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# With Assumptions in Mind

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WITH ASSUMPTIONS IN MIND

by

CLAIRE ELEANOR CREELMAN

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of the requirements for the Master  
of Arts in Teaching degree at the  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper is an account of a three month teaching assignment in Guatemala in which I examined and tested my assumptions about teaching and learning in light of the techniques I used in the classroom, my lesson preparation and my selection of materials. This is done through the examination of a series of lesson plans which I used in classes of different levels and at different times in the program. I was able to demonstrate through these critiques when my actions supported those assumptions as well as the times when they conflicted or even ignored them. In addition, I was able to suggest changes in my techniques, choice of material or even, at times, my awareness, which would bring my actions more into agreement with my assumptions. What I ultimately found as a result of this examination is that, in general, my assumptions, when substantiated by thoughtful actions, led to the kind of learning and teaching experiences which I had chosen as my personal goal as an effective, caring and perceptive teacher.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	ii
ASSUMPTIONS . . . . .	1
THE STUDENTS . . . . .	4
TESTING AND PLACEMENT . . . . .	6
STUDENT PRIORITIES . . . . .	8
MATERIALS . . . . .	11
LESSON PLANS AND CRITIQUES . . . . .	16
CONCLUSION . . . . .	39
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	44

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most challenging and difficult tasks in teaching is the successful matching of one's carefully thought out assumptions with the actual techniques and methods employed in the act of teaching. The moment of truth comes when actions are weighed against those ideals and goals which make up one's personal approach to teaching.

This paper is the account of my efforts to critically examine the basic assumptions underlying my approach to teaching and to further check the compatibility of those assumptions with the techniques, materials and methods which I used to implement this approach.

In order to complete this examination I inquired into the how and why of what I did in a particular setting, in this instance, a second teaching internship which took place in Guatemala over a period of three months, from June 15, 1984 to September 15, 1984 at the office of Alianza Para Desarrollo Juvenil Comunitario. Alianza is a non-profit organization located in Guatemala and funded by Norway which is part of an international alliance helping developing countries. The principal work of Alianza is in the area of development in many of the most needy Guatemalan communities. It is organized and run completely by Guatemalans who work in the areas of health, nutrition, agriculture, education and small industry. There are five branches located in different parts of the country with the central office located in Guatemala City.

My connection was with the central office because the staff

there needed English proficiency in their daily contact with English speaking people. All their transactions with Norway were in English, as were many other contacts, such as ones with American buyers for goods made in their handicraft co-operatives, as well as professional consultants from other countries and American and international agencies working in Guatemala.

In this paper I will first present my assumptions which were the basis for this examination. Following this will be a description of the students involved, their levels and interests, and the testing and assessment which I used for their placement in my classes. Next, I will present the materials which I used in my classes and my justification for their use. The major portion of this endeavor will be a series of lesson plans for the actual classes I conducted, along with a critique of each lesson from the perspective of how well my assumptions and materials and techniques supported and confirmed each other. Finally, there will be a conclusion outlining the results of my efforts to contrast what I thought about teaching and learning and what I actually did as a teacher.

The success of this effort to create or adapt and use techniques and materials which are consistent with my assumptions has been personally difficult to measure. For me, the ultimate proof must be the sense of accomplishment I have attained through the realization of my consistency in the uniting of my actions with my goals and, as a result, the evolution of an approach to teaching which is both personally and professionally satisfying and successful.

## ASSUMPTIONS

During an intense year-long learning period at the School for International Training where I was a MAT student, I spent many long hours examining and testing my assumptions about learning and teaching. To me, an assumption is a belief or conviction assumed as true at a given point but which can change over time as it is challenged or tested. During the program some of my assumptions were developed and strengthened while others were cast aside as faulty or incompatible with the reality of a teaching or learning situation. I found that many of my assumptions were formed from my personal learning experiences and did not take into consideration the different needs and styles of other learners. Not only did the roles of both the teacher and learner have to be examined but the use and purpose of language itself had to be considered.

The following is a list of assumptions about teaching which provides the foundation for my approach to teaching. Some were discovered in the process of examining my own attitudes and thoughts about teaching and learning and some, put forth by others, are ones with which I find agreement and which greatly substantiate many of my own feelings and actions.

- Students learn at different paces and have different learning styles, and the teacher should be aware of and accommodate these differences whenever possible.
- Students need to observe progress and experience success in order to increase self-esteem.



