Learning to Teach in an American Classroom: Narrowing the Culture and Communication Gap for Foreign Teaching Assistants¹

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Graduate teaching assistants are often assigned to teach small sections in which undergraduates are expected to participate and discuss the subject matter of a course. Foreign graduate students who have reached an advanced level in a specific discipline may be able to explain its intricacies with ease, particularly to others in the same field; however, when their teaching assignment calls for leading a discussion section, especially with students new to the subject, foreign teaching assistants² may encounter difficulty in speaking comprehensibly, in explaining clearly, and in understanding their students easily.

Crucial to their teaching success with American students, according to Bailey (1983), is an ability to promote interaction in the classroom. In their own academic careers they may not have been taught in a way that allowed for student participation. Asian and European graduate students alike speak about learning in large impersonal lectures. As a result they may not have had experience with the kinds of teaching that are common in an American classroom. They may lack familiarity with the rules of English conversation that govern discussion, and they may have no idea about small talk or topics for conversations with students. They may use non-verbal behavior that does not invite or support easy communication with undergraduates. They may encounter an additional barrier to

communication with some American students who believe they cannot understand their foreign teaching assistants. For all these reasons foreign teaching assistants can benefit from developing skills to communicate with their students.

In order to help foreign teaching assistants become more competent and confident teachers in the American classroom, Harvard University offers a program called "Teaching in English," organized by the Harvard-Danforth Center for Teaching and Learning. The goals of the program are to:

1. present and give opportunities to practice different ways of establishing and maintaining contact with students in and out of class;
2. present and give opportunities to practice some basic teaching strategies of particular use to non-native English speakers;
3. instill curiosity about cultural expectations of teachers and students so that they develop a perspective of looking at what people say and do in different situations (especially students and teachers in the classroom), asking what cultural values the behavior reflects, and remaining open to the possibility that the meaning of behavior may be different from what they observe or assume;
4. suggest that they establish and maintain good lines of communication with others who can help them understand more about the background and cultural context within which their students operate.

While a short course cannot perform miracles, it can provide ways to promote communication with students and interaction in class. Videotaped classes provide models of teacher-student interactions that are observed and discussed by program participants. Participants then videotape their own teaching and discussion-leading sessions in order to practice new skills, identify their own strengths and weaknesses, and observe subsequent improvement.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Discussion about Teaching

In this program, participants first discuss their experiences as students and teachers in their home culture and in the

United States, their assumptions about what constitutes good teaching, and the value of communicating with students, both in and out of the classroom. Usually in comparing and contrasting their experiences of good teaching in their own cultures with their observations about the United States, foreign teaching assistants, with few exceptions, observe that there is greater opportunity in the United States for interaction between students and professors (and especially between students and teaching assistants) than there was in their own countries; and, that in the United States, there is a greater expectation of student participation in class.

Ironically, this kind of interaction, with which they have so little familiarity, is the key to overcoming some of the other barriers to communication between teaching assistants and their students. For example, in class, teaching assistants who invite questions are asked questions more frequently and are misunderstood less often. Teaching assistants who ask students to rephrase questions are more likely to understand what is really being asked. Teaching assistants who ask questions find out what the students are learning and where they need more help. And, perhaps most important, foreign teaching assistants can engender good will by demonstrating their willingness to reach out and by allowing students to see them as accessible individuals rather than mysterious, remote presences. For these reasons, much of the program focuses on enhancing these skills.

Observation of Teaching Skills

Focus 1: Encouraging Participation.

Through viewing and discussing selected examples of videotaped classes, foreign teaching assistants can observe a wide variety of teaching styles that are well-received by American students. As a focus for observing several short videotapes of classes in math, social science and humanities courses, the following questions are posed to the teaching assistants:

What does the teacher do to encourage student participation?

What purposes are served when students participate?

Looking at sequences of classroom interactions and specifying teacher behavior that generates and supports student

participation provide a concrete focus for discussions about teaching. That teachers in math or science may seek student participation for reasons different from those of a social science or humanities teacher often emerges in the course of the discussion.

