

**“But, really, what do you think?:”
The Challenges and
Opportunities of Teaching
Across Cultures as a Fulbright
E.T.A.**

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The Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (ETA) in Budapest faces a two-part job: teaching at a Hungarian university and advising at the Fulbright Center. Each job requires patience in negotiating the cultural differences in style of teaching and learning – a difference that covers far more than just the language barrier alone. In this paper, I discuss both the challenges and rewards of teaching and assisting Hungarian students, and offer my ideas for how to best bridge these differences.

Introduction

As the students looked up from their pages, I put on my best Cheerful-First-Day-of-School-Voice and asked: “Well, what do you think?”

The circle of students, 15 advanced-level English majors who had signed up for my class on Contemporary American Women Writers at Pázmány Péter University, stared out the windows. They looked at the wall. They looked to the paper I had passed out, on which a poem by Native American writer Louise Erdrich was printed. They looked everywhere but at me. Figuring it was typical first-day nerves, I tried to prod the students with more specific questions—*who do you think the speaker is? Is she happy or sad about this outcome? What about this title?*

Each attempt was met with more wall-staring, with deeper plunges into silence. Trying to keep the jovial ring in my voice, I gave one more attempt: “It’s not a trick question, guys. How about this: let’s just start with your opinion. Did you like this poem or not? Did it make sense? Really, what do you think?”

Finally, one brave student timidly offered a response: “Well, what do you *want* us to think?” he asked.

And with that simple question, I was reminded, vividly, how wide a gap I would be crossing as an American-born and educated teacher working with students accustomed to an entirely different pedagogical style. As a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (ETA) grantee to Hungary for the 2008-09 school year,

I originally expected that my biggest challenge would be a language barrier (having arrived in-country with exactly one essential phrase of Hungarian: *kérek egy kávét*). Yet, in my work with students at both Pázmány and at the Fulbright’s Educational Advising Center, I soon learned that the cultural differences in ideas about teaching and learning were much more important.

In the following pages, I will discuss my experiences teaching and advising in Hungary. I will focus on the challenges of teaching across the aforementioned cultural divide, my strategies for successful teaching in this area, as well as how this challenge helped me re-evaluate and strengthen my teaching philosophy. As the teaching of writing, both in the classroom and in the advising center, became central to my work, I will also pay special attention to my work to improve student writing and explain cross-cultural differences in composition practice.

The ETA Role in Budapest

Before I begin the explanation of my more personal experiences as an ETA in Budapest, I want to take a moment to explain more general role and responsibilities of the ETA in Budapest. Unlike many of the other student or teacher positions, the ETA in Budapest actually has a dual role: teaching classes in English at a local university and advising students who wish to study in the United States at the Fulbright Advising Center.

The main universities in Budapest take turns hosting an ETA, and this year, I was placed at Pázmány Péter, a Catholic university which has a strong English and American studies program. Pázmány Péter has two campuses, one in downtown Budapest, and the other in the suburb of Piliscaba, where the English and American studies program is housed. The ETA usually teaches a variety of courses at his or her host institution, and I was asked to teach three sections each semester: a conversation practice, and one course each on American history and American literature.

The Fulbright Educational Advising Center, located on Baross utca in Budapest, shares space with the Fulbright Commission Offices. The ETA’s role at the Advising Center is to help students at any stage in the process of applying to study in the United States, from the initial inquiry to preparing for standardized testing to writing application essays and applying for funding. The ETA also runs weekly workshops on essay writing as well as a Friday afternoon workshop to prepare for the TOEFL test. Essentially, this role is to be the resource person on the American higher education system, a system which has some very distinct differences from Hungarian education, and, particularly, a system which has quite different entrance requirements from those of Hungarian universities.

Teaching at Pázmány Péter

I felt quite lucky to have been placed at Pázmány Péter University, even before I arrived there: by early summer 2008, I was already receiving kind messages of welcome from my supervisor, Cser András, and other colleagues with the Institute of English and American Studies (the department in which I teach). Pázmány Péter has hosted Fulbright ETAs in the recent past, and thus was very helpful in explaining what I would need for my year with them. András gave me a lot of leeway in choosing my course subjects: the topics, readings and methods of assessment were entirely up to my discretion.

