

Teaching Assistant at Debrecen University

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This paper is merely a description of my experiences as a teaching assistant at Debrecen University. I hope that it can serve as a guideline or useful reference for other future teaching assistants in Hungary. I wanted to try and accurately describe the courses I teach as well as the techniques that I have used. The first section details what I specifically have tried to accomplish as a teaching assistant. The second section explains which techniques have worked and which have failed followed by some brief explanations. The last section consists of a few very general observations that I have made during the course of the year about the university and students. Also, I conducted an extremely general survey with some random students to help emphasize my observations.

1. What have I tried to accomplish as a teaching Assistant at Debrecen University?

I am currently a teaching assistant in the English language department at Debrecen University. To be completely honest, I wasn't exactly sure what to expect and only had a faint idea about how I was going to assist the Debrecen

language department and specifically what the department expected from me. I met with my supervisor, Kiss Judit, two days before the school year started and she informed me that I was responsible for teaching four language courses primarily to first year students. However, one of the classes was designated for "Kiegeszito," or students who already

have a degree and are upgrading it. A majority of these “Kiegeszito” students are currently English teachers in primary and secondary schools throughout Hungary. Each of my classes is one-hour and forty minutes long, once per week. Kiss Judit instructed me that my first task was to write a course description that would appear in the University’s course catalog that students would use during the registration process. I was given absolute flexibility on what curriculum to use for the courses. Also, I was told to submit a syllabus as soon as possible outlining each week’s topic, as well as a list of the course materials from which I would be teaching. Again, the course description, syllabus, and course materials were all at my discretion. Kiss Judit did give me some advice on how to prepare the core curriculum for my classes by saying that the students already have grammar, writing, and vocabulary courses, and it would be beneficial for a native speaker to “tie it all together.” I immediately asked if I could see a sample of a previous language course description by either a former Fulbrighter or native speaker, but the librarian was unable to find a copy or be of any assistance. I think the problem was due to the fact that school was just starting, and things weren’t up and running quite yet. I didn’t have time to follow up because the academic year started three days after I arrived.

I decided to design my courses to resemble a prior college speech class, a Toastmasters’ session, as well as setting aside time for grammar and vocabulary review through simple warm-up exercises. I decided that the primary focus of the class should revolve around students being given the opportunity and forum to speak as much as possible about a wide ranging variety of topics. I also chose to implement listening exercises that would challenge the students to be able to

distinguish a native American accent rather than a British one to which they were accustomed. My course description read, “The class is designed to offer students an opportunity to improve their language skills through oral-aural (listening and speaking), creative writing assignments, and challenging vocabulary and grammar exercises.” The main goal of the class was to speak and be understood by a native English speaker and to understand what was spoken. I wanted to ease my students into public speaking by starting out with comfortable topics that didn’t require a certain position or answer in order to gradually progress towards more difficult and challenging position speeches and debates. I wanted to take the students out of their normal comfort zone by setting strict guidelines on exactly how the speeches were to be presented. I designated a specific time limit for each speech ranging in the beginning from two minutes, to the final speech of four minutes. I didn’t allow the students to use any notes, with the exception of the debate-style speech. I also designated an “Ah, um and uh” counter to help students realize the amount of verbal pauses they make during a short two-minute speech. This helped achieve another specific aim of the course, which was to get students speaking in a fluid and relaxed manner. In addition, every speech had to be given standing in front of the entire class. There were no exceptions. I deliberately put heavy emphasis on the importance of class participation and urged students to earn points by constructively criticizing their fellow student’s grammar, sentence structure and word usage. During students’ speeches, I did my best to make as many notes as possible in order to pick out grammatical errors, and problems with sentence structure and word usage. At the end of each speech, I first let fellow students have a chance to constructively criti-

cize their peer's speech. I then went over, in detail, all the mistakes that I found with it. Here are a few introductory speeches that I assigned: If you had the opportunity to host a dinner party and you could invite three guests from either the past, present, or even future, who would you choose and why? If you had the opportunity to go back in time and change one decision that you made, which one would it be and why?