- Students learn best when they are motivated by desire and need to learn, and when material is relevant to their lives and goals.
- Students need to process and manipulate the material in order to incorporate the learning into their own body of knowledge because they remember more of what they do than what they hear.
- A nonthreatening environment and nonjudgmental constructive feedback increase trust and encourage and facilitate positive learning experiences.
- Language is self-expression and changes for different needs and purposes. Lessons should reflect these differences.
- Successful language learning is not a linear progression but a spiraling order where each concept is encountered over and over in increasing levels of complexity.
- Successful language learning occurs in a rich and varied environment in which learners can efficiently generate and test hypotheses through meaningful tasks and problems rather than by rote and recitation.<sup>1</sup>

These were the assumptions which came from my own long experience as a learner as well as my brief time as a teacher. The issue for me was to examine them further in terms of the methods and techniques I used in this particular teaching assignment

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Blair, Ed., Innovative Approaches to Language Teaching (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1982), p. 7.

to be certain that my actions supported my beliefs.

## THE STUDENTS

Fresh from a year at the School for International Training with my assumptions neatly laid out before me, I left for Guatemala and the office of Alianza to begin my new teaching assignment. There were twelve students involved in this project and they came from varied ESL backgrounds. The financial director and the secretary, both women, had lived in the United States for one to two years and they were quite fluent. The director of Alianza had spent two months studying English at the Experiment for International Living's English program in Brattleboro, Vermont. When he returned to Guatemala he was at an intermediate level. The accountant had studied English in the public schools for approximately five years but had never had an opportunity to use the language outside of class. The office administrator and the director of small industries had studied English for a short while in school but could remember very little. Another secretary and two drivers knew no English at all. Two men came from outside the organization and had studied English in school many years earlier, and more recently, had taken a course in a program in Guatemala City and appeared to be at an intermediate level. The twelfth student was the accountant's assistant who came after the program was begun and his background was similar to that of the accountant.

We used a small conference room for the classroom which contained a small blackboard. The room was light and airy and classes were conducted around a conference table, all of which

seemed to help create a warm congenial atmosphere for learning and teaching.

## TESTING AND PLACEMENT

In order to assess the students' levels and propose class groupings I tested for placement orally with two exercises, both of which were tape recorded for later evaluation. One was a series of questions about personal information and work experience. The second test involved a picture accompanied by a set of twenty questions. In both instances the questions were graded in degree of difficulty and it was possible to stop the questions when it appeared that the students had reached their level of comprehension and/or ability to answer, without appearing abrupt or instilling a sense of failure on the part of the students because they could not answer the questions.

In both of these testing situations I was working from my assumptions that a nonthreatening environment in which the students could feel at ease and unjudged would increase their confidence and performance. I also wanted to encourage trust in me and create a positive beginning for their learning experience. Giving information about their personal lives and work experience made them more relaxed and less pressured than a grammatically focused test might have. Even the second test became more of a puzzle to be solved than a test of subject matter or grammar points.

After the initial evaluation I decided that there would be three classes at three different levels. The advanced level was to focus on reading and writing of material relevant to their field of development, while the intermediate and beginning levels would focus on oral communication with a grammatical

perspective using a variety of classroom materials.

The advanced class would meet one hour every day and the intermediate and beginning classes would meet two hours daily. The hours were chosen by the Director based on the students' need to learn and the amount of time they could spend away from their regular responsibilities in the office.

One conflict that arose in my placement of the students concerned the two advanced women students. One student was more fluent than the other and also more aggressive. She also happened to be the supervisor of the weaker student, who appeared to be intimidated by her at times. I wanted to ensure a nonthreatening environment but I couldn't place her in the intermediate level because she was really beyond their level and she was mainly interested in learning more about her own field of development. The answer in this case was to create a nonthreatening environment within the advanced class by accommodating her different needs, learning style and pace. This was accomplished in this instance by the use of different assignments, different levels of questions and separate classes when one or the other student was not available.

## STUDENT PRIORITIES

There were never more than three or four people in a class and, because of their specialized interests and the homogeneity of the groups, I decided that each group would determine, whenever possible, their own priorities insofar as choice of subject matter, skill areas and materials were concerned. This decision was prompted by the assumptions that (1) students learn best when they are motivated by desire and need to learn and when material is relevant to their lives and goals and (2) language is self-expression and changes for different needs and purposes and lessons should reflect these differences.

The advanced group was quite fluent and interested in learning more about development in general and, more specifically, the jargon of the field. They wanted to work on pronunciation, translation and writing of reports and memos. Fortunately, in the office there were quite a few books and magazines in English on the subject of development. We chose Gunnar Myrdal's Asian Drama because it had a large amount of general development information and was clearly written and very interesting. The other materials we used were articles from a development magazine, "Ideas and Action," published by Freedom from Hunger Campaign at the United Nations. The students chose articles of particular interest to them and I adapted them for class use. With these materials we worked on pronunciation through oral reading and taping, oral communication skills through discussion of the material, and vocabulary through oral and written exercises. Translation work generally involved

material needed in Alianza's day to day work and incorporated an equal amount of work on oral and written skills.