As a visiting teacher, I wanted to offer courses that would be both of interest to the students and would be something they might not otherwise have the chance to take. In my communications with Hungarian colleagues while still in the States, I learned that Pázmány did not offer many courses on contemporary American subject matter – which, fortunately, happens to be my specialty, as my M.A. thesis had focused on late 20th-century authors. With the input of my colleagues, I settled on a course schedule that included a two-semester series of courses on Contemporary American Women Writers, covering the period from 1950 to the present day over the fall and spring semesters, as this subject that was of particular interest but that full-time Pázmány professors did not have the experience to teach; a history

course on Civil Rights history for the fall, a subject other history teachers had found students very interested in; a course on the history and contemporary issues in American journalism for the spring; and two conversation practice sessions.

András had assured me that I was to teach my classes as I did in the States, as this would be helpful for the students, particularly those who hoped to study abroad or work in international schools or companies in Hungary. Before arriving in Hungary, I had a general idea about the differences in pedagogical practices between the United States and European higher education. I knew that the U.S. system tends to emphasize a participatory style of learning, particularly after the introductory level classes. Students are expected to actively participate in discussions, and lecturing is rare; indeed, as a humanities student, very few of my undergraduate courses included lectures and none of my graduate coursework did. Also, for humanities students, students tend to write original essays instead of sit for exams for assessment. I knew that European higher education tended to be the opposite: more lectures and tests, and less discussion and original writing.

Still, on the first day of class, I approached my seminar sessions most worried about whether the students would understand me at all. I was pleased to find that all of my students had a very strong command of the English language; indeed, after having taught for three semesters in a community college department which included many English language learners, I found

many of my Hungarian students to have a better command of the language that my students back in the U.S. However, I was soon to learn that how crucial it was to negotiate the difference between a lecture-based and a discussion-based pedagogy.

In my first fall conversation classes, for instance, I came armed with exercises similar to those I had used in my work in a basic/remedial English writing course at my community college in Virginia – some drills on issues like subject-verb agreement, practice games on word choice, worksheets on irregular conjugation and punctuation. My conversation students could easily complete this work, and it soon became clear more grammar practice was not what was needed. So, I turned to the students and asked them what they wanted. Nearly unanimously, the students said they wanted to talk as much as possible. It seemed a bit ironic: they seemed so reluctant to speak at all, and yet, this is exactly what the students said they wanted. With some more discussion, I observed that the lecture and test-based pedagogy they were used to in core courses also carried over to their spoken English. Part of what makes them reluctant to speak is the fact that while they do indeed know the correct word or grammar choice, they were rarely asked to spontaneously and quickly use that knowledge in an unscripted, “real-world” way. That is, they had no problem correcting misused words on a test or filling in rows of complex grammar, but were much less comfortable when asked

to speak for one minute about what they did over the weekend.

As such, I saw that I would be the best resource for my students by creating a classroom where talking was necessary, and where all students felt comfortable talking. I diverted from my original syllabus, instead moving to a student-centered pedagogy by creating a new assignment of Conversation Leader. This assignment required each student to serve as the leader of a class discussion by bringing in some topic for discussion, giving a short presentation, preparing questions and acting as a discussion facilitator. The assignment proved successful, as it gave students the freedom to talk about topics of interest to them – we have had everything from discussions about fashion trends to global warming and vegetarianism in our classes.