A second goal of my course was to test the student's aural abilities through a number of different exercises. In the beginning, I found that a majority of my students had a difficult time understanding my Southern Californian accent. I think this was partially due to the fact that a majority of the students here were taught by British teachers, or their primary school Hungarian teachers picked up the accent, because they were taught by British teachers. I chose material from current *Newsweek* and *Time* periodicals that I thought would interest the students. I soon realized that the vocabulary was extremely difficult for the students so I picked out the words beforehand that I thought would be too difficult, defined them and then went over them with the class before I would read the articles. Depending on the length of the article, I would ask the students to write a two-paragraph summary about what they thought was the main idea of the article. I would read the article twice, then give the students roughly fifteen minutes to produce a summary. I also felt it was important for the students to hear how American English is spoken on the streets and among people their own age. I wanted to pick out three movies that could provide enough material to enable us to have serious class discussions and debates. I selected *American History X*, *Higher Learning*, and *Bowling for Columbine*. The movies were shown without English subtitles and the students were expected to

take notes to help them prepare for the speech I assigned at the end of each movie. I told my students they should be able to understand a minimum of 70% of what was spoken. When I felt that the dialog or vocabulary became a little too hard, I would rewind a particular scene and explain. I encouraged students to ask me to stop the movie at any point if they didn't understand something, but that rarely happened.

A third goal of my course was to introduce new vocabulary, phrases/idioms, proverbs and slang that are specific to American English and widely used. I was able to locate several books in the library, as well as numerous sources on the internet. I tried to give the students a chance to familiarize themselves with the relevant lexical items and to integrate them through various kinds of exercises into their active vocabulary. They were given extra points if they could accurately use these words and phrases in future speeches. A portion of the final exams will also test the students' knowledge on these items.

One of my best resources came from the Regional English Language Office in Budapest. I had the opportunity to meet Damon Anderson, an English Language Officer, and he gave me an extremely useful book titled, *Effective Techniques for English Conversation Groups*. I used this book for virtually every class I taught during the first semester. The book gave me ideas for conversational elements, specific dialogues, speeches, debate topics, commonly used proverbs, small-group discussions and improvisations. Throughout the semester, I spent about two class sessions on each of the above-mentioned topics when a speech or listening exercise wasn't assigned for that particular day. I spent extra class time on improvisational speeches, which I remembered from my days in Toastmasters. This really helped students to be creative, think

on the spot, search for vocabulary words and, overall, helped prepare them extemporaneously. I noted that improvisational speeches and discussions really challenged my students to think on their feet. I found that most Hungarian students do not like extemporaneous exercises. This was yet another way to challenge them to leave their comfort zone of learning, which generally involves zero or little class involvement or requires them to be proactive. I took the opportunity to explain the concept of “thinking outside of the box,” which led me to try a heuristic learning approach that would allow students to encounter information and derive their own conclusions. I would read some controversial statements or spark a debate by giving the students “hot topics” to research and have them prepare a position speech to defend in front of the class. I would allow the students to use notes because I stressed the importance of these particular speeches and wanted the students to be able to prepare and form sound arguments. I sometimes assigned people to give pro and con statements about topics that they necessarily didn’t believe in, such as the death penalty, abortion, euthanasia, and drug legalization.

The language department also assigned me to a team with four other colleagues to help design the first ever EYE (English Yardstick Exam) that would be administered to all freshman students at the end of this year. I was asked to be on the committee for the sample speaking and reading tasks. The University decided to implement this test because the level of the students’ command of English has dramatically dropped over the past few years. If students fail, they are put on a probationary period for one year. For the reading section of the test, I was simply asked to go to a recording studio and record my voice as the proctor of the exam. For the

speaking section, I have met about four times, for a few hours, with two other colleagues in the department, to go over ideas and topics that could be used for the test. We had to come up with tasks that would fit each individual phase of the speaking section. Please refer to Attachment A for examples.