The intermediate group wanted to work on better oral communication, in both fluency and accuracy. One of the students was interested specifically in material related to his work as an accountant. When his assistant joined the class later he expressed interest in the same material also. Another student, the Director of the program, was interested in the topics of management and development and particularly concerned with a need for accuracy in comprehending and giving information of a technical nature. This was especially important in his business dealings with the office in Norway because, although English was the common language, it was not the native tongue of either and it was crucial that there be no misunderstandings about what was said or expected.

Because accuracy was a top priority with this class, they wanted a thorough review of material at the elementary level and chose to work with Side by Side primarily because the Director had used it in the ESL program in Brattleboro and we all liked its format and approach. We supplemented and complemented it with sections from American Kernal Lessons which lent themselves to further practice of similar structures in a unique and interesting way by their focus on oral and written comprehension through taped and written exercises. In addition, we used activities from Play Games with English, Action Plans and Take a Stand. When the Director could not come to class, the other students, who were a little more advanced, worked with



Business Concepts for English Practice with its thorough coverage of many business subjects, including accounting.

The beginning class was much less secure than the others and saw themselves as much less proficient than they actually were. They were mainly interested in being able to communicate orally and saw this as an overwhelming task. We used Side by Side, Book One, and began with the first lesson, although they already knew some English. This allowed them the comfort and security of beginning with some knowledge of the material and building from that point.

## MATERIALS

When considering materials for each class I was working from certain assumptions about what type of materials would be most successful in creating a good learning environment. A key assumption involved here was that students learn best when the material is relevant to their lives and goals. In addition, the material should create a rich and varied learning environment so that learners can efficiently generate and test hypotheses through purposeful language use. Another consideration came from the assumption that students need to process and manipulate the material in order to incorporate the learning into their own body of knowledge and the material I chose had to allow for this. The materials also had to allow for self-expression according to the different needs and purposes of the students. Finally, the materials should allow for spiraling so concepts would be encountered over and over in increasing levels of complexity.

What follows is a short discussion of the texts and materials I used in light of the criteria listed above. When the subject matter was not explicitly the choice of the students, it was adult and relevant, engaging and used to elicit real communication. Each text is listed in the bibliography.

### SIDE BY SIDE

Although obviously American in pictorial perspective, the characters were sufficiently neutral so as not to create a block or division for foreign students who might not be able to identify with the characters and therefore see the relevance

for them. The aim of the book was to help students use the language through exchanges of meaningful conversation which could be used outside of the classroom. Because of the specific focus of the dialogues, it was possible to combine each lesson with other materials and activities for further practice or for developing writing and reading skills.

#### AMERICAN KERNAL LESSONS

This is a series of short paragraphs related either in subject matter and/or grammatical focus which can be read aloud by the teacher or used with the accompanying tape for practice in aural comprehension. This material provided for good spiraling of previously covered material and added a good balance for use with Side by Side. Accompanying visuals for each paragraph with cue words for eliciting information allowed for individual expression without rigid adherence to the exact dialogue presented. The format also allowed for guided, and later freer, reading and writing activities.

#### BUSINESS CONCEPTS FOR ENGLISH PRACTICE

This text provided technical information based on subject specific readings in a clear, informative manner. The material enabled the students to engage in realistic conversation to increase their oral and written communication skills in a particular area. All four skills areas were covered and were extremely well integrated. The situations were based on actual business application and encouraged oral communication with a substantial development of vocabulary.

## PLAY GAMES WITH ENGLISH, 1 & 2

These activities were graded and had a particular grammatical focus which could be used in conjunction with a particular lesson. They injected a note of humor and lightness and relief from more serious work and yet, they still offered the students an opportunity to manipulate some aspect of the language they were working on. Not all the games were usable because they often tested in topic areas in which the students had had no exposure. Because I was concerned with building self-esteem, I didn't want to use materials which might make them feel inadequate. Others were too British culture specific and the vocabulary was not relevant. Some were childish or unnecessarily tricky, neither of which served the purpose of eliciting or stimulating relevant responses.

## IDEAS AND ACTION

These were specific articles on development dealing with issues similar to those of Alianza. In these articles as well as with Asian Drama, the subjects were ones which were of interest and importance to the students whose learning motivation was very high.

## ASIAN DRAMA

This book was chosen largely for content due to its coverage of general development theories as well as overall clarity of subject matter.

## TAKE A STAND

This book offered certain controversial topics for discussion which served to elicit student opinion although the

lessons had no particular grammatical focus. The relevance of the issues was a motivating factor in encouraging open conversation and allowed students of different levels opportunity for expression.

#### THE GRAMMAR BOOK

This is an English grammar book for ESL teachers which I used both as a reference source and also for teaching suggestions which were easily adapted for a particular class, no matter what other material they were using at the time. This book offers a variety of analyses from traditional to transformation, from inductive to deductive. Such a variety gives wide opportunity for whatever type of learner you have in the classroom and allows the teacher to respond to different learning styles.

