
A lesson on writing a cause and effect essay on divorce

First, I would like to give a brief description of the teaching context. This lesson was designed for 16 intermediate to advanced adult ESL learners from different countries with diverse L1 such as Arabic, Chinese, French, Japanese, Korean, Turkish, and Vietnamese. Their ages range from 20 to 38. This lesson took place at NOVA from 3:25pm to 5:30pm. This is a writing course; therefore, the instructor is focusing on teaching students the basic skills to build essays. The teacher normally uses mini communicative tasks that encourage students to participate through meaningful scaffolding to reach the main task. Most of the class is seeking a higher degree in American universities; therefore, they want to improve their writing in this class in order to pass English proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL.

This lesson was about writing a cause and effect essay, and in order to make that happen, students need to clearly outline what they were going to write about, which is a major step or phase in writing an essay. I designed this lesson for 65 minutes due to a prior agreement with the instructor, but when the students started writing their essays, the teacher decided to let them finish writing in class, instead of assigning the rest as a homework assignment. Therefore, I took an hour and a half of that class time. I videotaped the whole session, so that I could reflect on the entire session.

The reflection of the video and the comments from my host instructor shed the light on strengths and weaknesses of my teaching. Some parts were great while others were less than great. I started the class by trying to engage the students to build a good rapport with them, and that went really well. We talked about that day's topic, which was divorce. I chose divorce as the topic for the essay because I thought that the students would be able to relate to this topic if I asked them about social and relationship issues that are going on in the society. I wanted them to be able to guess the topic after I gave them clues, but, unfortunately, the students were not able to identify the topic. Eventually, I ended up mentioning the topic that we were going to discuss. Afterwards, I showed them a video that addressed the topic of divorce and its causes. I wanted them to have a general idea to be able to participate. After the video, I asked them to tell me what causes divorce in their opinion. Students started providing causes, and after that I drew their attention to the results of divorce. Again, they provided answers about the effects of divorce. I think I succeeded in engaging the students and drawing their attention to the topic we are about to discuss as well as having them generate causes and effects within minutes. Therefore, I think I succeeded in meeting the objectives in the warm-up stage.

In the first lesson, I had time management issues because I failed to get students into smaller groups in a timely manner. As a result, I thought of another way to divide students into groups. I

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had each student draw a number, and all students with number one got into one group, student with number two got into another, and so on, until I had three groups of five. This procedure was practical and fast because students were seated in their groups within five minutes. I distributed three different handouts to the three groups that highlighted different body paragraphs. Each group was responsible for outlining for only their specific body. In one handout it was cause, in another it was effect, and the third one was the solution. I meant to have each group work on different body paragraphs because I wanted to cover more areas. Some groups finished before the time I assigned, which was 15 minutes. Therefore, I asked one of the groups who finished first to come to the board and start writing the outlines they came up with. After all the three groups listed their outlines, I asked the students if they could see the differences between the different patterns on the board, but I do not think they were able to see what I had in mind. As a result, I had to explain to them that there are three patterns we can follow to create a cause and effect essay. I think the task went very well, and this time the instructions and organization was clear and quick, but I think that the post task was not executed very well. Therefore, this idea was a little bit confusing to students. The final result of this task where the students had to identify the three different patterns was not clear enough for them. I think I failed in this part because the students did not identify the patterns themselves; instead, I had to explain to them, which is more teacher-centered teaching. I created this task because I wanted the students to follow the discovery approach where they see the big picture they have created as a group. On the other hand, this task succeeded in utilizing the communicative approach because students participated in groups in a limited time to come up with an outline.

I meant to have all the outlines on the board for students to see and fix their classmates' outlines. Therefore, I started asking students about what they thought of the first group's outline, and if we should group some ideas together and have a topic sentence for it. The students had great ideas for the essay, but their ideas were not categorized under headings, and sometimes they were repetitive. Therefore, we worked together as a class to group ideas together and to provide topic sentences. I think this was a good scaffold for students because they created three different outlines, and they got to see how could they categorize their ideas to come up with an organized outline. I have to admit that this stage, the post task, was not easy for me because I had to work with the examples provided in front of me to help students get the best results. At some point, my mind just stopped, and I could not think of any headings or examples. After working on the post task where we categorized and organized the outlines, I gave students a break, and afterwards, I asked them to write cause and affect essay using the same divorce topic that we had been working on since the beginning of the class. This was the assessment stage, and the students had already done the major part because they had already created the outline for this essay. The instructor decided that they should finish writing the essay in class. Therefore, I took 30 more minutes to have the students write the cause and effect essay. After the students finished writing the essay, the instructor took their essays so that she could assess them. She will give them to me at a later date so that I, too, can assess

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their work.

Watching the teaching video again and again made me pinpoint some strengths and weaknesses in my teaching. I established a good rapport with the students, and they participated with enthusiasm in the activities. Also, I think that the video we watched at the beginning of the class worked well because they were able to absorb its content and apply it in their writing. In addition, the time management worked really well this time because the students chose numbers randomly to place them in groups, and the body parts they were supposed to work on during the group work were labeled in red, therefore, clear instructions were provided, and time was saved. According to the instructor, the essays that students wrote for this class were better than the last times, therefore, this class helped them a lot to improve their writing.

On the other hand, there were some weaknesses as well. At the beginning of the class, I asked the students about problems in the society, and they provided several topics, but divorce was not one of them. I insisted on discussing the topic I prepared for this class, which is divorce. Although the task was clear to students, and they created the outline according to the handout they have, the post task, where they discover the three patterns for cause and effect essay was not clear enough. Therefore, I was not successful in applying the discovery approach during the post task. I wanted students to see the difference between the three outlines they have created and which they have written on the board. Unfortunately, they could not see that, therefore, I had to explain each one to them which appeared like a teacher centered approach where I was lecturing them about the different patterns for writing cause and effect essay, instead of having them discovering it themselves. Adding and crossing things from the board during the post task when I tried with the whole class to organize and categorize the outlines the student came up with made it unclear for students.

If I were to teach this lesson again, I would have done some modifications to make it better. When I ask students to elicit ideas for a topic, I should choose what ever they come up with, and not insist on using the one I provide for the class. This way, I'm being an advocate for my students because I'm fulfilling their needs of wanting to know about a certain topic as well as giving them the power to choose today's topic. Having the students do a task very well, but not knowing the outcome from doing the task is not a success, therefore, I should have been more patient and give the students time to see the big picture of the different patterns on the board rather than jumping to explain everything without giving them a chance to think. I should have given students more time to absorb what they have created. After trying to fix the outlines on the board with the students, things were not clear anymore on the board. I should not have left it like that, instead I should have rewritten the outlines on the board or on the computer, and then project it on the board to clearly show them their ideas.

Every time I teach, I am learning and discovering new things about teaching and about myself

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as a teacher, Every time I teach, I am gaining confidence as well. Although I am not fully satisfied about the lesson I taught, the results were better than last time. Therefore, the overall lesson was a good way to have students practice outlining to come up with a good essay, which was the objective of the lesson.

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