Finally, I also placed heavy emphasis on my office hours to try and encourage students to come in and talk about problems they were having in my class, other classes, in school, or even personal problems they might be having. After every class, I told my students that my door was always open for any “help” they might need. Some of the freshman students asked me if I would be willing to hold additional classes to help them prepare for the EYE exam at the end of the year. I’m currently trying to form two study groups that can meet for a few hours a week at a local coffee shop.

2. Which teaching techniques have worked and been successful and which have failed? Why have they worked and why did they fail?

One of my most difficult challenges in teaching a language course was preparing assignments and subject matter that could reach the entire class. During my first semester, I quickly found out that there was a large gap between the student’s abilities. Roughly half of the students I considered to be at an “advanced level,” while the other half was at a “beginner level,” at best. I realized that the majority of the work load and assignments were challenging enough for the advanced students, but much too difficult for the beginners. These gaps became extremely obvious when the students presented their speeches. By assigning speeches every other class session, it really allowed the

students to practice speaking and as a group learn from individual mistakes. Although many students weren't too happy about giving speeches in front of the class, towards the last few class periods, almost all of my first semester students told me how valuable they thought this opportunity was. Speaking was the core curriculum of my course.

In contrast, this is where I encountered my first real dilemma in the classroom, the concept of volunteering. I completely expected the students to be shy and hesitant for their first few speeches and to be unwilling to volunteer to go first. I had no idea how difficult it would be to get ANY of my students to volunteer for ANYTHING. Usually, students in any country do not like to volunteer for additional assignments or tasks that they don't necessarily have to do. However, I couldn't understand why students would not volunteer to do their speeches, despite the fact that they all knew at one point during the lesson they would have to do it for a grade. I took it as a personal challenge not to have to call out individual names each and every time a speech was due. I wanted the students to be professionals and to decide among themselves who would be the first to go and so forth. I soon realized that in every class we would sit in silence for about ten minutes until I would give up and call a random name from the list. Not one student was willing to volunteer to go first or second, or third for that matter. I tried numerous tactics to try and motivate or convince my students to be proactive and take control of the situation. Many American students have the notion that by going first they can get it out of the way and relax the rest of the class period. This concept is alien to Hungarian students. I then decided that when a speech was due, I would multiply the length of the speech by the number of the students and add an additional two-minutes for com-

ments and constructive criticism. Therefore, if there were fifteen students in my class and the assigned speech was supposed to be two minutes long, I would allot sixty minutes of class time to finish all the speeches. I would start my watch and tell the students that they had sixty minutes to present their speeches to me. I wouldn't call on anyone and would simply say that once sixty minutes has passed we would stop and move on to the next assignment. Those students who didn't finish their speeches failed and I didn't allow them to make it up during my office hours. Inevitably, each and every time they would sit in silence and stare at each other waiting for a fellow student to volunteer, thereby wasting their allotted time. When the time elapsed, I always had to fail three or four students. It was so absurd to me that students who actually prepared for the speech would fail it simply because they didn't want to volunteer. At first, I thought maybe they were too shy and really had a genuine fear about speaking in public. But, if I called on them individually, they would do it and generally deliver excellent speeches. This bothered me tremendously during my first semester and continues to be a problem this semester.

Another problem that I found was that the students who were struggling wouldn't have the courage to stop me when they were unclear about something or come to me after class to let me know that they were falling behind. I constantly asked the students during and after each lesson if they understood or needed further explanation on a particular speech, lecture or assignment. Each and every time, all of the students reluctantly said "No." It was because of this reluctance that I decided to challenge the students who I thought were struggling and simply too embarrassed to speak up. I soon realized that as a group the students would all say they understood a particular

lesson, but when called on individually they said, "I don't understand." This fear or embarrassment became a very big problem in all of my courses. When we would cover material, I couldn't tell who understood and who didn't, unless I randomly called on somebody and asked him/her directly. I found this to be a sharp contradiction to a collegiate classroom in America. From my own experience, students at my university (which roughly is the same size in undergraduate students) would never hesitate to stop the professor to comment or ask a clarifying question. If a professor at my university lectured for an entire class period and then opened it up for a questions and answers, I can't recall a time when not a single student commented or asked a question. Professors encouraged their students to participate and be proactive. They would state, "If one student has a question, then often times many students in the class have that same question" or, "There are NO stupid questions." I tried to relay this same concept to my classroom, as well, but to no avail.