#### OTHER MATERIALS

I used visuals of all kinds -- slides, magazine pictures, stick figures, personal photos -- to convey meaning, to set the scene for using the language, or as a cue or stimulus for carrying out a variety of language activities. When I wanted a less defined image I would use rods as a method of working with material based on personal perception. For example, in depicting a park setting or a house interior, the rods allowed each student to attach his own perception of an item to that rod. If the rod represented a sofa or a tree, each student had his own vision of what that sofa or tree looked like to him. The most important result of rod usage was that it allowed students to transfer the focus of attention from themselves to

the rod. This was particularly helpful with more timid students in creating a more secure, nonthreatening environment. One way I did this was to use the rods in telling stories of daily activities from the point of view of a particular character represented by a rod. From there, the students used the material to tell the same story about themselves.

Tapes were used for both listening comprehension practice and for pronunciation improvement and practice. They were also useful for helping the students see their progress over a period of time by contrasting earlier tapes with more recent ones.

Occasionally we worked with articles about Guatemala from English newspapers. The impetus to understand was high and the students enjoyed finding information previously unavailable due to their level of English comprehension.

While each of the materials I used was chosen based on particular teaching assumptions, they formed an eclectic mixture that worked very well. What one lacked in style or focus, another provided. Some were more grammar specific while others elicited less controlled, more spontaneous responses.

## LESSON PLANS

I have included here seven lesson plans I prepared for each class, followed by a critique which includes comments and changes I would recommend now that I have carried out the lessons. I have tried to be clear about what I chose to present and why I presented it in a certain way. When something did not work out or was awkward I have attempted to understand and explain why this happened. The lesson plans are straightforward outlines of the goals for each lesson and the techniques and materials used. The critiques examine the assumptions behind my choices and actions and they attempt to defend, explain or reject those same choices and actions in a broader, more introspective manner.

As I planned each lesson I endeavored to be true to those assumptions I professed as a basis for my teaching philosophy. When I selected and presented material I tried to be mindful of those assumptions and aware of any inconsistencies. At times my path was clear and what I planned worked as I had planned it but, at other times, it was only after trying and failing that I could see the inconsistencies. At this point, the critiques were enormously helpful in clarifying my errors and omissions.

I used the following list of questions to raise the issues I felt were important when developing my lesson plans. These grew out of my assumptions and were the link between those assumptions and what I did in the classroom. They were a guide I tried to follow in my planning and preparation.

What are the particular needs of the students?

What material will I use? Why?

What techniques/activities will I use? Why?

What skills will I concentrate on? Why?

How will I assess students' progress?

What are the situations in which the language will be used?

What language structures must a student learn in order to accomplish objectives?

What degree of skill will the listener be expected to use?

Have I linked specific structures, functions and situations to develop effective communication strategies?

Now, after preparing and executing many lesson plans, I see how difficult it is to give sufficient time or space in my lessons to every consideration.



Goal: To be able to request and exchange information about the weather and people and activities around the house, using short answers with "to be" and possessive adjectives. To review family members and present continuous tense.

The teacher passes out cards with names of family members. Students take turns attaching cards to appropriate picture on family tree chart on wall. When all cards are in place students describe entire family and relationships to one another.

Scrambled sentence game. Students work in pairs to unscramble sets of sentences using pronouns and correct form of present continuous tense.

New Material:

The teacher puts a picture on the blackboard of people engaged in various activities. She models a person calling on the telephone asking person in picture, "What are you doing?" and responding, "I'm washing my car." She then puts cue word for possessive adjective next to picture. Teacher models again and class repeats. Teacher then models dialogues for other pictures and puts cue cards next to appropriate pictures with class repeating after each use.

The students then practice with exercises in Side by Side, working in pairs using possessive adjectives and answering questions with yes/no or short answers.

While students are working on this exercise the teacher puts pictures of various seasons of the year on the board.

Students describe what they see, providing or requesting vocabulary which teacher writes on the board. Teacher reads the narrative describing one season and students repeat what they remember. Teacher then reads narrative one more time. Students then write a short paragraph about narrative and work in pairs to correct, ultimately writing a joint paragraph on the blackboard, corrected by other students and finally by teacher. The students then copy the corrected version.

In this lesson I was trying to deal with a realistic and relevant goal both in terms of content and grammar. In the review of family members and the present continuous tense I wanted the students to work with connecting written and visual cues for reinforcement of material covered in a previous lesson. I wanted them to manipulate and incorporate this material into their own body of knowledge because of my assumption that students remember more of what they do than what they hear. One problem that arose was that some students could not remember the names for the different family members from the day before and they began the exercise by being confused. I should have had the whole class review chorally the names of family members in order to refresh their memories and to ensure success in the activity.