To fill out the rest of the class, I also brought in timely current events topics, focusing on American media, to give students some cultural information along with the speaking practice. For instance, in the lead-up to the November 2008 U.S. Presidential elections, students were very interested in the American candidates, so I brought in up-to-date news stories about the campaigning. Other activities I have used in class to spur extemporaneous speaking include:

- *using a quick-summarize game, where students are given newspaper front pages and have to quickly summarize the stories out loud*
- *playing games that require quick oral responses, such as Celebrities*

(students write celebrity names on strips of paper, then take turns pulling names and describing the celebrities in English, in a race to collect the most wins for their team) or Taboo

- *doing mock job interviews and mock talk-show interviews*
- *bringing in selections of contemporary American music and talking about the songs and songwriters*

Finally, I made my final assessment not a test – for the students already take many of these – but a debate project. In this assignment, students needed to pick a controversial issue and present each side of the debate around it. The assignment also included every student, not just the two presenting at any one given time, by requiring the audience of the debate to ask question. This forced students to do some quick-thinking and use their English skills spontaneously, resulting in some very entertaining and educational conversations.

The pedagogical differences, however, were even more challenging to negotiate in the history and literature classes I taught. As the anecdote in my introduction attests, simply trying to teach as I had taught in America would not work. Particularly with regards to student writing, there was too great a difference in the basic scaffolding of the students’ skill set. For instance, in an upper-level humanities course in the United States, I could say that I wanted a thesis-driven essay, and all students would understand what I meant (even if they did not always succeed in producing

them!). But in my Hungarian classrooms, the more basic ideas of what it means to have an argument, to do a close reading of a text, to show an original critical thought were completely new concepts.

This is not to criticize the Hungarian higher education standards, however, or to suggest that Hungarian students are somehow deficient. Indeed, as a community college teacher focusing on first and second-year composition classes, I have often found a similar gap in knowledge with beginning writing students. And yet, after recently completed an M.A. where I was constantly writing long, original research papers, these basic concepts of critical thinking and analytical writing are so ingrained in my mind that it can be difficult to break down what they mean. As such, working with I saw my work with Hungarian student writers as a great opportunity to re-examine my methods of teaching writing.

To better understand where my students needed assistance, I began my fall courses with short response papers, directed by prompts, to assess their writing strengths and weaknesses. Immediately, I began to see what would be considered a major weakness in the American conception of college-level composition: students in both the history and literature classes were presenting me with summaries. Often, their papers proved a high level of comprehension, but showed little to no analysis. They could tell me what was in a text, but not *how* it created meaning, *why* an author chose to create a text as such or *what* it

could tell us about the socio-cultural and historical context in which it was written. For instance, in my Civil Rights History class, an assignment on the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. revealed many papers which stated that King used much Biblical imagery. And yet, when I pressed the class on why a politician would make this choice, I was met with silence. After these observations in my own classroom, I wanted to learn how the students were assessed and taught in a larger university context.

Luckily, my colleagues were very open and willing to share their classroom experiences. I sat in on departmental meetings about the future of the basic essay writing courses offered by the English department, and learned that many of my colleagues faced similar frustrations. Perhaps most useful was observing the English department's *Szigorlat*, or final oral exams, at the end of the fall semester. Here, I watched students tackle a list of 40 questions, comprising hundreds of texts which students needed to be able to speak about. And, as I watched them answer questions, I was impressed by two things: the students had knowledge of a staggering amount of material, but that this volume meant students were indeed offering mainly summary, rarely expressing critical thought. They could offer plenty of facts about *Jane Eyre*, for example, but they could not make a connection between those facts and the larger contexts, such as colonialism and nationalism, which informed that novel.

Again, my point here is not, however,

to make a judgment call on the Hungarian style of learning and assessment. Certainly, the lecture and oral exam method does have some advantages – I think one would be hard-pressed to find American students who could speak on as many texts as the students I observed in the *Szigorlat*, for instance. Yet, I still felt that, in the modern marketplace, the ability to think critically about a subject and express that thought in writing is the most vital. Indeed, I have always thought that it matters not so much whether my students can remember the names of characters in a novel but whether they remember how to look carefully at a piece of text and draw an original conclusion, for this is the type of skill which matters far more in the world outside the classroom than a list of facts. Additionally, as my colleagues' responses and department meetings revealed, this is also the type of writing Pázmány wants from its students.

