now, I find myself developed with more of my own expertise and higher competence in teaching. Most importantly, all of these are gradually changing and improving even at this very moment.

The tutoring experience I had last fall was a transitional moment to me; I began to recognize myself more as a teacher for adults, not only for children. I started noticing differences compared to my previous teaching experience and constantly questioned how to improve my teaching style more appropriate to adult learners. After the semester, I was more confident with my instructional techniques and was certain that I gained abilities to keep balance between my strengths and weaknesses while interacting with students. While I am still confident that I was able to taste a glimpse of success through this experience, I also find myself much more

improved in teaching techniques now than before.

During and after teaching ESL 015 in the summer, I found myself being more flexible and adaptable than I was before – and even more than the first day I started teaching this course. I normally say that teachers prepare 3 hours only to teach a lesson for an hour. This, in fact, has never been an exaggeration; I know how much time teachers spend on preparing lessons and I was not an exception. As a person who always needs a big picture to start planning out details, I spent days planning the bone structure of the course. After knowing the basic structure, I usually spend days thinking about the details over and over again. Then, I finally get to sit down and make my lesson plans with the materials needed. Once I get an idea of how to effectively deliver the goals of the lesson, the job will take only few hours. However, getting the idea sometimes takes a while and even forces me to spend a long time doing research as well. The fact that I have lessons to teach every day, pushed me to adapt quickly.

By simply comparing the lesson plan on the first day and the last day, I see my lesson plans becoming simpler and briefer. In the beginning of this course, I needed to plan every detail, and dared to take the risk of making mistakes while teaching. I planned everything perfectly and reviewed my lesson plan at least twice before I got into the classroom. Knowing how time has always been an issue in my previous teaching experience, I highlighted the maximum time I can use in each activity and constantly checked my watch. While the course continued, I realized my lesson plan becoming shorter, and I barely looked at my lesson plan or my watch in each lesson. I still spent a quality time preparing my lessons, but I could see myself adapting to the class, students' pace, and my own lesson plan each and every moment while teaching. I began relying less on my materials and “plans”, but feeling comfortable and confident enough to rely on my own teaching skills: adaptation.

How I teach in class was not the only part I realized as being adaptable and flexible. Even on planning lessons, I could easily adapt activities from outside sources and recreate it based on my own needs. Before, many of the lessons I planned were based on my previous teaching experience. I might change the contents for the activity, but the form and structure were in the same way; and there were several routines I preferred using. If I learned a new activity or approach from other instructors or from a class, I waited for a moment to use the same purpose and form in my teaching.

While I was teaching iLEAP ESL 015, I have gotten a chance to experiment with the many activities I learned in the course I took this summer – APLNG 597A: L2 classroom Practice. To be honest, while I was taking the course, I did not expect to make so many of those activities in practical use. Humanistic approach itself seemed quite far from the purpose of language learning sometimes, and seemed to require great flexibility or freedom from the institution. After starting to apply several of these humanistic activities in my own lesson, I realized how flexibly and creatively they can be adapted. I used some activities in the same way as they were, and I used some with a different purpose; I sometimes even combined two activities together to add a humanistic approach to the activity. Through this experience, I realized how one activity could have such large scope to approach differently and became confident of my ability in adaptation. Not only my teaching instruction, but also my technique of using sources and planning activities became more adaptable and flexible.

Comparing to the tutoring experience I had and how I reflected on my experience saying that I am able to be more flexible and understanding while giving instruction, I improved even more. I can be more responsive to the students and the classroom while readjusting my plans when needed. I also know how to skillfully adapt new approaches or even approach activities

differently to satisfy my needs in lesson planning. It is now easier for me to proudly say that I have improved my instructional techniques compared to the first time I began teaching here at Penn State.

During the spring of 2014, I had my practicum experience in an ESL 015 class. This experience allowed me to confirm my beliefs and principles in teaching, and also provided me great confidence in teaching. It was a perfect opportunity to realize the principles that were more important to me as a teacher; I learned how to respond to diversity and established the beliefs I have in teaching regarding diversity. This particular experience also provided confirmation to my instructional ability while applying my previous knowledge of teaching into a new context. Now, after having the experience of teaching iLEAP ESL 015, I find myself in a different position as a teacher and this also affected my philosophy of teaching.

