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MSU TESOL Program, Teaching Practicum, and Graduate Teaching Assistant

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MSU TESOL Program, Teaching Practicum, and Graduate Teaching Assistant

Minako Yogi

The MA program in TESOL at Michigan State University (MSU) is designed to help meet the need for specialists in English language studies. Those who would enter the program complete courses which provide pedagogical, cultural, and linguistic information in accordance with the individual student's academic background and needs. There are two ways to complete this program: one is under Plan A (with thesis) and another under Plan B (without thesis) with the approval of the department. Usually this program is completed under Plan B. Students are required to take a minimum of 45 credits to complete this program. Thus, they must take approximately 15 to 16 classes. In the following, I will describe some of the classes I took, with special emphasis on Teaching Practicum class. In addition, I would like to share my experience as an ESL instructor under Graduate Teaching Assistantships.

Various Courses in MSU TESOL Program

The courses required for the MA degree at MSU TESOL program are listed in Appendix A. For instance, students are

required to take courses like Methods of Teaching English as a Second Language, Advanced Methods of Teaching English as a Second Language, Language and Culture, History of the English Language, Approach to Language, and Testing of English as a Second Language. From these five required courses, I will introduce my two favorite ones.

The Approach to Language course dealt with child language acquisition and discourse analysis. We were assigned to tape-record children's conversations and analyze the phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics. Also, we had to tape-record male and female conversations and analyze the differences between them. In the Testing of English as a Second Language class, we were assigned to design many tests on grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A sample syllabus of the course is listed in Appendix B. By the end of the term, we were required to complete a major project, which was to make an original test for the international students studying in the English Language Center of MSU, and to analyze each test item, give a statistical analysis of the results, and check the validity of the test.

Moreover, we had to take two courses offered by the Department of Linguistics, choosing from among Introduction to Linguistics, Articulatory Phonetics, Phonology, Morphology, and Introduction to Transformational Grammar. Above all, Articulatory Phonetics was a fascinating class. The course gave me insights into the ways in which sound systems intersect with other language skills. This provided me with a framework for

developing teaching techniques for the pronunciation class that I am presently involved in.

In addition, Practicum or teaching experience was required. This requirement may be waived depending upon the student's experience. Although I had four months' experience in teaching English in a senior high school in Okinawa, it was not enough to meet the requirement, so I had to take the practicum course, which consisted of a supervised graduate practicum, class observations, and an internship in teaching the English language. This course will be discussed later in detail.

Besides the courses mentioned so far, we had to take one course from among the courses Teaching Reading, Curriculum Development, or Research Design. In the Teaching Reading class, we read texts that focused on social issues in the development and implementation of English curriculum, issues ranging from gender, class, and culture to the culturally constructed views of literacy. The remaining 16 credits could be fulfilled with elective courses. Such courses were offered in other departments like Communications, Teacher Education, Linguistics, and the like. I took one of the Teacher Education seminars which introduced the theory and method of the sociolinguistic study of communication, and reviewed research on communication in educational settings. It was really thrilling to see various conversational data collected in American schools. While pursuing my graduate work, I took many courses in various fields to get a good background as a teacher of English as a second language. There is no royal road

to learning. I really worked hard, throwing myself completely into studying, while enjoying the experience of learning itself.

From my own experience, most of the professors required two or three approximately 20-page papers in one term. Since one term consists of only 10 weeks, I was so busy with the reading assignments and term papers that I had almost no time to go any place except to the library and my own apartment. In a quarter system, the professors cram in a large amount of material in a short period of time. Therefore, in a way, a semester system might be better because there is more time to go deeply into a subject. In fact, MSU changed to a semester system in the fall of 1992. Therefore, I believe the MA TESOL program at MSU may have changed for the better and may now provide more in-depth study.