As such, I began to work a lot more composition teaching into the second half of my fall classes — and, when planning the syllabi for my spring courses, I decided to take a different approach. Borrowing from some of the ideas by American composition theorists I had studied such as Nancy Sommers, Laura Saltz, Peter Elbow, Mariolina Salvatori, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, I began working with exercises that broke down the concepts of good writing that instructors often take for granted. For example, I began using excerpts from Graf and Birkenstein's book *The Say/I Say: Moves that Matter in Academic*

Writing in both my history and literature classes. This unique book offers templates for creating academic arguments. As someone who prizes original thought and creativity, I had been quite skeptical of the idea of writing templates, at first, but after using chapters successfully in basic writing courses with non-traditional adult students in the U.S., I found that they were quite useful for de-mystifying the types of moves an experienced writer does unconsciously. For instance, one set of templates explains how student writers can introduce their point of view on an issue by treating it as a response to a larger academic conversation, suggesting templates such as:

- *One implication of X's treatment of _____ is that _____.*
- *In discussions of X, one controversial issue has always been _____. On one hand, _____ while on the other hand _____. My own view is _____.*
- *When it comes to the topic of _____, most people think _____. However, _____.*
(Graff and Birkenstein 22-24).

In each class, I used Graff and Birkenstein's templates alongside material from our course texts. In this way, I was able to further discussion on the course topic, while also helping students better understand how to produce successful academic writing.

Another successful writing/critical thinking exercise I used came from Salvatori's book, *The Elements and Pleasures of Difficulty*. In this book, Salvatori suggests that teachers take a different approach to the difficult moments in texts, asking students to focus on the areas they do not understand, as opposed to only focusing on those that they do. She uses a tool she terms "difficulty papers," in which a student pinpoints a moment in the text that does not make sense to them. The student then tries to use outside knowledge, questioning, close reading of the text and research to take apart the difficult piece. Instead of calling for one "answer," the assignment tells students to write down any and all possible explanations and questions they have about the difficulty. In this way, students learn to think in a more complex way, moving past the elementary notions of "right" and "wrong." Particularly for my Hungarian students, these assignments have been useful because they encourage questioning in a new way. One of the most important observations I had made while observing the end-of-term tests was that the exam-heavy pedagogy made students very fearful of giving a "wrong" answer. As such, my Hungarian students seemed much less inclined to reveal when they were having trouble with a text, sensing that difficulties or misunderstanding would mark them as a weak student. By enforcing the idea that difficulties were useful and assigning papers where students were encouraged to talk about what was confusing, our classroom discussions became much more interesting and effective. Instead of hiding

the difficult parts of the text, we got the chance to explore them.

But perhaps one of the most useful changes I made for the second semester teaching was inspired by my work as a graduate student at Georgetown University's Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship. There, I assisted directing Professors Randall Bass and Eddie Maloney with research and development of many educational technology tools, but one of the most interesting, to me, was our work to create the Georgetown Digital Commons (www.digitalcommons.georgetown.edu), and, particularly, our use of blogs in classroom settings. One of the arguments Bass and other scholars working in the study of teaching and learning use for blogging in the classroom is that it makes student work public. In a way, this mimics what working academics do: we present our work publicly to colleagues, accepting criticism and inviting dialogue. Scholars in this area also argue that the public nature of the blog makes students more accountable for the work they do, just a professor is accountable for the article she publishes in a scholarly journal.

As such, I built two course blogs, using the popular free blog hosting site, www.wordpress.com for my spring courses on Women Writers and American Journalism. The blogs had a twofold purpose: firstly, they could serve as course management system, allowing me to upload readings for my courses and post supplementary material, and secondly, they served as a space for students to post weekly responses. While the blogs are password protected, meaning that

only those students in the class can access them, the public nature of the responses spurred an immediate improvement in writing: students know their peers will see the work, and thus, they treat the responses more seriously. Because I also required that students post the writings before class begins, and make the responses a significant portion of their grade, it also provided a natural segue into class discussion. Now, instead of cold-calling on a student to analyze some text, I could introduce a topic by pointing to a response a student had on a blog. In this way, students' confidence in their thoughts and theories was boosted: I could say "*Eszter had something interesting to say about the character's name,*" or "*Zoltán had a good analysis of this Washington Post story,*," thus inviting students to share in a way that was more comfortable. The result has been both improved responses and much livelier in-class discussion.