While teaching iLEAP ESL 015 this summer, I was able to put those principles into action. Through various journal assignments, students had multiple opportunities to search for their identity and consider their identity in the new cultural context. This also allowed me to have more personal contact with students and understand individual student's style and culture. Also, even though I believe each student's culture and identity should be accepted, I believed that students should be aware of using culturally appropriate language. For example, while I was in my practicum ESL class, I recognized students often using swear words mostly because they are lacking of language sources to express themselves. I also often found students using language inappropriately, which could easily be considered as "rude behavior". It was a dilemma for me to teach students of a new culturally acceptable language while encouraging them to preserve their identity. I straightforwardly mentioned the differences students should be aware of whenever I

noticed one, but also tried to emphasize on students' unique identities and the value of those. Although it is difficult to say whether I kept a perfect balance between those two, I can assure that students were more aware of the different cultural context, and they were more proud of themselves at the end of the course.

During the teaching experience I had this summer, I also reshaped my philosophy in a slightly different direction. Oftentimes my teaching style and the way I work could be described with the word "over". I am usually overambitious, overenthusiastic, over-planned, or I even overwork. Few times in the first week of class, I caught myself dismissing the class few minutes late because I over-planned and was being overambitious to complete the lesson I planned perfectly. After feeling guilty for doing so, I reminded myself of what Dr. Verity told me: learn how to "let go". While keeping my beliefs and pursuing my values as a teacher, I also learned how to let certain things go sometimes instead of trying to jump "over" the limit I actually have. In lesson planning, I still over-planned few times, but managed to give up certain parts of the lesson depending on the flow of the lesson. With students as well, even though I feel obligated as a teacher to bring out the maximum potential from each student, I learned to give up sometimes when it is not under my control to change the student. As an overachiever, this teaching experience taught me to be satisfied with the progress I made instead of pushing too hard to reach the maximum all the time. This not only reshaped my teaching philosophy, but also made my overall teaching experience more satisfying than before.

When looking back to my practicum experience in spring, 2014, I remember myself being more confident and certain with myself as a teacher. Instead of judging the right or wrong in teaching, I began to consider whether certain aspect felt right *to me*. With this relatively settled philosophy I had in teaching, I was able to finally take in action of what I believe. This action

again reshaped my beliefs and modified my philosophy in teaching. Now, I know how to *teach* with my beliefs and learned how to *manage* those beliefs in order to make each teaching moment more satisfying and valuable.

By looking back of the past teaching experiences and the improvements I made back then, I am now able to clearly see how much I developed from this particular opportunity of teaching. Moreover, the most fruitful part of this experience was the feedback and confirmation I have received. Despite the short and intensive period of time required in this course, I noticed students' actual improvement. Compared to their first diagnostic writing, first journal entry, blog post, major assignment, and first presentation, each student delivered their ideas clearer in more constructive organization. Although students' complaints of heavy course load were discouraging from time to time, the improvement they have shown at the end of the course gave indescribable fulfillment. Also, the humanistic approach I took returned with great feedback; this seemed to help students' overall transition to a new life supported by personal connections. Students built great bonding and became good friends even outside of the class; they came to me and felt comfortable enough to complain about their classmates or homesickness. Students also spent quality time understanding and searching for their own identities. This helped them to be more expressive with critical views to evaluate self and others. All of these changes and improvements I recognized throughout and at the end of the semester gave an assurance; an assurance that the approach I took based on my belief actually enriched students' learning experience.

After all, teaching an ESL 015 course during this summer taught me more lessons than the lessons I actually taught to the students. From a tutor learning more instructional approaches to a practicum teacher setting up her own teaching philosophy, I now have the competence to say

that I have gained certain expertise in my own teaching. As a learner, I still regret for not reflecting my teaching experience regularly and wonder how to continue disciplining myself while being a teacher. As a teacher, I still question how to develop more of my expertise to satisfy the “right” teaching for me. As a researcher, I cannot stop wondering how my personal identity as a teacher influenced my teaching and the student’s identity as a learner. With more questions to be answered, I am mostly filled with satisfaction and cannot wait to learn more answers to my questions in the future.