In my rush to get on with the lesson, I had overlooked my assumption that students need to observe progress and experience success in order to increase self-esteem and to continue their lessons with more confidence. Also, the scrambled sentence activity was too unrelated to the first activity as well as the ones to follow. For reinforcement I could have used the names of family members in the sentences and the verbs I would be using with the new material.

The new material was presented with visuals to set the scene and convey meaning for more clarity. This was done out of my assumption that students need a rich and varied setting within which to work and that this material must be relevant to

their lives. I used cue words beside each picture because they focused on the new item and let people visualize the word as they heard it. Activities were common, everyday activities. The dialogue was conducted via telephone to bring in another dimension of communication. I should have used a real telephone for a more lifelike situation thereby creating the reality setting I had been aiming for.

There should have been one more exercise using the new material to give the students more opportunity to manipulate and integrate it. Perhaps a game where students draw slips of paper with the name of one or more persons and a key word such as "car." One student would become leader and ask others what they were doing. People would answer with complete sentences using present continuous tense and appropriate possessive adjectives. Leader would then ask, "Is he/she . . . .?" using different verbs or nouns. Entire class would answer chorally and then individually. This would have led to more open use of the material and helped me assess their progress.

Goal: To introduce future tense with "going to," time expressions, "can" and "have to." To discuss personal future plans and excuses. To review prepositions.

Begin class with rod exercise for warm-up, followed by written cloze exercise with prepositions to be filled in. Correction to be done in class by students.

New Material:

The teacher presents a calendar and time chart for parts of the day. She talks about plans for future, specifying morning, noon, night, next week, month, year. Then the students work from a grid chart on the board for practice. They then work in pairs from Side by Side, pages 80 and 81.

Teacher models dialogue, A: "I'm going to the movies. Can you go with me?" B: "I'm sorry. I can't. I have to go to school." Students practice and modify dialogue substituting other examples of invitations and excuses taken from pictures on the board. Students then make up new invitations and excuses of their own.

Students work with a picture game from Play Games with English for practice with "have to." Then they write a short story about their plans for the future using "going to," "can" and "have to."

The review with the prepositions worked well with the rod exercise warm-up. The rods provided a good opportunity for the students to process and manipulate the material and from that to observe their progress. Some students put down each rod as they said each word. Others picked up the rods left in place by the previous student as they said each word. This personal use of the rods accommodated students' different learning styles and reminded me to be aware of those differences. With the focus more on the rods than on themselves, the students seemed more relaxed and less threatened.

I should have added a further rod exercise after the written work by having them retell the sentences from the cloze exercises to work on reinforcement and fluency.

The calendar and time chart was very useful but would have been smoother if I had introduced and used the pictures at this point instead of waiting for the next exercise.

The dialogue with "can" and "have to" worked well and was a good transition from the previous practice where we talked about future plans using a calendar and time chart. Again, it would have been even smoother if I had introduced the pictures of places at the time we worked with the calendar and time chart. Students enjoyed making up their own excuses and enjoyed becoming outrageous. The exercises with the invitations pointed out even more strongly how much language is self-expression and how it changes for different needs and purposes.

For further grammar practice I should have had them ask each other questions about a third person to practice with "has to." They did not finish their short stories and took them home to finish. This worked well the following day for review and assessment of their progress.

Goal: To review and practice past tense with regular verbs ending in (t), (d) and (id) and irregular "to be" and "do." Questions with yes and no. Focus on weekend events, in reading and oral comprehension.

Teacher reads a short paragraph with past tense verbs ending in "t" sound. Students then take turns repeating as they can remember, one sentence at a time. Teacher then reads second and third paragraphs with emphasis on past tense verbs ending in "d" and "id" sounds. The students repeat the process.

The teacher then writes verbs in present tense on board in three columns depending on ending sounds. Students make up sentences using those verbs in past tense.

Students read short story with past tense focus and answer questions for comprehension and communication practice, working in pairs.

Students work with a picture game, asking and answering questions about characters in picture, using "did" and "didn't." The teacher models the first few questions to demonstrate objective of activity.

Finally, students work with a picture story with a series of pictures out of sequence. They put pictures in order and tell story one sentence at a time using past tense, to tell a complete story. They then take turns trying to tell the story without looking at the pictures.



The entire lesson was planned as a general review of past tense verbs to give students practice and refine their understanding of its use, as well as to give them a firm basis from which to begin to learn new material. The activities were varied and interesting and involved information leading to real communication. My goal was to create a setting within which the students could effectively generate and test hypotheses through purposeful language use. This was part of the assumption that contextually meaningful tasks and problems would allow for just such an opportunity.