In a calculus class, for example, the teacher is seen asking students how much they remember about checking equations to see if they are exact. As she writes out the equations, she invites the students to collaborate in working them out step by step. Another teacher, in a discussion of the Soviet economy, calls on students who speak infrequently whenever they show a willingness to talk, responds to student contributions differently in order to encourage more retiring students and to challenge more assertive ones, and makes frequent summaries, elaborating on students' points and attributing them to individuals by name. In a third class, a literature teacher initiates an animated discussion of the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by hearing from nearly every student in response to his opening question: "Do you retain any vivid images from this poem?" This open, concrete question is readily answered by many students who provide specific examples. The teacher moves the discussion forward by listening closely and respectfully to the students' comments and relating students' comments to one another. Students are encouraged to explore new ideas by the teacher's willingness to pursue directions introduced by students.

In the discussions of these videotapes, the foreign teaching assistants' comments about the rationale for encouraging student participation and discussion are supplemented by what we, the teaching consultants, know about the videotaped teachers' reasons for asking particular questions and responding to different students as they do. Math and science teachers, for example, know that it is easy to talk over students' heads, and that it can be difficult for students to articulate what they do not understand. By asking for specific answers, in a non-threatening way, the teachers keep better track of how students are grasping the material, and because they anticipate being asked, students are apt to follow the class more closely.

Teachers of discussion sections that follow lectures, such as the government class and the poetry class observed on tape, view class meetings as an opportunity for students to demonstrate

their command of the lecture material and to explore the associated readings. At the beginning of the year, the government teacher establishes a clear expectation that students will talk without his having to call on them. Understanding that it is their class, not his, they come to class prepared to make contributions. The literature teacher views each class as an opportunity for students to develop their own ideas by talking with each other. He knows that there are many different ways to read a text and that individuals have different personal responses. Creating a safe atmosphere for students to express themselves, he encourages individuals to develop and support their own interpretations.

This background information both informs the teaching assistants about ways successful teachers think about their teaching and adds to their understanding of teaching in an American context. Implied in these discussions are the notions of flexibility and individuality: that different teaching strategies are effective in different circumstances; and, most especially, that individual teachers develop unique teaching styles reflecting their own personalities, values, and enthusiasms.

Focus 2: Basic Teaching Strategies to Assist Non-native Speakers.

Not only are foreign teaching assistants well served by an awareness of the rationale and strategies for establishing and maintaining contact with students, but, like other teaching assistants, they can benefit from learning skills basic to lecturing and discussion-leading, especially devices of particular use to non-native speakers of English.

Presenting material clearly. Teaching assistants are alerted to techniques that native speakers of English use when they teach, techniques that they themselves might use were they teaching in their own languages. For example, foreign teaching assistants usually express themselves very parsimoniously in English, while native speakers of English might restate ideas in slightly different ways in successive sentences instead of trusting in one simple sentence to do the job. Therefore clarity can be enhanced if the teaching assistants develop the habit of restating and rephrasing concepts as they teach in English.

It has been our experience that many foreign teaching assistants worry particularly about their pronunciation. While

pronunciation is what undergraduates complain about most often (Hinofotis and Bailey, 1980), there is evidence that other phenomena might be mistaken for a general pronunciation problem (Zukowski/Faust, 1984). For example, foreign teaching assistants, as well as many inexperienced teachers, tend to express themselves casually in the code of their disciplines. Many foreign teaching assistants are accustomed to using English terms when discussing their field in their own language. When they use those same terms while speaking English, they sometimes retain their non-English intonation and pronunciation. In doing so, they may further obscure the meaning of abbreviations, formulas and jargon. Teaching assistants need to be alerted to this and to practice paraphrasing into ordinary English the abbreviated statements which they may be tempted to gloss over.

Some other elements basic to clear explanations are of particular importance to people who tend to have difficulty making themselves understood: framing presentations, using devices to organize speech (Brown, 1978), and setting up expectations for listeners by telling them what is about to be said all help set the stage for clearer communication because they cue the listener about what is to follow. Foreign teaching assistants learn to announce the elements of the talk they are giving, to provide explicit transitions and to cite examples and suggest comparisons and contrasts. These devices make it much easier for the students to follow even if the actual delivery is handicapped by pronunciation, intonation, or vocabulary problems.