Teaching Practicum Course

Based upon my own experience, I strongly recommend that every prospective TESOL student take the practicum course. This program had strong connections with the Lansing Public School District Bilingual Program. The Program began in 1979 when the bilingual population became increasingly diverse. The community experienced an influx of non-English-speaking immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asia. The schools, being the essential agent in integrating these newcomers into the community, desperately needed the services of trained professionals, volunteers, and student teachers in the area of

bilingual education. That is one of the reasons why the community bilingual program and the university began their cooperative efforts.

The Lansing Bilingual Program intended to provide appropriate instruction and support for limited-English students to ensure their successful achievement in the English speaking environment. While English proficiency was the cornerstone of the Bilingual Program, support of and respect for the students' native languages and cultural heritages was of paramount importance. Both were seen as integral elements of who the students were and the talent and potential they brought to the school setting and the community.

Every summer, the Lansing Bilingual Center provided opportunities for student visitations, student teaching, seminars, research studies, and on-site in-services. The Center staff came to the university to give seminars and answer questions about 'real life' bilingual education.

This summer practicum involved home, school, and community liaisons. It emphasized multicultural awareness and attempted to develop curriculum and materials with input from students, staff, and parents. This practicum course actually gave graduate students a chance to teach in the bilingual programs in the public schools. We were required to undertake 60 hours of teaching and preparation.

In my case, I decided to go to an elementary school to teach refugee students from Vietnam and Laos. My practicum started out with a meeting concerning the cultural background of the

refugee children whom we were going to teach. It was a new and fascinating experience for me since it was my very first time to learn about people from Vietnam and Laos.

The following week, I visited the Lansing Bilingual School to observe classes to absorb teaching techniques. I also attended all the seminars held for the teaching staff to prepare for teaching in the public schools. Right after the first meeting of the program, I started brainstorming about the appropriate topics for teaching refugee children and began to gather materials, such as children's books, workbooks, toys, games, cards, classroom decorations, art activities, posters, charts, and so on. My team-teaching partner and I often met and discussed topics, strategies, activities, materials, students' needs, and problems which might be expected while teaching. We organized our teaching plan in advance without knowing the students' English proficiency level.

After our first class, however, we began to understand the level of the students, and we made some revisions in our teaching plan to suit the students, who had recently arrived in the U.S. and had no English background at all. At first, we thought that we would have a difficult time communicating with them. All the students participated in every activity, though, and some were well-motivated and eager to learn. I noticed that they were really enjoying learning through visual aids, games, songs, and physical activities. They seemed to be very much interested in everything we did in the classroom. Even using pencils, crayons, and scissors seemed to be fun for the children

since most of them had not had a chance to go to school back in their own countries. They were ideal and adorable students.

Teaching such well-motivated students was challenging and rewarding. I was filled with joy when I witnessed the students' progress in learning English. Time passed so fast that I wished I could have taught these students a much longer period of time. Our main goal of teaching was to reinforce the students' recognition of survival English so that they could acquire the basic vocabulary and basic sentence structures needed to adjust to public school and eventually to the real world. We focused on natural English and tried to bring real-life situations into the classroom.

I attempted to start every lesson with a brief greeting and review of the previous lessons. Then, I presented new vocabulary visually by using flashcards, charts, pictures, and various objects. And I always prepared a variety of classroom activities in order to keep the students' attention and interest. I kept folders (portfolios) for each student. In every lesson we had a writing activity using worksheets so that they would not only listen and pronounce during the presentation stage, but they would also write and read to reinforce their mastery of the lesson. I placed stickers in their files each day in order to motivate them. On the last day of my class, students took back their files, art work, and family booklet, all of which represented their hard work during the two-week session. I certainly hoped that they would look them over and keep them as a remembrance of the program. I spent a lot of time, money, and

effort for that practicum, and thanks to the help of all the people involved in the program, it turned out to be a successful one.

As you might have noticed, MSU had a very unique program in which students could fulfill their course requirements by going out into the community to teach refugees or non-native English speakers. Some of the courses offered by the university were strongly connected with the people in the community. Therefore, the university, society, and volunteers in many fields worked together to improve the community and education in many ways.