Students never asked me questions, challenged me, or spoke up when they didn't understand something. As I mentioned before, the classroom environment was a one-way dialog without any random discussion or interaction between teacher and student. I could not figure out why Hungarian students did not interact with each other let alone their professors. Classroom participation was a concept that I couldn't get across. I constantly reminded them that classroom participation made up roughly 25% of their final grade. When I asked one of my colleagues for help and advice for solving these problems, Dr. Csontos Pal informed me that they are a direct result of the Prussian system of education. He explained that in this system students were not encouraged to be individuals, but rather members of a group.

You didn't receive any special privileges for standing out or taking initiative. Also, under communist rule everybody was supposed to be equal; so you didn't want to stand out. This mentality seemed to be the answer for a lot of my struggles during the first semester. I realized that students with strong language skills were ashamed to stand out and contribute ideas to class discussions, just as students with weak language skills would rather not understand than to ask for clarification or help. Dr. Csontos also went on to say that rewards were never given to individuals, only to groups. "Uttoro" teachers conditioned their students to behave this way. I thought to myself that this can't be, it's the year 2003. Surely these young students don't still harbor this destructive mentality. Most of my students are between the ages of 18-22 which would mean they were subject to this style of education for only a few years from Kindergarten on to first grade. However, Dr. Csontos also said that there are still teachers who don't want students to speak up or behave in a certain way. I then drew an immediate link from my most problematic class with respect to this mentality, the "Kiegeszito" students who are upgrading their degrees. The majority of them are between the ages of 25 and 40, teaching in primary and secondary schools in Hungary. Ironically, a majority of these students turned out to be "beginner level" students, which is a bit frightening, because they are currently teaching English! This behavior that Dr. Csontos mentioned was extremely obvious in these particular classes. I had to literally threaten students to participate in classroom discussions, stand up during their speeches, and, of course, volunteer to give them. I remarked after the first day in my journal about how angry they looked during class and how many times they asked me, "Do we have to speak?" I found that many of

them were too embarrassed to speak or didn't want to stand out and be heard. I asked on a daily basis why they attended this class if they didn't want to practice speaking and improve. I didn't get many responses, and the students who did respond said, "Because we have no choice."

Case in point came when a few "Kiegeszito" students had to mix in with one of my freshman classes due to scheduling conflicts. It was painfully obvious that a majority of the freshman students had a much better command of the language than they did. I noticed that they often missed the days they had to give speeches and refused to willingly participate in classroom discussions to earn points. They would often ask to make up their speeches during my office hours. I even had one "Kiegeszito" student tell me that she thought some of the freshman students were "arrogant" for volunteering and always commenting during discussions. I thought a majority of these above mentioned problems were partially caused by the gap between the individual skills of the students. I constantly rearranged topics and assignments so students with weaker language skills wouldn't feel so lost. Again, this was all assumption on my part because my students would never tell me if an assignment was too difficult or too easy. It was very hard to find a line that challenged the advanced students but not lose the beginners.

After the first semester, I decided that I needed to make some drastic changes in my classroom in order to make my classes more effective. Immediately, I went to the language department and made a request never to mix the "Kiegeszito" students with the freshman students. I was informed that some of the "Kiegeszito" students would have to mix during the second semester due to scheduling conflicts. I then asked if I could create two "Advanced Language" courses

with prerequisites and keep three normal language courses. I was given the green light by the administration and immediately wrote a new advanced course description for the school's second semester course catalog. Please see attachments.

So far, splitting the classes up has really helped tackle some of the problems I had during the first semester. I'm still facing the same challenges in my three regular courses but have noticed dramatic improvement in the two advanced courses. In my advanced classes, students are more willing to volunteer, participate in classroom discussions, and interact with me during lessons by making comments, asking questions, and raising new points.

