

Observations of an Exceptional Pandemic-Era ESL Class

Dyan Collings Ralph
Tutor and Curriculum Developer
Step Up Tutoring

In Spring 2021, I had the privilege and pleasure of working with an extraordinary instructor during my student teaching experience, a requirement for the MA in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) Program at California State University, Los Angeles. The Advanced ESL Reading class at Glendale Community College was on Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I realize, gratefully, that many classes will return to in-person teaching soon. But many will stay on Zoom, and I share the following observations and tips with the hope of enhancing these classes.

First, and without exception, the instructor greeted each student as they entered the Zoom room, every class. He asked each student to write “Hello” in the chat when they came in. Repeatedly, he encouraged students to keep their microphones and cameras on. This had amazing results. I quickly noticed that students who left their microphones on participated much more during class and tended to leave their cameras on longer. I also saw that students participated much more after being in a breakout room group discussion. After pointing this out to the instructor, he added a group discussion to get this rolling at the beginning of each class.

I also observed teaching techniques that would enhance any class, whether remote or in-person. First, the instructor *always* took as much time as needed for text review and *never* seemed hurried or rushed. He taught practical techniques on how to be an active reader and recycled these constantly. He modeled by reading aloud with intonation and emphasis. He actively engaged students with the text by asking interesting, relevant, and personal questions related to their cultures, and sharing online images and websites that breathed life into the text. Following are just a few examples:

- We were reading Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. He showed the website thirteen.org and discussed Jim Crow, Plessy v. Ferguson, and the concept of “separate but equal.” It was clear by their questions that most students knew little about this aspect of U.S. history and appreciated learning more about it.
- He displayed images of graphic organizers, such as timelines, and taught students how to use them when reading. Toward the end of the semester, students said the timelines they created were remarkably helpful for understanding Angelou’s life and work.
- He shared language maps. I believe this was fascinating for the students, especially as he focused on their native languages and home countries.

- Maya Angelou loved Shakespeare, so he pulled up images to show who Shakespeare was and read a poem by him. This simple act brought to life a figure many students had heard of but knew little about.
- We were reading about cotton pickers during the 1930s, and he shared historical photos. The powerful images were likely harsher than anything our students could have imagined.
- He consistently enlarged the text and connected it to the students' lives. I believe this led to a dramatic increase in the students' motivation to read and interest levels.
- He used a textbook that taught ESL via the content of U.S. culture. Students consistently expressed fascination and interest in what they were learning about the U.S.
- Most poignantly, when a student said, "Sorry, I have a question," the instructor responded with, "No one has to say sorry! I am here to answer questions!" He had to say this more than once. But gradually students ventured to ask questions without apology.

Lastly, my observations convinced me that Content-Based Instruction (Snow & Brinton, 2017) works. If the content is relevant and interesting to the students, it works especially well. I appreciate that content choices are personal and individual for every teacher. But I now believe that students who hail from other countries benefit from learning about U.S. culture. Of course, it is not the only content that works. But I believe it can be incorporated into lessons to the students' benefit regardless of the primary subject matter. Ultimately, students evolve into more interested and engaged learners if the instructor invites them to share their own cultural experiences in tandem with exploring U.S. life, values and politics. As a newer teacher, I tend to stick closely to my lesson plan and prepared materials such as PowerPoint slides. But I find that by incorporating the suggestions I offered, I wind up with students who are less passive, more connected, and who display more consistent attendance and participation. Put simply, there is no excuse for a boring ESL class, online or in-person. We can all strive to ensure that our students value not only the English they are acquiring, but the journey itself.

References

Snow, M. A., & Brinton, D. (2017). *The content-based classroom: New perspectives on integrating language and content* (2nd ed). University of Michigan Press.

After rewarding careers in the technology and fitness industries, **Dyan Collings Ralph** returned to her true love: education. She recently completed an MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages at California State University, Los Angeles. Currently, she is a tutor and curriculum developer with a California based non-profit aiming to improve student success through online academic support and mentorship.