Finally, one vital part of my teaching philosophy has been the responses I provide to student writing. Instead of dedicating the majority of my time to marking grammar errors or focusing only on a grade, I try to provide substantive feedback by writing back to the students in a letter format. In these responses, I focus most of my energy on trying to help the students clarify their argument, raise places where their support is weak, and show them new angles for examining their topic. Instead of "correcting," then, I try to treat the responses as a conversation, which I believe makes the student feel more in control of their writing process than merely offering a grade. I use the blog to post comments

on their weekly responses, and I assign outlines due more than a month before their final essays, on which I try to provide about a page of commentary. Because of the extremely busy schedules of the typical full-time Hungarian professor, this type of feedback simply is not feasible in many other classes. But as a Fulbright teacher, I have a less-stressful schedule, and so I feel it is important to take the time to offer intensive feedback whenever possible. Over my year here, this has been one of the things my students are most excited by, and many have told me that the responses I have offered have been the most useful feedback they have ever received.

Certainly, I know that there is always room for improvement in teaching, but I feel as if my students have made some great strides in my year here. What is perhaps less measurable than their progress on essays, but no less important, is the increased curiosity I have seen in the subjects I teach. Several students, for instance, have told me that they wish to use one of the authors I have introduced in a thesis project. As they had not had exposure to many of the texts I use – particularly the more contemporary ones – I am glad that I was able to bring these new ideas to Hungarian students and open a window on texts that they enjoy. One student from the first half of my Women Writers class, who could not fit the second half of this class into her spring schedule, even asked for the readings to complete on her own "for fun," a statement which any teacher would agree makes one quite happy!

Advising at the EducationUSA Center

For the ETA in Budapest, however, teaching at a university is only half of the assignment. In addition to the three classes I teach, two days every week are spent at the Fulbright EducationUSA Advising Center. Here, I have a variety of responsibilities. I run weekly workshops on both essay writing – covering all of the varieties of essays used for admission to U.S. colleges, universities and scholarship programs – and the TOEFL exam. I also assist students with borrowing materials or using the three computers in the Advising Center to study for the full range of standardized admissions tests: TOEFL, SAT, GRE, GMAT, LSAT and individual subject tests. I assist students with locating appropriate study programs in the U.S. and in obtaining more details about the schools. Additionally, I have traveled with my colleagues at the Fulbright Commission to smaller Hungarian cities, including Veszprém and Kaposvár, to offer information about both the Fulbright and study in America in general, and I have helped organize and participated in our International Education Fair, held at the Fulbright Center during the late fall.

As in my writing classrooms at Pázmány, I found that the bridging the cultural differences in writing style was a significant part of my work. Perhaps even more so than a classroom essay, the admissions essays and personal statements required for U.S. schools are quite different than anything a Hungarian

student would have completed previously. These essays require a student to “sell” himself to a school, a concept which Americans might think as confidence, but which seems more like bragging to the Hungarian student. Because these essays are very specialized, based on both the student and the program to which the student is applying, I tried to use my time in the center to give students as much one-on-one assistance as possible, often sitting with a student and commenting on the essay alongside him or her, to make the purpose of the essay more clear. Because writing a successful essay often takes many drafts, I have also made myself available online to visitors, giving them to chance to submit essays via e-mail when they cannot make it in during my limited office hours.

Writing is also quite important on both the TOEFL and other standardized tests, so I also tried to offer many ways for students to receive feedback on this writing as well. One thing I try to emphasize in the opposite styles of organization used in Hungarian and American writing styles: while the Hungarian student is used to writing which works up to a final conclusion, the American system these exams expect prizes a clear topic sentence which presents an argument at the very beginning of the essay. For students both in the workshops and who come to use the practice software in our computer room, I always offer them the option of saving their writing and receiving my feedback, to give some more individualized instruction.