Discussion Leading Devices. The notion of framing what one is about to say, and even using cues to indicate that one is at a loss of words, is of great use to foreign teaching fellows as they lead and participate in discussions. In a foreign language it is easy to appear abrupt or puzzlingly silent because one does not use linguistic devices that signal intentions. Native speakers use many cues to provide a context for interpreting their behavior, such as "I'd like to add to a point that was made earlier" or "let me think about that for a minute;" non-native speakers are often unaware of those cues.

In the training program, teaching assistants are asked to practice phrases as they lead and participate in discussions. They learn to correct more gently by using responses such as

“yes, but. . .” or “I think you are right about . . . but what about . . .?” They can keep a discussion on track by interrupting a speaker with “Let’s just focus on the first point you raised” or “Could we hold that question for a minute, and get back to the issue of . . .” Other situations that can be handled more gracefully with similar devices include: opening and closing a discussion, leaving a topic, handling silence, re-phrasing a question that gets no response, asking for clarification, reformulating others’ statements to test comprehension, asking for examples, balancing participation in the discussion by drawing out reticent people, and many more.

Focus 3: Teacher and Student Expectations of Each Other

Discussing cultural and personal differences in teachers’ expectations of students can be very illuminating to foreign teaching assistants and to the teaching consultants as well. For example, the level of preparation of many American high school students in math is surprisingly inadequate, according to teaching assistants from different educational systems. Some are surprised that a teacher can successfully organize a class around the expectation that students will do some homework during the semester, as opposed to waiting for an exam at the end of one year (or even three years) as is the case in their own systems; that weekly quizzes are not the custom in all American universities is a surprise to others. That students evaluate teachers can come as a shock. Several foreign teaching assistants notice that American teachers emphasize the development of students’ personal opinions, in papers as well as in class; in their own learning they may have had more experience in citing authorities than in asserting and supporting their own views. While some foreign teaching assistants observe that American students have narrow academic interests, others are surprised at their breadth of preparation. Many appreciate the informal relationship between teacher and student, for example, easy conversations outside of class, while others are offended by displays of what they view as student disrespect, such as chewing gum or drinking sodas in class.

After viewing several classes, foreign teaching assistants sense how teachers may also take into account the expectations students have of them. For example, American students want to

be positively regarded and recognized as individuals. They expect a less formal authority relationship with (and more access to) their teacher. They expect to learn inductively, with more problems to solve and greater participation in class. Above all, they expect teachers to help them succeed in their learning.

Familiarity with these expectations can ease communication between teacher and student, not only improving classroom interactions, but also contributing to their overall effectiveness. In the classes viewed on tape, successful teachers demonstrate some of the following qualities and skills that some foreign teachers say they benefit from observing, such as: encouraging students in their learning, taking into account different levels of academic preparation by giving different feedback to different kinds of student responses, showing politeness and even gentleness in correcting student errors, showing that students are known as individuals by, for example, making references to their particular interests and using names in class, being accessible in conversations before and after class in their offices, explaining assignments clearly and responding carefully to student work.

Problems can arise when expectations are not met or when there are discrepancies between student and teacher expectations. The source of problems becomes harder to detect when expectations seem similar in the two cultures, but are demonstrated differently, for example, when the meaning of actions based on one set of cultural values is interpreted by people from another culture assigning meaning according to their own cultural framework. Viewing videotapes of other teachers' lectures and discussions serves as a vehicle not only for learning pedagogical techniques, but also for becoming acquainted with a cross-cultural point of view, by observing behavior, raising questions about what has been observed, and reflecting on how interpretations of meaning can differ.

The importance of non-verbal aspects of behavior, for example, should not be underestimated by someone trying to function in another culture. Non-verbal aspects of teacher (and student) behavior that may be peculiar to American culture are evident on the videotapes. While it is often not possible to identify exactly what it is about the tone of voice, posture or facial expression that conveys meaning, nor is it

necessarily desirable to copy the details of another culture, it is possible to increase foreign teaching fellows' awareness of the meaning of different behavior in different cultural contexts. For example, among Americans, it is customary for listeners to look relatively steadily in the eyes of the speaker. When a listener looks away, it can convey inattention, disrespect, or in a discussion, reluctance to speak. In some other cultures, looking down can signify respect, while moving around in one's seat—as Americans tend to do—can seem very disrespectful. Rules vary among cultures as to how people act with one another if they know each other only superficially; how people enter and leave rooms; where people stand or sit; how close to one another they stand and sit; and how and when people touch one another. By raising questions about the meaning that particular behavior might convey and what that might imply in the context of the American classroom, foreign teaching assistants begin to develop a framework for observation and understanding.

