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Morrell Community College

The first-year composition class meets in a basement room in a typical urban setting. Even though students come from a variety of privileged departments (sciences, engineering, business) with state-of-the-art facilities, the students in this foundational academic skills class are assigned to meet in a semi-dark, dingy environment. The 15 or so students huddle in one corner of the large room; most are staring at their phones and some are whispering. Dr. Spurns walks into the room with a booming greeting.

“What are we doing today?” he asks.

Then, “What is the homework? Who’s presenting?”

The quick questions go unanswered, but there are some murmurs in the corner. Dr. Spurns scribbles a few bullets on the board:

- Discussion
- Quiz
- Group work
- Presentation
- GRAMMAR

“You know the routine: Get into your groups, 1, 2, 3!”

This command results in some shuffling, tables being pushed around, pencils dropping, and laptops opening.

Dr. Spurns has already listed several points on the board:

1. Native Americans
2. Montana
3. World War II
4. Native American Reservations

“Group 1, take Native Americans. Group 2, Montana. Group 3, World War II. All groups also take the fourth one, Native American reservations. Tell us what you know about that. Five minutes!”

The students are finally in groups. Some of the groups are all male, while others all female; a few are mixed gender. Judging by appearance, different ethnicities are represented in most groups, but there are no detectable patterns in the class that is

two-thirds Asian and one-third Caucasian. Whispered words in some groups suggest a predominance of Chinese. Many of the students look puzzled. A tentatively raised hand gets Dr. Spurns' attention:

"Professor, what kind of information do you want from us?"

"Anything you know about your topic!" he responds.

"Do you mean history, geography, or just vocabulary?"

"Didn't you read the first chapter of the book?" asks Dr. Spurns.

Another tentative hand goes up. "But, you told us to take notes."

"Yes, on everything! I'll walk around and check your reading logs," Dr. Spurns replies.

Dr. Spurns then starts pacing and peeking over the students' shoulders. In some groups, papers rustle in the otherwise silent room. One phone rings several times, and its jazzy tone is met with chuckles. A boy with the adopted American name of Brad says to the girl next to him: "Why don't you take notes for our group?"

"It's always me," she complains. Then she opens her notebook with pen in hand.

Dr. Spurns then says, "Over! Let's hear what you have. Any volunteers?"

The silence is complete.

"Amanda?"

Amanda does not look up. Most of the students do not look up.

Brad speaks up: "The Native Americans were the first on this continent. The English who came, you know the emigrants, killed a lot of them."

"The settlers, you mean? Where did the Native Americans live mostly?" Dr. Spurns asks.

Slowly, the class responds with a word here or there. Dr. Spurns writes some of what he hears on the board, but not all of it. Comments cover points 1, 2, 3, but not 4. The students have significantly more to say about World War II, in impressive detail, in fact.

Dr. Spurns moves on briskly: "Two more minutes and then we do the quiz."

There is more shuffling of papers and some worried faces while the quiz is distributed. The quiz consists of three sections: vocabulary (*List the words in Chapter 1 you found useful and explain why*); grammar (*Identify and correct the errors in the five sentences*); multiple choice (*Answer the questions to provide factual information contained in Chapters 1 and 2*). The time allocated is 20 minutes.

The students work diligently. Then Dr. Spurns springs into action:

"Done! On to the presentation!"

A team of three students reports what it found about the background of the story in the novel: the geography and demographics of the small town, the major and minor characters, and interesting vocabulary items. They take turns reading from their notes, but occasionally trip over each other's cues, as some are clearly

more fluent than others. The class is mostly attentive: Some students take notes, but others look only at their phones. The presentation wraps up with muted applause.

“Let’s do some grammar now,” Dr. Spurns announces, and the remaining ten minutes of the class are spent on exercises that illustrate challenges with prepositions and articles.

“You know the routine for next class! Have a good day!”

The students file out in their preferred clusters.

■ Exhibit A: Institutional Context

This EAP course is at the entry level in a community college composition program. The curricular emphasis is on academic acculturation with a goal of facilitating the language skills of L2 students who are typically in the first semester of first year. In such programs, the makeup of the class may vary from quite diverse to just a few groups as in this situation. The goals of the course are rigorously academic, including advanced language proficiency and key academic competences. Here is a representative sampling:

- Use effective strategies for critically reading complex texts.
- Identify and practice various writing styles and formats.
- Express ideas using a controlled range of structures.
- Acquire knowledge of advanced grammar and basic metalanguage.
- Fluently perform classroom language functions.
- Understand the culture of the academic classroom.

Assigned readings provide models for analysis and discussion that help students recognize and emulate the processes used in academic texts. A successful completion of the course expects L2 students to achieve a balance of language skills that would allow them to perform competently—and on a par with native peers—the academic tasks relevant to their field of study. The instructors in the program have credentials in TESOL and pedagogical experience in L2 writing.

■ Exhibit B: Presentation Outline

Section I: Analysis of Theme

Choose three eloquent passages. Each passage should represent a different theme that you have identified within the text.

Section II: Analysis of Rhetorical Technique

Choose three short passages that illustrate unique rhetorical points. Choose from:

- repetition
- metaphor
- simile
- symbolism
- definition
- tense shift
- tone shift
- irony
- satire
- dialect or non-standard usage

Section III: Vocabulary

Note three new vocabulary items key to understanding the text. Write out the entire sentence from the text and underline the unfamiliar word/expression.