3. My observations about the University and the students

I can make a pretty good comparison between Debrecen University and my old college, the University of Redlands. Presently, they are roughly two-hundred freshman students at Debrecen, which is about the same size as my university. One of the things that I noticed from the beginning and have mentioned earlier was the striking difference of the relationships between students and the faculty. When I was a freshman, I had an advisor I could turn to for advice on classes, school related matters, or even personal problems. If I didn't feel comfortable talking to a professor, I could turn to residential life organizations to seek specific counseling for any number of problems. Also, most professors went out of their way to make students feel comfortable. Therefore, it wasn't uncommon to have coffee with a professor or even be invited to his/her house for dinner. The university went out of its way to set up social events where students

could interact with professors on a personal level which often times carried over into the classroom and created an extremely comfortable and positive learning environment. I had the opportunity to show the film "Higher Learning" to four of my classes. Each student made specific remarks about the relationship between professor and student depicted in the movie. It wasn't unusual for me to see a professor stepping outside of his primary role to counsel students who felt the need to confide the problems they encountered outside collegiate classroom. In this particular instance, a student had problems fitting into campus life and adjusting to the college atmosphere. I think at one point or another during our college years, a majority of American students have turned to specific professors for guidance on school, life, and future career paths.

There are certain fundamental aspects of university life that are missing here at Debrecen. Excluding sports teams, fraternities, and sororities, there are no signs of any student organizations, clubs, or forums for student discussion. I also found it hard to understand how students could take up to seventeen classes per semester. On average, my students take thirteen classes each semester. Numerous students told me that they just don't have time for my class and have to prioritize their schedule in order of importance and difficulty. I strongly feel that this is one of the reasons a few of my students give very little effort at all in my classes.

Another drastic difference between my former university and Debrecen, is that the education is free for Hungarians and some

students even make money by going to school. I strongly feel this is the "root" of the problems that occur in classrooms throughout the university. Why don't students interact more with professors, voice opinions, speak up when they aren't clear? Why aren't more students proactive about their college education, and why is the university implementing a year-end test to weed out poor students? I think there are certain benefits to having free education and having to pay for your education. Assuming some sort of responsibility, whether it be financial or something else, forces the students to engage willfully, to get the most out of their time, and ultimately to learn. Most students that I see in going through the motions and can be pushed through the system or fall through the cracks without making progress. I can only speak for myself and tell you that I took full advantage of my academic career, always sought out help, challenged ideas or asked questions during lectures if I didn't understand something. Most students were very proactive and conscientious about their grades because it was their *money* and their *time*. I feel that since I had to pay for my college education, I took full advantage of the opportunity and made sure I learned as much as I could. I wanted to test these ideas, so I decided to pass out a brief survey to try and find answers to some of my questions about university life here in Debrecen. I passed the survey out to two of my classes, one advanced and one regular. I listed the questions below and have inserted the answers with an "*" under each corresponding question.

Questionnaire

Male/Female:

11 females

2 male

Year:

10 freshman

2 sophomore

1 "Kiegeszitö

How many courses are you currently taking?

18 courses: 1

17 courses: 1

13 courses: 2

10 courses: 3

7 courses: 4

4 courses: 2

1) Is there a specific person you can turn to for advice on which classes to take, problems with current classes, problems with teachers, or personal problems you are having at school (housing, roommate problems, stress, etc.)? If so, what is his/her position?

- Turn to a friend who is older and wiser.
- Only to upper-year students
- My cousin who is a second year student
- No specific person
- Somebody from the HOK
- One of my friends who is a 5th year student
- No
- Yes, I can turn to a seminar teacher
- A friend
- Nobody that I can think of besides fellow students
- I don't know the person's position
- Other students only
- No one specific person

2) Are you aware of a career office you can go to for job opportunities or study abroad possibilities?

- To my knowledge a place exists; I just don't know where it is.
- I am, but I don't know how it works.
- Yes, I am. There once was a lecture about going abroad and studying (Fulbright).
- Yes, the HOK Office.
- Yes, there are many places.
- No.
- Yes, there was a lecture once about it from Fulbright.
- No.
- Yes, but I don't know where it is.
- No, I don't recall anything like this.
- Yes, but I don't know how it works.
- Yes its called HOK, but I never went there.
- No, I would have to ask somebody else.