I am very grateful that I had a chance to take part in that practicum. As a student majoring in TESOL, teaching English to foreign students was a precious and fruitful experience for me. Since I couldn't speak the students' native languages, English was the only means of communication and instruction. I truly experienced Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), which gave me a chance to look back at the theoretical and methodological perspectives that I had learned in courses I had taken previously. Exposing myself to diverse cultures by teaching non-native speakers of English helped me build up sensitivity to other cultures and helped me gain the ability to communicate across language and cultural differences.

I am sure this experience served as a stepping-stone to my present teaching career.

Teaching ESL as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at Battle Creek

Graduate Teaching Assistantships were available to teach college courses, to assist the faculty with research projects, or to provide services to the college. In the spring of 1991, the College of Education posted a teaching assistant position for a Japanese elementary school students' ESL instructor. When I heard about this announcement, I decided to apply for it in order to gain practical teaching experience, although I was financially supported by the Okinawa Prefectural Government. Applicants were required to submit a resume and a curriculum vitae written in both Japanese and English. I prepared all the requested documents and handed them in right away. I went through an interview with the superintendent of the school district, the dean of the department, the supervising committee, and the Japanese School PTA president. After thorough screening, I successfully passed the interview and obtained the rarely offered position of graduate teaching assistant.

Quarter-time assistants, like myself, worked 10 hours per week and were paid approximately \$600, with a waiver of the out-of-state tuition charge, a waiver of the cost of six credits each semester, and payment of the university's graduate student medical plan fee. Extra compensation was provided in recognition of the extra time required for transportation to Battle Creek. A university car was provided for transportation to and from the school. During fall term, all the teaching

assistants were evaluated by representatives of the school district, including the superintendent, designated representatives of MSU, and the Saturday School principal. Through this annual performance evaluation process, the concerned authorities decided the eligibility of the applicants for reappointment to the given position. I continued in the same position as a graduate teaching assistant for two years. It was time-consuming and exhausting but beneficial and rewarding.

Once, twice, or three times a week, depending upon my schedule, I drove the MSU car to Battle Creek, approximately 90 minutes away from MSU. My day started very early in the morning. I woke up at six and washed up, prepared my lunch, and packed breakfast to be eaten in the car while driving. My first stop was the University motor pool, where I picked up the university car. On snowy days, my first obligation was to scrape off the snow which covered the whole car, warm up the engine, and head out to the highway. The 90-minute drive was hazardous, especially in stormy weather. Some mornings, the snow was so heavy that I could hardly see the center lane of the highway, and I once drove onto the shoulder without noticing.

The elementary schools where I taught were Riverside, Territorial, and Minges Brook in Battle Creek. Each school had around ten to fifteen Japanese students whose parents worked for an automobile manufacturing company, and who were staying or planning to live in the U.S. for three to five years. My position was ESL tutor for those Japanese children. As soon as I arrived there, I went around to classrooms to pick up my ESL

students. I brought them to the seminar room, where I had many materials for various activities to be used while teaching them. Frankly speaking, there was no particular room for ESL tutoring. So I had to use a storage room where teachers kept audio-visual equipment. Each group consisted of two or three students grouped by their English proficiency level. After the 40-minute session, the students were brought back to their own classrooms to continue their normal classroom routine.

During the school year, teacher-parent conferences were held twice a year, and I always served as an interpreter. It was very touching to see busy fathers rushing into the conference room, still in their factory or lab uniforms, typical Japanese parents who were very concerned about their children's education. At some school assemblies, I also served as MC to help the meetings progress smoothly and helped introduce Japanese culture and customs with the Japanese mothers dressed in traditional kimonos.

I was very fortunate to be able to work with teachers and parents who were enthusiastic and conscientious. This gave me an opportunity to observe and learn the problems that Japanese ESL students were facing. I was able to see both sides, the teachers' opinions and the parents' concerns. Knowing that I had had almost the same experience in the U.S. in my childhood as their children did, the parents often asked me how I went through the academic requirements in the U.S., and how I survived after I returned to Japan. They were curious as to whether I had fallen behind in my studies and had to catch up

with my Japanese classmates. They also asked for my advice on what they should keep in mind when their children went back to Japan and faced difficulties in catching up with the Japanese curriculum and coping with the reverse culture shock that they might experience. I believe such communication between the teacher and the parents is one of the most crucial aspects of ensuring a positive student outcome since it encourages a shared responsibility for the success of the student.

