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Toward a More Perfect Union: Increasing Student Assistant Efficacy through an Online Training Program

Using domestic student teaching assistants (SAs) in the ESOL classroom has been widely accepted as an effective tool for enhancing student learning. SAs have been shown to facilitate student participation in the classroom, foster students' confidence in interacting with native speakers, and serve as a connection to the local culture (Lynch & Anderson, 2001). To capitalize on the benefits afforded by SAs, the AEC has, since 2007, integrated SAs into level one courses. However, research literature underscores that, to maximize SA efficacy, SAs must be purposefully trained for their roles (Gube & Phillipson, 2011; Kachi & Choon-hwa, 2001; Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Williams, 1991). As new GTAs, we observed that the AEC's SAs represent a broad range of personalities, facilities, and experiences. Given these variances in SAs' skills, we found ourselves questioning to what standard of knowledge we could and should hold them. Defining such a standard would enable teachers to design class activities that most productively draw upon the strengths of SAs without overstepping the boundaries of their expertise. Three lines of inquiry arose out of this realization: 1) What are the expectations of SAs at the AEC? 2) Do the AEC's current, procedure-focused SA training practices satisfactorily prepare SAs to meet these expectations? If not, 3) how can the training program be improved to make the presence of SAs in the classroom more fruitful for students, teachers, and SAs alike?

In an effort to answer these questions, we assessed the SA program, hypothesizing that we would find evidence encouraging the development of a training resource to fill the gaps between SA expectations and performance. The evaluation included mirror questionnaires administered online to both teachers and SAs surveying their perceptions of SAs' pedagogical expertise, intercultural awareness, and English language knowledge, as well as the role of the SA. These questionnaires comprised thirty-eight questions scored on a five-point scale in addition to four open-ended questions coded for common themes. Level one students completed a 13-question online survey and participated in a focus group conversation. The online survey and the focus group conversation were in English. The focus groups were designed to elicit more in-depth opinions about student experiences with SAs than would be possible using the online survey alone.

The results from the questionnaires and student focus groups revealed that a more comprehensive training program for SAs may prove advantageous. Overall, teachers identified more areas for improvement than did SAs or students. Teacher and SA perceptions were especially discrepant with regard to SA language knowledge; teacher responses demonstrated a need for more explicit knowledge in terms of ESL reading, writing, and pronunciation concepts, while SAs felt their knowledge in these areas was satisfactory for their role. However, both groups agreed, as did level one students, that SAs would be better equipped for the ESL classroom if they possessed more extensive knowledge of grammatical rules. Both teachers and SAs also acknowledged a lack of clear expectations for SAs and weaknesses in SAs' pedagogical techniques, such as giving examples, explaining mistakes, and providing feedback in a way most conducive to student learning.

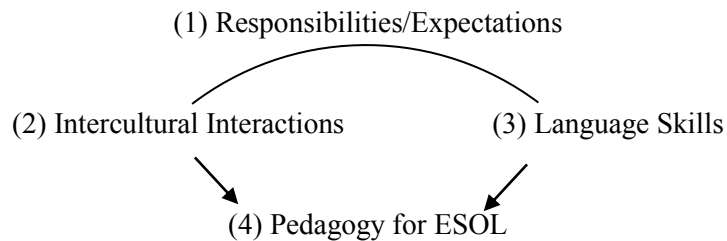
A common thread in SA feedback was the value of experience. SAs possessing previous experience working with international students and/or language learners reported feeling prepared to take on their responsibilities at the AEC; in contrast, others with less experience noted the time on the job it took to fully grasp student language abilities and successful cross-cultural communication strategies. Finally,

students, though openly appreciative of the cultural guidance provided by SAs and their polite, friendly demeanor in general, commented on their desire for SAs to exhibit dedication and professionalism in their interactions.

Using the teacher, SA, and student feedback to inform its design, we have developed an online SA training program to address the areas for improvement exposed by our research. Serving as both a pre-service program and a continuing resource for SAs, the training modules will feature video footage, veteran SA input, interactive presentations, and short assessments to maximize their engaging and informative qualities. Achieving these endeavors will thereby accomplish the end goal of realizing more effective partnerships between SAs and both teachers and students.

The program will consist of four modules: (1) responsibility/expectations, (2) intercultural interactions, (3) language skills, (4) pedagogical awareness. The flow of these modules is based in the finding that unclear expectations seem to lie at the root of SA shortcomings in the culture and language awareness necessary for sound practices in the ESOL classroom. Pinpointing the responsibilities required of SAs clarifies the linguistic and intercultural skills necessary for their success in the classroom. With a solid foundation in the former topics, SAs then can develop pedagogical techniques that enable more productive communication with students.

Modules for Student Assistant Training Program



More precisely, the goals of these modules are to:

- 1) orient SAs to the AEC, level one, and its students by defining student learning objectives and SA expectations;
- 2) identify the concepts of explicit and implicit culture, bringing SAs to an understanding of how cultural customs affect student *and* SA behaviors, ideas, and learning styles;
- 3) provide an overview of the English language through the lens of SLA, driven by level one course syllabi;
- 4) introduce pedagogical strategies and topics relevant to language instruction, including negotiation, corrective feedback, wait time, and modeling.

Following the development of this training program, stage two of this research will aim to test its effectiveness. Beginning in the fall 2012 semester, all SAs will be required to complete the training program. A subsequent evaluation of the program will seek to investigate if the program meets the needs of the AEC. Specific questions are; ‘Is the training program effective?’ ‘What role does prior experience play in training?’ ‘Will SAs employ the knowledge and techniques provided in training?’ And ‘are SAs, instructors, and students satisfied with the results of the training?’

Four types of assessment will supply the information to answer these questions: pre-test, post-test, satisfaction/feedback survey, and classroom observations. The SAs will participate in a brief training orientation and then will take a pre-test, which will cover the four areas of the training program. The SAs

will then have two weeks to complete the on-line training program with brief formative assessments after each module. After completing the training, the SAs will return for a training conclusion and a post-test, which will include a satisfaction survey. The last form of evaluation will be classroom observations with the aim of seeing how SAs interact in the classroom and if they use the knowledge obtained from training.

After the data collection, the results of both the pre-test and post-test will be compared with SAs' and teachers' perceptions and pre-test and post-test scores in general and by years of experience with the hope to support our hypotheses: 1) the training program can replace semesters of experience; 2) being a native or near-native speaker is not sufficient enough to be an SA; and 3) the classroom environment plays a substantial role in SAs' efficacy. With these data, we hope to better understand the importance of SAs, to enhance the use of SAs, and to inform future decisions in level one.

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