Another project I undertook as the ETA in the Advising Center has been the implementation of a GRE workshop. I had noticed that more and more students were coming in to borrow materials or use the center’s practice computers for GRE (Graduate Record Exam). Additionally, because of the American system of funding for higher education, where students tend to pay for their undergraduate education but win fellowships or assistantships to cover graduate education, it is often easier for foreign students to obtain the needed funding at the graduate level. The GRE test, however, is required for nearly every program, and it is quite daunting, even for a native speaker. With the assistance of Natalie Bowlus, a Fulbright Student Grantee studying math in Budapest this year, I put together a GRE workshop. Together, Natalie and I selected the most useful sections of practice books to compile a large packet of study information, made lists of key words, and created a presentation on study and test-taking strategies. While this program was in its test stage this year, and only offered once, the students who attended found it useful, and I hope that the assembled materials and presentations can now be used in future years by the Advising Center, particularly because there is no similar workshop offered in Budapest.

Finally, as the in-house American, I find that some of the most useful assistance I can offer visitors to the center is the more informal kind. Many students enter with only the vaguest idea of what life in the United States is like, or what the

college experience is there. I often find myself offering practical information on everything from public transportation in New York to the climate in the American South. They are “little details,” to be sure, but they can be very much appreciated by a student facing a list of potential schools in cities they know nothing about.

I am happy to report that, even in this very difficult recession year, I have seen some great successes from students who regularly use our services. One student, for instance, won a highly-competitive scholarship to spend a year abroad studying business at New York University, and another landed a sport in an elite medical school exchange. These are just two examples, but they do illustrate how exciting it can be to help Hungarian students reach their educational goals.

Conclusions

My time as an ETA, both at Pázmány Péter and the Advising Center, certainly has presented challenges, but each has also presented an invaluable learning experience.

When I return to the states in August to begin full-time teaching work at Northern Virginia Community College, I will be entering classrooms with large numbers of non-native English speakers and beginning students who are not familiar. The practice of teaching cross-culturally here in Hungary, of learning to understand and appreciate the differences in pedagogy which go far deeper than language alone, has made

me a much more aware, self-reflexive and flexible instructor.

While it might sound clichéd, I truly can say that my Hungarian students have been the best teachers I could have asked for. Today, nearing the end of my second semester teaching, when I turn that beginning question of *what do you think?* to my classroom, I get a much more lively answer — a change that has as much to do with their hard work and willingness to try new learning styles as my own planning. And, in addition to the more formal, professional lessons I am taking away, the wonderful relationships I have formed with Hungarians have also expanded my thinking and opened my mind, be that the evenings I spent discussing literature with my Pázmány colleagues over wine or the lunches I have shared with the Fulbright Center staff. I feel I am leaving Hungary having made progress with many Hungarian students — and having made much personal progress as a teacher.

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Georgetown Digital Commons. www.digitalcommons.georgetown.edu

The Social Context of a Modernist Poet: Endre Ady

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The article addresses the social milieu from which the poet and journalist Endre Ady emerged. In doing so, it explores the possibility of applying an interpretation to Hungarian Modernism similar to that of Carl Schorkse and later scholars of fin-de-siècle Vienna. The question is whether the shared historical experience of a Hungarian cultural elite can serve as an interpretive starting point for Ady's writing. In order to answer the question, the paper first discusses the preponderance of downwardly mobile provincial gentry and Calvinists in the Hungarian intelligentsia. It then explores the work of Ady, who was from a Calvinist, gentry background himself, arguing that Ady's unique blend of iconoclasm, patriotism, and spirituality may be seen as a result of his social origins.

Introduction

Endre Ady, the most influential poet of the pre-WWI period, came from an impoverished Protestant gentry family in the East of Hungary. How, then, can this fact be seen to have affected his journalistic and poetic output, which so polarized