

Just a few weeks into my doctoral career, I found myself in a surprising situation for a first-time teaching assistant (TA). I received an email from the professor teaching the class saying that she had had an emergency and needed me to teach the lecture on first (L1) and second (L2) language acquisition that same day. I was of course willing to help, since I was knowledgeable in each of the topics, but even so, I was extremely nervous. I also quickly discovered that 2 hours was an incredibly short amount of time to prepare to teach a lecture, even when given slides to work with. I spent every minute of those two hours figuring out how to clearly and effectively explain the topics. My prior experience in L1 and L2 acquisition served me well, and I was able to cover each topic clearly and confidently. That day, I discovered that I was not only capable of standing in front of lecture a hall of over 200 students and effectively sharing topics that I loved, but also that I really enjoyed doing it, even under those crazy circumstances.

I later taught the same course as a lecturer over the summer on three separate occasions, and once again, enjoyed every minute of it. These experiences as a TA and instructor, in conjunction with my own years as a student, have allowed me to form a foundation for my teaching. In my view, there are three core teaching practices to a successful course: setting expectations, encouraging skills development along with content learning, and utilizing appropriate assessments of students' progress. I strive to incorporate these three practices into every class I teach.

Setting the Expectations: the balancing act

In planning for a course, the syllabus is the most important document, as it sets the expectations for both the students and the teacher. It is my belief that students cannot meet expectations unless they are clearly laid out. However, setting expectations for a course is a delicate balance between pushing students to meet their potential and not pushing them so hard that they become frustrated and give up. In my experience as a student, there are two things an instructor can do to destroy students motivation to learn: set no expectations, so the students do not know what is required to succeed, or set the expectations so high that the students feel they can never meet them. These are my two biggest concerns when designing a course and creating the schedule and syllabus. I expect my students to work in earnest and put in the work I ask of them, but in return they can expect that I will be understanding and will help them succeed in the class. The balancing act of expectations in the classroom is a delicate performance that requires both sides of the classroom to contribute and cooperate in order for everyone to succeed.

Setting the Focus: knowing vs. doing

One main focus of undergraduate education is teaching content, which in most cases will take the form of understanding the foundational and recent theories on any given topic, as well as having an understanding of how these theories are applied in research and what these studies find. My teaching of content of this type would incorporate both lectures and class discussions. From a student's perspective PowerPoint lectures can be dry and uninteresting, but are often necessary to convey the material effectively and to accommodate visual learners. In my classes, especially long classes, I would try to break up lecture with discussion. This is easily done in courses where the students would be reading published research (e.g., psycholinguistics, second language acquisition). After a lecture on the theory tested or method used in the research article, the class would come together and, guided by the instructor, discuss the paper. The instructor would pose a question to the class with specific focus on critically analyzing the claims made by the authors, for example: Why did the authors predict that particular outcome based on the theory? Was the method appropriate to test what they wanted to test? Do the results support their conclusions? With these questions as a guide, students' responses would demonstrate any weaknesses in understanding, which could be immediately addressed by the instructor in the discussion while simultaneously keeping students active and engaged in class.

While encouraging critical thinking is essential, I believe that it is equally important to teach skills that students can take with them to other classes and to other topics. I try to incorporate related practical skills into the classes I teach, so that my students leave not only with knowledge, but also new skills that will one day help them either in the workplace or in graduate school.

An important skill I acquired in my undergraduate studies at the University of Maryland, one that I learned in my first language acquisition class with Dr. Jeffrey Lidz, was how to effectively read a research article. Learning how to critically read journal articles is not an easy task for undergraduate students. Hence, the courses I would teach that focus on experimental research (e.g., psycholinguistics, second language acquisition) would help undergraduate students read and understand research articles on their own by modeling the assignment structure similarly to the course I had with Dr. Lidz. More specifically, my assignments would be geared towards building critical reading skills in a series of progressing assignments. First, students would learn basic skills for reading a research article: understanding the parts to a research paper, locating research questions and hypotheses, understanding predictions and methods, being able to read basic graphs, and understanding conclusions. The later assignments would then build on these foundational skills and include more analysis and critical thinking: identifying shortcomings or flaws in the design or materials, identifying alternative interpretations of results, and proposing improvements.

In statistics/quantitative methods or research methods courses, the focus would be less on reading research papers in their entirety and more on specifically understanding the reported statistics/methods while simultaneously developing basic design or data handling skills, by having the students actually work with the relevant computer programs (e.g., Excel, R, OpenSesame, etc.). Assignments would begin with simple tasks for students to become comfortable with the programs and how they work. The assignments would build on these basic skills, each time asking students to perform more advanced analyses and providing interpretations for the obtained outputs or collecting small sets of data. By developing these skills, students would become better able to understand research articles in linguistics. In this way, students develop theoretical and empirical knowledge of the field, and they learn skills that they can take with them and apply to other topics in their lives. The combination of knowledge and skills is what creates strong students who will have the ability to succeed in the future.

Setting the Mark: testing vs. assessing

In terms of assessment, I would tend to avoid timed, in-class written exams for several reasons. First, all of my classes would emphasize the development of skills, in parallel with the content, that would be built successively throughout the semester and would culminate in a final project where students would either propose a new study based on existing research or conduct a full analysis on a set of provided data. Exams as an assessment tend to be more appropriate for assessing knowledge, and are less appropriate at assessing students' progress in developing a skill. Second, with a course structure in which knowledge and skills build on earlier topics, I believe that assessments that are more summative, and focus on the output of learning, are not appropriate or conducive to either learning or retention. If the major forms of assessment are examinations, students only really have a few opportunities to identify the shortcomings in their understanding of theories or mastery of skills. This means that when topics build upon previous topics, not fully grasping early material will impede understanding of later material. Importantly, any lack of understanding on the part of the student will be identified only after the student has performed poorly on the examination, with few opportunities for them to recover from a bad performance. Finally, there are many students who do not perform well in a timed exam setting, and so exams do not accurately assess these students' knowledge of or difficulties with the material.

To avoid these issues, I prefer a more frequent, lower-stakes form of assessment. By assessing students' understanding and skill level every week or two weeks, both the students and instructor can identify where the gaps in knowledge and skills are, and can address them before moving onto the next topic. As such, in my courses, the students would be assessed at multiple time points in the course for understanding of the materials and mastery of the relevant skills. This progressive assignment structure provides a comprehensive assessment of the students' progress in a more thorough and useful way. In my experience as a student, the use of such assessment methods made me enjoy the class more and to retain more information from it. Admittedly though, this type of assignment structure only works with smaller class sizes, and is generally unreasonable for larger lecture-styled courses, where exams tend to be the preferred option.