The opportunity to work with many different students with different characters influenced me tremendously in many ways. Some students were well-motivated, but some were just too difficult to handle. I found that not all children were good learners of English. I believe that children's learning may be affected by their personalities, attitudes and motivation toward learning, the amount of their interactions with peers, the degree of their involvement in school activities and in the community, and possibly even by their parents' attitudes toward learning and toward the culture in which they live.

Closing remarks

My life at MSU as a graduate student was truly a blend of academic and social experiences, making many social and cultural opportunities available in addition to academic life. It was a period of personal growth and development and a process of building various skills needed for the next step in my life. All my graduate courses, my practicum, and my graduate teaching

assistant experience, wove together in harmony to broaden and strengthen my knowledge. I am very grateful to have been given the opportunity to study at Michigan State University. My overseas education was both a memorable and advantageous experience I will cherish all my life. I sincerely hope that the information given in this article will provide prospective graduate students with helpful insights in preparation for studying and living abroad.

<Appendix A>

Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Program

1. A minimum of 45 credits.
2. The required courses in theoretical and applied linguistics:
 - ENG 407 Methods of Teaching English
as a Second Language 4 Cr.
 - ENG 807 Advanced Methods of Teaching English
as a Second Language 3 Cr.
 - ENG 845 Approaches to Language 3 Cr.
 - ENG 846 Approaches to Language 3 Cr.
3. One course in Language and Culture
4. One course in the detailed study of some aspect of English.
This requirement is met by completing ENG 404 American English or ENG 800 History of the English Language.
(ENG 403 The Development of Modern English may be substituted)

5. Two of the following courses in theoretical linguistics:
 - LIN 401 Introduction to Linguistics 4 Cr.
 - LIN 402 Phonology 3 Cr.
 - LIN 403 Morphology 3 Cr.
 - LIN 421 Articulatory Phonetics
 - LIN 431 Introduction to Transformational Grammar 4 Cr.
6. Practicum or teaching experience.

This requirement may be waived, depending upon the student's experience.
7. ENG 808 Testing of English as a Second Language
8. One of the following:
 - a. A course in reading: ENG 408 A, 847, or 895A
 - b. A course in curriculum development: English 840, 841, or 849
 - c. A course in research design: English 849.
9. Electives. A maximum of 16 credits may be taken in courses outside the department.

<Appendix B>

Syllabus for The Testing of English as a Second Language

I. Course Content

- A. Types of Language Tests
- B. Basic Language Testing Techniques
- C. The Testing of Language Components (Grammar, Vocabulary, and Pronunciation) and Language Skills

(Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing)

D. Test Administration Practices

E. Test Evaluation and Item Evaluation Techniques

F. Basic Test Data and Use of Statistical Analyses

G. Survey of Current ESL Tests (TOFEL, Michigan Test, etc.)

H. Innovations in Language Testing:

1. Computer-Assisted Language Testing

2. Testing of Special Groups (ESP, Bilinguals, Children)

3. Confidence Testing

4. Testing of Communicative Competence

II. Instructor:

Prof. Y Room 10, Center for International Program

Office Hours: 9:00~10:30 a.m. and by appointment

III. Requirements

In addition to writing various types of tests/ test items for practice, each student will be expected to prepare a significant testing project, to include the planning, writing, administration, evaluation, and revision of a substantial body of test items. There will also be a series of five short quizzes to provide students and instructor with feedback on progress. A comprehensive final exam will be given which will cover the entire course.

IV. Text: Hughes, Arthur. Testing For Language Teachers.

Cambridge University Press, 1989. (A course packet may be required at a later date.)

V. Grading: The final course grade will be derived from scores on quizzes (25%), final exam (5%), course project (20%), and exercises (50%).