

Chapter 1 Approaching teaching practice

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This chapter discusses the purpose of teaching practice (TP). It also examines the roles played in TP by you the trainee, by your supervisor, the other teachers and your fellow trainees. We also look at ways to get the maximum benefit from your own lessons and feedback sessions, and from those of your fellow trainees.

1 The role of TP on a teacher training course

Why have teaching practice on a course?

You can learn a lot *about* teaching by discussing it and talking about materials and techniques but, like most skills, including using a language effectively, you can't really learn it without doing it. It is one thing to describe what you are going to do in a lesson, when you might be allowed to talk without interruption; it is quite another to carry it out when it includes a group of people who expect to contribute to the lesson and perhaps influence its progress. Before you teach students who expect you to be able to do your job, there are obviously huge benefits in being able to try things out beforehand in a supportive atmosphere, such as TP should provide.

What does TP practise?

It normally focuses on four areas:

- 1 sensitivity to problems of language use for learners;
- 2 sensitivity to how learners learn, the skills they need, the strategies they employ and the problems they have;
- 3 classroom management skills;
- 4 teaching techniques.

What are the objectives of TP?

Depending on the overall aims of a particular course and the stage that TP has reached, its objectives would normally be one or more of the following:

- to allow you to simulate or approach the real teaching situation under sympathetic supervision;
- to provide you with an opportunity to try out techniques;
- to provide an arena for assessment;
- to provide you with an opportunity to have your teaching evaluated and constructively criticized;

- to provide an opportunity for you to get used to being observed (as observation often forms part of teacher appraisal in many teaching institutions);
- to encourage development of criteria for self-evaluation and self-awareness;
- to create a situation of gradually increased freedom so that you become increasingly more independent – able to make decisions about what you teach and how you teach;
- to help you develop your own teaching style;
- to provide you with exposure to real learners, their learning problems and the factors which influence their learning;
- to expose you to students at a range of levels and to develop an understanding of the differences of approach required;
- to develop your sense of responsibility for your students.

Of course TP should also provide genuine learning for the students involved.

How is what to do on TP decided?

Supervisors or tutors will probably give a lot of support and help initially, both with what to teach and with techniques and materials to use. This detailed guidance is often gradually withdrawn as trainees' ability increases in identifying the students' language needs and in preparing activities and materials to satisfy them.

The aim of a lesson should initially be identified for you. Some supervisors like to give out beforehand a timetable or a syllabus of what you are to teach and how your lessons fit in with the students' timetable and that of other teachers or trainees. Or you and your supervisor may discuss and decide the timetable together – especially if you are the class's main teacher. The syllabus should ideally reflect both your needs and the students' needs.

Shouldn't TP be based around the needs of the trainees?

In some ways this is so and most courses ensure that a wide range of teaching skills are worked at. But the most effective way of meeting those needs is by making TP reflect the real situation as closely as possible: this can only mean basing it, as far as possible, on what the students need to learn.

How can particular skills and techniques be practised?

In many of the following chapters there are references to a number of tasks. They don't form a complete programme and no doubt you and your supervisor will be able to think of others. Some are intended simply to provoke discussion, others are of the 'get up and do it' type and involve peer teaching – where one trainee teaches and the other trainees act as students.

Does this mean that things have to be got right before going into TP?

No. TP is a time for experiment. It is one of the few opportunities you may ever have for trying out a new idea and having one or more critical but supportive observers. When anything is tried out for the first time you are likely to make mistakes. Sometimes, more can be learned from the lessons that don't go so well than from the great successes.

How will I know if I am making progress?

Through self-awareness

Sensitivity won't really come until you have had experience and learned to relax with your students. As the basic classroom skills are mastered and different parts of a lesson are handled more confidently you should be able to stand back mentally and observe the class as it is going on, see what the students are doing well, what they are having problems with as well as how they are interacting as a group. You will gradually become more self-aware – of your particular strengths, and of areas where improvement is needed.

Feedback from observers

Other trainees (if they are available) and, of course, supervisors can help develop your awareness. They can sit back and observe what is going on in a more objective way, unhindered by the nerves and anxieties of the teacher.

Feedback from students

To help yourself it is worth getting to know the students well, both inside and outside the classroom, not only to find out about their interests but also to give them the opportunity of expressing what they feel their problems are with the language. They can provide useful feedback on your classes, both what they found useful and what they didn't.

What should be the end result of TP?

After TP you should:

- be more aware of the language you are teaching;
- be more aware of the factors that aid and impede learning in the classroom;
- be in control of basic classroom management skills;
- be able to plan a series of lessons, perhaps based around published materials (such as a coursebook), which are relevant to what the students need to learn;
- be able to present, practise and revise language;
- be able to use activities and materials that develop language skills;
- be able to help students develop their awareness of how they learn and what learning strategies suit them;
- be able to think critically and creatively about your own lessons.