3) How would you define your relationship with your college professors? Is it strictly professional?

- Strictly professional, and I couldn't imagine it otherwise.
- I don't have the courage to talk to a professor.
- Professional, the teachers but a huge distance between themselves and the students.
- Professional only, the older teachers are not kind at all.
- Professional, but if I had a problem I can go to a teacher. They are kind.
- It's strictly professional. I don't have any contact with them outside the classroom.
- Most of them it's strictly professional.
- Strictly professional.
- Strictly professional.

- The older teachers are very mean, so, yes, it's professional.
- Yes, it's only professional I couldn't imagine it any other way.
- Professional.
- Only professional.

4) Would you feel comfortable approaching your professors with questions about school related subjects, such as project ideas or other class assignments?

- Yes.
- Not in all cases, but mostly yes.
- I would turn to other students. We get information booklets for all other questions.
- Yes, I have tried that and it works.
- Yes, after a few semesters.
- If there weren't any other possibilities.
- I would ask them for help.
- No.
- Yes, but only these.
- No, I would rather talk to other students. Most professors don't have time for this.
- Yes, I think they are willing to help about school stuff.
- Yes, they are willing to discuss there assignments.
- No, I don't feel comfortable approaching teachers about anything.

5) Would you feel comfortable approaching your professors about personal problems you may be having at school or at home?

- No, I wouldn't.
- Yes, but I found that most of the professors are not interested in private matters.
- No, unfortunately not, I could never do that .

- No!
- No, I never thought to .
- No, I would never ever do that!!!
- No, it's not their responsibility.
- No.
- Absolutely not.
- No, that's not their job.
- No way!
- I would never do that.
- I never thought about. I wouldn't have the courage to something like that.

6) Who would you turn to for questions you may have about courses to take during your third year or for simple advice on academic matters?

- Older students and a few professors.
- I would turn to other students. We get information booklets for all other questions.
- My cousin or Ildiko Banka who is a teacher here.
- The woman at the Office of the English Department (she isn't helpful at all though).
- Favorite teachers and other students.
- The teachers that I have a good relationship with.
- I would turn to other students.
- Upper students.
- To assistant instructors.
- Upper students.
- Only my nice teachers.
- Other students.
- I would go to the office for help and ask somebody there but usually they are not very friendly and are too busy.
- Other wiser students.

7) Do you feel that the University values you as a student?

- I don't know.
- I feel that I'm a number in the administration book.
- No, I am only a number.
- Yes, kind of.
- Yes, but I don't like the women in the office, they don't help and want you to leave as soon as possible.
- Yes, because they get money from the state by having me as a student.
- Yes, I do.
- Yes.
- No, I'm only a number here I think.
- Yes, because I pay so they value me more than others.
- Yes, the university values me I think.
- Yes, because they get money from the state for me.
- No, I'm simply a number in the book.

8) From your personal observations, why do you think students don't stop and questions when they don't understand something?

- Everybody is too embarrassed to admit they don't know something.
- Shy or embarrassed and they fear your comments after they speak.
- They don't want to seem stupid or slow the class.
- The pressure of the majority!
- They are afraid to seem stupid in front of the other students.
- People are shamed not to know something.
- They prefer to stay silent and they aren't interested in such things.
- They are ashamed.
- They are ashamed and embarrassed.
- They don't want to stand out.
- They don't want other people to

know that they don't know something.

- People don't want you to know that they don't understand because you might be upset.
- It's to embarrassing!

9) Finally, if you had to pay for your college education, assuming that you had the means to do so, would you still attend? Would you be more proactive in class? Would this change your study habits?

- I already pay.
- I'm not proactive, but if I had to pay, I would be. of course.
- I would be the same, I think.
- I would prepare more for my exams.
- No, I wouldn't change anything.
- I would concentrate much harder.
- I would take it more seriously.
- People who pay work harder than I do.
- I would study more.
- I would be more proactive and study harder.
- My school already pays for me so I wouldn't change.
- I would try much harder I think so I don't have to repeat and pay again.