The basic problem with the lesson was that the first exercise in which I read a short paragraph with past tense verbs ending in "t" was too difficult. I jumped right in and some of the students could not remember the verbs and the first exercise became more of a test than a review. I should have started with simple visual examples with written cue words to reintroduce the material. If I had written the past tense verbs on the blackboard according to the ending sounds and in the order they occurred in the stories, the students would have had something to refer to.

This was an instance when I was not clear about the students' needs and was working chiefly on the material to be presented. I assumed they knew the past tense and only needed a review and practice. I could have written the story on the blackboard and covered it up at first. After reading the story

I could have uncovered it and had the class read together orally. This would have refreshed their memories and presented the material in a much less threatening manner. If I had thought more about the concept of learning as a spiraling order where each point is encountered over and over in increasing levels of complexity, I would have seen the exercise as new learning as well as review.

The short story would have been more successful if I had introduced it using rods to represent the setting, characters and actions. It would have given students something on which to hang the progression of the story, stimulated recall and helped them to manipulate and process the material. Then they could have worked in pairs with the written story asking and answering questions for comprehension and communication practice.

In the picture game the task of putting pictures in order was unnecessarily tricky and difficult and threw off the focus of working on the past tense. Some students didn't agree on the order and some couldn't do it and became frustrated.

There should have been some exercise for open expression, perhaps a writing one where the students talked about their own experiences using the past tense and speaking of weekend events. This would have given them another opportunity to work with the material in a different way and perhaps encouraged a more positive learning experience than the one with the tricky picture order.

I found in this lesson that most of the materials were appropriate and realistic and complemented one another. However I began at a level too high for the students and if my original presentation had been more thoughtful and less assuming about what they knew, they could have started from a point of strength instead of weakness.

Goal: To provide language practice based on specific readings in the field of accounting. To develop and use appropriately subject-specific vocabulary orally and in writing.

The teacher begins the lesson with a prereading activity with questions about the subject of accounting to elicit known information about the subject.

Students then read material aloud, stopping at the end of each paragraph for discussion of unknown vocabulary, pronunciation and general meaning of paragraph.

When material has been read students answer questions orally for comprehension activity.

Students then fill in cloze exercise with appropriate synonyms for vocabulary practice.

Students make an outline of reading in class together and then each one writes a descriptive paragraph or two about the material, looking only at outline. Teacher corrects after class and returns them the next day for review.

Students discuss different types of accountants and their work in their own country.

Beginning with a prereading activity helped me see what the students brought to the subject and how I should accommodate their needs. The material itself was rich in content and allowed ample opportunity for students to generate and test new concepts and ideas.

The first oral reading of the material would have been smoother and more comprehensible to the students if we had gone over the vocabulary prior to the reading. Stopping to discuss the meaning of a word in the middle of the reading too many times tends to confuse the reader.

As the students read I made a note of the words they had trouble pronouncing and went over those words individually after the reading. I think if they practiced them chorally it would not have pointed out any one student's particular weakness. This nonjudgmental constructive correction was the type of thing I had in mind when I spoke of my assumption that a nonthreatening environment increases trust and facilitates a positive learning experience.

This lesson was specifically prepared for two students who had a special interest in accounting and it was given when the other students were away on a trip. The material was a fine example of how stimulating and helpful relevant material is when learning a language. The students were fascinated with the reading and particularly enjoyed the similarities and differences in accounting in the United States and Guate-

mala. They exhibited a great deal of "real" communication with each other and with me.

Beyond providing language practice, however, the lesson was truly informative both for the students and for me. The fact that I was not as well versed in the subject as they were made them even more interested in explaining certain aspects of the material to me. This subtle change in roles of the student from learner to teacher adds another dimension to the classroom as students are able to retain their personal identity and exhibit knowledge of a particular subject area. It could serve to remind them of how much they already know and boost their confidence in a new learning situation.

This lesson reinforced even more strongly my beliefs that students learn best when they are motivated and when material is relevant to their lives, that language is self-expression which changes for different needs and purposes, and that a rich and varied learning environment will create a setting for learners to efficiently generate and test hypotheses through meaningful language use.

Goal: To review present and simple past tenses, modal should, weather, and adjectives using slide show of SIT campus.

Teacher shows 20 slides of pictures of School for International Training campus in Brattleboro, Vermont, describing various buildings, surroundings, weather and activities. Teacher then asks and answers general questions about what was seen, using present and past tenses and yes/no and "wh" questions. Teacher replays slides again and students take turns volunteering information as they remember it.

Students then work in pairs. Each one writes a short narrative describing SIT and then they exchange, read and correct each others' stories. Teacher passes out mimeo of her presentation and collects their stories for later correction. Students then take turns using rods to create scenes of their own school or home or work settings and describe them to class.