2 Working with others

During your training, as in most teaching situations, you will be liaising and co-operating with other teachers: perhaps fellow trainees, TP supervisors, teachers to whom you are apprenticed, other teachers working in the institution.

Working with a supervisor and/or a teacher to whom you are attached

In most institutions this person's role is:

- to help with lesson preparation;
- to observe critically;
- to give helpful feedback.

Make the most of your tutor's experience and expertise. However, it is vital that you are not over-dependent on your tutor. Certainly ask for clarification of any point you are supposed to be teaching – you can't say to a group of students that you don't know what you are supposed to be doing – even ask for your lesson plan to be checked, provided there's enough time for changes to be made. But your attitude is all-important: it shouldn't be *I don't know how to do it* but *I wasn't sure how to do it but I thought this might work. What do you think?* Expect to get less help as the course proceeds. You should always be moving positively towards independence and eventually you should get close to the real-life situation when you may be working with little or no help. Don't blame the tutor if things go wrong; you're the one with responsibility for the class while you are teaching it. Respond positively to suggestions and criticism; by all means give your reasons for doing something, but try not to be defensive.

Co-operating with other teachers working in the institution

In addition to your supervisor or 'attached' teacher other teachers can be a great help. For example, some may be prepared to give guidance as to what materials to use or tell you what you need to know about particular students. They can also give you a good picture of what teaching is actually like. However, they are likely to be busy and preoccupied with their classes and shouldn't be pestered unnecessarily. Remember: if they are teaching the same students as you are, they can make a big difference to how those students think of you. If you are observing, participating in or teaching another teacher's class it is imperative that you do everything you can to co-operate with the group's main teacher, that you know what your role is and that you don't tread on anyone's toes by turning up late, interrupting at an inappropriate time, contradicting the teacher in front of the students, etc!

Try to behave professionally with colleagues (teachers and fellow trainees) from the start:

- Clean the board when you finish.
- If you rearrange the furniture return the room to the state you found it in.
- Return borrowed materials.
- Start and finish lessons on time.
- Make sure you know how to use the machinery. Try not to break it and if the worst does happen, report it!

It is also worth remembering that institutions have expectations as to your behaviour and personal appearance. Be guided by the teachers as to what is considered appropriate. While a certain informality may be acceptable, and indeed necessary to help the students relax, a lack of cleanliness and tidiness isn't. If you are working with students who come from different cultures from your own remember also that there are marked cultural differences as regards what is considered to be appropriate dress. Aim to gain the respect of your students, not to embarrass them.

Working with other trainees

In many TP situations you'll be expected to work together in the preparation of classes and in the sharing of views after the classes. TP isn't a competitive situation where one person's good lesson diminishes the value of someone else's.

Often in TP you're working as part of a team in which each member supports the others and you're tackling common problems.

- You may work together on some of the tasks in this book. (See Introduction Section 4: *How to use this book.*)
- As well as giving support, other trainees can be an extremely useful resource. You can give one another ideas and information about language, resources and about students.
- You can offer constructive help in preparation, and check each other's plans. TP is a good opportunity for you to talk about the students and classes with other people.
- You may be able to help in other ways: before a lesson – by being responsible for arranging the furniture and organizing equipment; during a lesson – by being a time-keeper, indicating when someone teaching has only five minutes left, etc; after a lesson – by chairing a feedback session.
- You may co-operate in providing feedback on one another's teaching. This can take a number of different forms, depending on the TP situation:
 - observing a fellow trainee's lesson with a group of 'volunteer' students and giving feedback (see Chapter 1 Section 4: *What do observers do during TP?*);
 - teaching a class with another trainee (team teaching) and evaluating the lesson together, afterwards;
 - taking part in a discussion group about lessons observed and taught with classes to which you are attached – reporting back to colleagues on what you observed or what you taught;
 - observing a video of another trainee's lesson and giving feedback.

As with other colleagues, it is important to be sensitive and professional in your relationship with fellow trainees. (See the points made under *Co-operating with other teachers working in the institution*, above.) If you're teaching the same students as other trainees it is important to work together so that the lessons interrelate. At the very least make sure you keep fellow trainees informed about what you've done and what you're planning to do with the class.

3 Your own attitude

We can't change our personalities but we can alter the impression we give in class:

- by smiling – that doesn't mean you have to walk around with a fixed grin, but showing a friendly attitude warms the students to *you*;
- by responding to what students say as communication; try to respond naturally, show interest in what they say. Don't treat every utterance as a model to be corrected or congratulated upon!
- by finding out about the students, getting to know them;
- by taking time, by showing an interest in both the learning and the personal interests of the students. Talk to them before and after the lesson. Notice if they are absent, etc;
- by trying to enjoy their company as a group;
- by showing that you are enjoying teaching them.