Section IV: Discussion Questions

Formulate three insightful discussion questions, at least one of which connects to other readings from our textbook. Aim for a variety of questions. Discussion leaders should involve ALL students in the discussion. This forum is meant to foster a lively intellectual exchange of ideas.

Section V: Grammar Focus Point

Discover an interesting grammatical feature of the text (e.g., sentence structure, word order, punctuation). Research that feature and present a brief summary of your findings in class.

I. PRE-CASE DISCUSSION PROBLEMS SETS

Complete the chart after reading the case.

Facts	
Opinions	
Assumptions	
Theories referred or connected to (if any)	
Ambiguous language	
Criteria you used in analyzing the case (e.g., emotional vs. rational)	
Emerging options	

Write a pre-case discussion decision paper. Include these points:

- a. options for case resolution
- b. criteria (a rational decision should always be made with a set of criteria)
- c. analysis of options
- d. recommendation (of the best choice among the options)
- e. action plan

II. CASE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Big-Picture Analysis

Describe the context of the case:

- institutional setting
- student demographics
- physical resources
- curricular mandate

Stakeholders

In small groups, assume the role of one of the case stakeholders. Write a statement/dialogue expressing this person's or group's hypothetical feelings and perspectives.

Be prepared to act out your roles to the large group.

- Dr. Spurns
- Brad
- Amanda
- the rest of the students in the class
- a program administrator observing the class

Surface Issues

What are the surface issues in this case? What is happening here from an untrained perspective? What underlying assumptions or beliefs feed into this perspective?

Deep Issues

Discuss the real issues in the case. Try to categorize them in terms of language teaching curriculum and instruction.

Evidence-Based Solutions

In groups, develop evidence-based solutions for each deep issue listed. Whenever possible, refer to a theory or principle of language learning and teaching to support your proposed solutions.

Teacher Thinking

In what ways does this case influence and/or reinforce your beliefs and dispositions as a teacher? Consult the Further Resources section to help with theoretically informed solutions.

III. POST-CASE PROBLEM SETS

Post-Case Analysis

A. Categorize what you learned as:

- teacher knowledge and praxis (e.g., content knowledge, curricular knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and application)
- teacher thinking (e.g., beliefs, problem-solving strategies, prioritizing objectives, values, professional ethics, attitudes)

B. List:

- learning objectives that you discovered in the case
- potential learning outcomes
- implications for your pedagogical practices

C. The post-case problem sets introduce reactions from various perspectives. These quotes are from others who have read the cases for educational and pedagogical purposes. Read all of the quotes and then choose two about which to write a short response (put the quotes at the top of each response). Use these questions as a guide:

- What is the message the speaker is trying to convey? If possible, also explain why you chose the quote.
- What examples can you think of that connect to the themes presented?
- Can you relate the quote to a class discussion or to something you have read or experienced?

Quotes

1. "The instructor seemed to want to pack a lot into the class in the form of drills. He kept referring to a routine, but I was wondering what the established sequence format was. Also, what exactly preceded that session? What were the students assigned to read? What other preparation did they have to do for the class?"
2. "My recommendation for this teacher is to mitigate his style. He is abrupt, impatient, and creates a boot camp atmosphere in the class. He should explore the background of his students and harness their knowledge about the topic (not quite sure what that is, though). He is inconsistent: he acts very strict about time-keeping but ignores other distractors in the class (L1, phones). I'd be curious about his course evaluations—do the students like him or fear him?"
3. "I am puzzled by the designation of the class as composition and writing intensive. There was little writing involved in any of the activities except for the quiz. If I were a student, I would probably be OK with the minimal writing (as this is usually the hardest academic challenge), but I would also wonder what I would be graded on—the quiz? participation? The assessment criteria are fuzzy, and the instructor's feedback is minimal. There are no scaffolding materials of any kind to help the students deal with the new content (in fact not defined at all) and practice the relevant language skills."
4. "This being an EAP-oriented class, I would suggest that the agenda reflect that. As it is, discussion figures there, but there is very little of it during the session. Also, grammar is listed separately, but it is covered in a generic way, with exercises on across-levels problems such as articles and prepositions (which are, in fact, largely lexical issues). The instructor seems experienced and is probably able to get a lot of good work from the students, but he should plan the class much more carefully in terms of prepping the sequence of activities, providing opportunities to integrate all language skills in the service of academic communication, and allocating time for review and feedback."

D. Write a reflection describing a take-away from the case in terms of praxis. Make sure to develop an action plan to resolve the case.

Consider these questions as guidelines:

- In what ways did the case discussion influence your thinking about the case?
- Did you change your original decision or did the discussion reaffirm your position?
- What points had you not considered prior to the case discussion?
- How might the information you gained from this case be applicable to your current instructional setting and/or future instructional settings?
- What did you learn?
- What are you inspired to learn more about?
- How did the themes discussed in class apply to your experience?

E. Discuss what theoretical basis there is for:

- the stakeholders' behavior in the case.
- the solutions you proposed.

Further Reading and Resources

BALEAP. (2008). *BALEAP competency framework for teachers of English for academic purposes*. Retrieved from www.baleap.org

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