This particular class was of much interest to the students because the Director of the program had been at SIT and told them something about it. The lesson clearly had a communication focus using structures with which the students had some familiarity. I chose this presentation because of the high level of interest to the students and the opportunity it presented for open discussion at each student's level of competence. Also I believe that visuals such as slides can have a strong impact on connecting words and meanings in a very memorable manner. Here again, I was working from my assumptions that in-class activities should emphasize contextually meaningful tasks and situations in which students' different learning paces and styles can be accommodated.

I prepared my presentation very carefully and thought out all my questions using structures they could handle and use as well as practice and communicate with. I gave out a copy of my presentation at the end of the class to allow the students the opportunity to review the material. Not all students need or want such reinforcement, but such accommodation of different learning styles is important to me.

A further consideration was the spiraling effect of bringing in a past tense focus in a different setting and increased level of complexity. At the same time students could observe their progress and feel good about their improvement, thereby increasing their self-esteem.



Goal: To comprehend and develop working knowledge of development material from Gunnar Myrdal's Asian Drama. To work with reading, speaking and writing skills in order to increase vocabulary in the subject of development. To review pronunciation with exercises on minimal pairs, and oral reading, using a tape recorder.

Teacher reads short paragraph and then each student reads and tapes the same material. Teacher then works with minimal pairs in listening discrimination exercise as students select the correct words.

Students then preview reading material for words they do not understand. They take turns reading paragraphs aloud, pausing for help when they request it -- either for meaning or pronunciation. They ask and answer questions about vocabulary when reading is completed. Teacher then returns to material and reads certain passages aloud where students had trouble with pronunciation and they repeat.

Teacher writes vocabulary words on board, students discuss meanings and then complete written exercises, filling in correct word in appropriate sentences.

Students then work in pairs with exercise matching vocabulary words with correct synonyms.

Students write a short paragraph describing the material they have just read. Teacher corrects these after class and returns them the next day for review.

In the pronunciation review exercise we taped my story and then taped each of the students reading their version. Then we practiced with minimal pairs. The order should have been reversed to give the students the practice with problem sounds. This would have prepared them for the story exercises and encouraged success. An alternative would have been to repeat the stories at the end so that students could observe their progress.

In the reading material, I should have begun with a pre-reading activity to develop thoughts about the topic and to introduce the material. This would also have given me an opportunity to ascertain the levels of the students' understanding of the material. I should have developed the vocabulary list prior to reading -- (1) because of the time factor involved in having the students preread and choose words they didn't understand and (2) because some people didn't want to admit to a lack of understanding in view of the superior vocabulary of some other students. This resulted in a lack of comprehension of the article and subsequent general withdrawal and lack of confidence on the part of the less informed student.

In the taped correction of the reading I could have let the students choose the words they wanted to practice and had them repeat them until they were satisfied with their pronunciation. In this way each student could focus on his own particular needs and not feel compared to another's ability.

The environment would have been more nonthreatening and allowed for more self-expression.

Before beginning with the work with the vocabulary I should have added a series of questions to be sure of comprehension. This should have been done orally and voluntarily to be sure those who didn't know the information would learn from the others.

Before writing the paragraph I could have worked with the students in writing a short outline to help clarify the material and to give them practice in preparing outlines, something they had requested at the beginning of the course.

This class was very advanced and had rather specific ideas about what they wanted to learn and practice. Their choices were sensible and apropos of their English level. The major weakness of the lesson was that I focused too heavily on the subject matter and did not prepare the lesson with adequate consideration for their individual grammatical weaknesses.

Goal: To develop knowledge in area of development and become familiar with and able to use subject specific vocabulary orally and in writing.

Class begins with a prereading activity with questions about students' opinions of women's role in development and what changes should be made for today's world.

Teacher then presents vocabulary list taken from material. Students discuss meanings, ask questions and look up words which are still unclear after explanation.

Teacher pronounces words with students repeating and signaling for second or third utterance or until they are satisfied with their pronunciation.

Students take turns reading orally from material. Teacher underlines words with which they are still having trouble. This is followed by general discussion and comprehension questions and work with pronunciation.

Students then complete written exercises matching vocabulary to correct synonyms and then substituting appropriate terms for underlined words in sentences.

Students interview each other on tape with one person playing part of author, and then they play it back to the class.

The prereading activity discussing the general topic of women's roles in development presented a good opportunity for students to express their opinions at their own level. It also made a good starting point from which they could build with the new material from the lesson. By reviewing the vocabulary first the students were able to approach the reading material with more clarity and comprehension. The material itself was clearly relevant to their jobs and lives and their motivation was high.

The general comprehension questions should have been more carefully thought out in order to accommodate the various student levels.

The tape exercise of playing author allowed students to interact with each other and develop questions as well as answers. It was a good exercise for processing and working with new information and incorporating it into their own realm of experience.