Videotaped Practice Teaching

After observing several models of American classroom interactions, foreign teaching assistants are given the opportunity to observe themselves as they practice their teaching skills. The sequence of teaching skills in the practice sessions is incremental, from the least to the most interactive. The first activity is taping (and then viewing) a short presentation of a concept or a process in the teaching assistant's own field, accompanied by a handout or other visual support for communication. The second activity is a re-taping of the presentation, in which participants explicitly interact with the audience, taking into account what they have learned about giving clear presentations. The third activity is a videotaped discussion in which each participant has an opportunity to practice discussion-leading skills.

Reviewing the First Practice Presentations

Some questions that guide participants as they begin reviewing their teaching include: How do you motivate the listeners so that they will attend to your presentation? How do you vary the pace of your delivery? What are your key

points? How do you provide emphasis? What do you want to convey enthusiasm about? How do you want to present yourself?

In response to these questions people may comment about the structure and content of their presentations, how the use of the blackboard or handout affected their delivery, and how eye movements, body position, and voice affect communication. Fellow participants, who subsequently join in the discussion, are urged to point out strengths. They are further cautioned that people will be more likely to work on improving what they feel is important, and that they can concentrate on only a few things at a time.

The Second Practice Presentation

Repeating presentations, and viewing subsequent improved versions, builds confidence as individuals see their own improvement in aspects of teaching that they view as important. Ultimately, as the teaching assistants feel and look confident and competent as teachers, their students' understanding and willingness to communicate with them will increase. For the second videotaped presentation, the explicit assignment is for the teaching assistants to draw in the audience by asking about their experience with the topic or engaging them in a demonstration or solution to a problem. The goal is to incorporate into a presentation as much contact and communication with an audience as possible so that teaching this way becomes more natural.

Practice Discussion-leading

Having the opportunity to actually lead a brief discussion and then view themselves is the culminating activity of this sequence. We have experimented with different ways to organize discussions in order to give all the foreign teaching assistants a chance to lead, to allow the discussion to flow, and to keep within reasonable time boundaries (stopping the tape and discussing observations takes considerably longer than the actual taping). One format that works well is for individuals to choose a topic related to one of the two themes of the program, subjects in which everyone has done some reading in the course and has something to offer: teaching and culture.

All the participants are responsible for leading ten minutes of discussion. At this point they have an opportunity to practice all the interactive skills they have observed in the model videotapes. In reviewing the videotape of the discussion, participants consider the responsibilities of a discussion leader and the mechanics of discussion-leading. They observe how different types of questions facilitate discussion and how successfully they, as leaders and participants in the discussion, integrate the many skills they have been practicing throughout the program.

Focus 4: Communication with Colleagues and American Friends

Our last general piece of advice is to suggest ways for foreign teaching assistants to establish relationships with Americans. Isolation is a serious risk for graduate students, particularly foreign graduate students. In order to better understand their students, and in order to better interpret what they observe about American culture as manifested by their students—as well as maintaining a sense of humor about observations and experiences—we encourage them to make a conscious effort to establish and maintain links with other Americans, especially among teaching assistants in their departments who can help solve the mysteries related to teaching American students.

IN SUMMARY

The Harvard-Danforth program provides the participants with an opportunity to develop the understanding and skills they will need to function effectively in an American classroom. This is done through a sequence of discussion, observation of model teaching episodes and videotaped practice teaching. All of these experiences allow the foreign teaching assistant to examine assumptions about good teaching, observe a number of teaching styles and strategies, practice teaching the subject matter and gain experience and confidence in interacting with students in English, which will serve them well as they face their own classes.

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NOTES

1. Part of this article previously appeared under another title. "Training Foreign Teaching Assistants: Using Videotape to Observe and Practice Communicating and Interacting with Students." (1985). In P. Larson, E. Judd & D. Messerschmitt (Eds.), *On TESOL '84*. Washington, D.C. Copyright by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.
2. While some foreign teaching assistants are native English speakers and many non-native English speaking faculty may have problems similar to those of teaching assistants, for the sake of simplicity the participants in this program are referred to as "foreign teaching assistants."