At first you may have difficulty in understanding what some of your students are trying to say. With experience this will get much easier. Don't panic! Apologize, say you didn't understand and be patient.

4 What do observers do during TP?

In many situations you will be observed by your supervisor, perhaps by other trainees not teaching, and possibly by a trainee supervisor. Your supervisor will usually sit apart, and will probably take no part in the lesson but observe and note what is happening.

If you are observing, let the trainee who is teaching concentrate on the students:

- Sit apart from the students.
- Be as silent and inconspicuous as possible (don't chat to other trainees!).
- Try not to make eye contact with the person teaching.
- Never interrupt.

There are obvious exceptions to this: when, for example, a trainee wants help with monitoring pairwork (perhaps in the early stages of a course), when supportive laughter might be helpful, or when you are helping the trainee with timing by indicating how much time is left.

You may be asked to observe a particular aspect of a fellow trainee's lesson, perhaps doing one of the observation tasks, such as Task 1 on p27, or Task 1 on p59. This may concern a whole general area, perhaps related to topics currently being dealt with on your course: for example, *classroom management; aims; correction; interaction between students*. Or it might be more specific, perhaps relating to a problem that you know you have: for example, *instruction-giving; eye contact; 'concept' checking*. Observing how others perform in these areas can be very helpful. Alternatively you may concentrate on problems that the trainee who is teaching has. Your supervisor may select an appropriate observation task or the trainees who are teaching may ask you to observe and give feedback on an aspect they are consciously working on in that particular lesson. Of course, all observers should make notes as discreetly as possible when trainees are trying to concentrate on the lesson they are giving. Otherwise this can create unwelcome pressure!

5 Feedback on lessons

The timing and format of feedback can vary, depending on the TP situation. Feedback is often given soon after you have finished teaching, though it can take place some time later – perhaps the following day. Some supervisors like to give the trainees time to reflect on their own lesson and expect them to make written notes. Even if you are not required to do so, from time to time you might like to do a critique of one of your lessons. If you need a checklist, try using the contents list of this book.

Where feedback is predominantly oral many supervisors also give out a copy of their written notes. You may be given individual feedback by your supervisor or the feedback may take the form of a group discussion. You may be asked to give your impression of the lesson first or the other trainees may be invited to contribute, perhaps by reporting back on an observation task.

The trainees who improve most quickly are those who recognize their strengths and weaknesses and are open to suggestions for improvement. They respond positively, not defensively, to criticism – seeing all feedback as an aid to improvement.

Feedback on lessons can be frustrating and even seem unfair. This is often because:

- the students' needs are rightly being considered first;
- you may be trying out new ideas, totally unpractised. This is especially true if you are on a pre-service course and doing TP at the beginning of the course;
- you don't often get the chance to have another go at something you messed up.

But your supervisors are likely to be aware of these sorts of problems and will provide support. Listen carefully to what your supervisor says; you may want to make notes on your lesson plan. After each lesson it is worth noting the skills you have used and referring back to previous criticisms. In fact if you have shown yourself to be good at some particular strategy it might be worth *avoiding* it on TP; to give yourself practice over a wide range of skills. Don't worry about always showing your good side. Try to think of TP as *practice* even if it links to a qualification.

If you are asked to give feedback on other trainees' lessons, try to do so tactfully. *Why on earth didn't you show everyone the picture?* is likely to provoke a defensive reaction, whereas *I don't think everyone could see it* is likely to be more helpful. Try to describe what you observed rather than making value judgements. Also, although you will want to be supportive, it can be just as unhelpful to overpraise a lesson as to be overly critical. Remember: being aware of the effect language can have and being able to offer non-detracting criticism are aspects of your job as a teacher.

6 Keeping track

It is worth keeping a TP file, even on courses where the tutor doesn't require one to be handed in at the end for assessment. It could include lesson plans, reflections on your own teaching, copies of supervisor's comments, examples of materials and visual aids used, students' written work. You may like to ask fellow trainees for the plans of lessons you have seen them teach and offer yours in exchange. There are further tips on how lesson plans can be stored on p182.

You might also find it valuable to keep a personal diary of TP in which you reflect on your successes and failures: what you did, how you felt, what you resolve to do in the light of these experiences. In a diary you can include your feelings about your own TP lessons, those of colleagues, your reactions to ideas discussed in input sessions on the course and to any tasks and exercises you do.

Articulating an experience can help not only to get it in perspective but to develop self-awareness generally as a teacher. As it is of essentially private value you may or may not decide to show it to others. On some courses trainees are required to keep a TP diary and may be asked to submit part of it to their supervisor.

Further reading

- Parrott, M. 1993 *Tasks for English Teachers* (CUP)
 Scrivener, J. 1994 *Learning Teaching* (Heinemann)
 Wajnryb, R. 1992 *Classroom Observation Tasks* (CUP)
 Wallace, M. 1991 *Training Foreign Language Teachers* (CUP)