## CONCLUSION

Robert Blair has observed that lesson content as well as every teaching technique and classroom strategy used by a teacher is consciously or unconsciously based on decisions that derive from a teacher's assumptions about teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup> This same observation has led me to this examination of my efforts to match my assumptions about teaching and learning with my approach to teaching. This process has been difficult, thought provoking, rewarding and, I believe, will continue for as long as I am a teacher.

What I have attempted to do here is to examine closely my own assumptions about teaching as I entered a new teaching experience. In all of my lesson planning I tried to be aware of why I chose certain materials, methods and techniques. In my critique of those lessons I tried to explain why some things worked and some things did not. I found that even when I planned carefully there were often factors I had not anticipated. Often this was because I planned a lesson without enough consideration for the levels and requirements of my students. For example, even though I always considered and acted on the assumption that students need material which is relevant to their lives and goals, there were times when the students' different needs and learning styles demanded more than just the relevancy of the material.

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Blair, Ed., Innovative Approaches to Language Teaching (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1982), p. 6.

What I learned also is that saying and doing are often worlds apart when talking about assumptions and their implementation in the classroom. What actually surfaces at times are aspects of your own character which are sometimes in direct conflict with those assumptions you feel are guiding your teaching efforts. This conflict became apparent as I examined myself as a teacher and how I actually performed in the classroom. I came face to face with a certain rigidity. I discovered a tendency to plan lessons in a way that worked best for me, rather than what was best for the students. I set out a list of wonderful, thoughtful, caring assumptions and acted as if just stating them was enough. Putting them into action was another story.

I found that when I planned a review activity at the beginning of the lesson it was often thrown in, almost as if to get it over with, so I could get on with the lesson. After a few incidents where the students were thrown into a lesson with a very inadequate review, I realized that I was giving lip service to a very important step. From that point I spent much more time working with and processing the review material before we went on to the lesson.

In this instance, students needed to process and manipulate the review material every bit as much as the presentation and application of new material. I found that a reviewing exercise should encompass the same rich and varied learning environment for the generation and testing of hypotheses as the earlier presentation of material. When this step has been

completed successfully, a nonthreatening environment will have been created which will facilitate a positive learning opportunity where students will be able to observe their progress.

I felt that just saying and believing that language learning was not a linear progression, but a spiraling order where each concept is encountered over and over, would make it so, and this would automatically be incorporated into my teaching. My observation of what actually occurred in my classroom has shown me that I was not practicing what I preached. It took conscious, deliberate action and awareness to begin to act on this assumption, as well as constant reminding.

I found an anxiousness on my part to completely cover a given area or point instead of expanding each student's competence in that area to a level appropriate for their ability or need. Here too, I was no longer considering language as self-expression to fulfill different individual needs but rather my own needs as a teacher. In effect, I was teaching as if I believed language learning was indeed a linear progression. I think this approach came from a certain rigidity which stemmed from a lack of confidence on my part and a need to control the environment in order to ensure my own security.

Two things have worked to enable me to be less rigid in the classroom. One has been, very simply, my awareness of the rigidity which I uncovered during this introspective process. The other has been a natural process of becoming more comfortable and confident in the classroom with the material I am presenting so that I could begin to focus more on the needs



of the student and less on the content of my lessons or my own needs.

There is another issue that has become very substantial as I examined my role in the classroom. This is a matter of control, and has to do with an unresolved personal problem I was not even aware of. In my effort to have an open, student-oriented class and not be a rigid controlling force, I abdicated certain responsibilities which ultimately had an effect on how closely my lesson plans followed upon my stated assumptions. What I realize now is that I confused control with direction. Since control had a negative connotation for me, I backed away from it almost entirely. This led to a kind of understated anarchy in the classroom which occurred as a result of my trying to set up an open nonthreatening environment. Gradually I saw that the students looked to me for direction and that this was clearly my responsibility. When this direction was lacking, the "open" environment I had created became threatening.

What happened is that I uncovered an assumption that said any control from the teacher was in opposition to the "open nonthreatening environment" I had envisioned in my earlier assumption. As I have come to grips with this I have redefined "open nonthreatening environment" to be one in which the teacher sets limits and guidelines which lend stability, structure and direction to the class.

This process of introspection has forced me to examine all the assumptions at work in my approach to teaching and

learning and to work out conflicts as well as to be aware of other forces at work which also affect my teaching. I have found that my assumptions form a valid foundation for my teaching and I have an even deeper conviction regarding their value. It has been mainly when, for reasons of expediency or thoughtlessness, I failed to consider one or another of these assumptions that my teaching was less effective. This process has also taught me that in order to grow and improve as a teacher I must always be open to change and new perspectives and never stop examining those assumptions underlying my approach to teaching and learning.

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