

Preparing Future Teachers with Case Studies from Essays and Fiction

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Teaching the English language requires a lot from a professional: communicative skills, a lively mind, empathy, and the ability to work with large amounts of information. Many of these qualities and skills get honed over time. To start this never-ending process, students—preparing to become teachers in the future—enrolled in teacher-education programs undergo various professional teaching internships; in addition, some of the students combine their studies with part-time teaching. As the first pedagogical challenges arise, many aspiring teachers suffer from imposter syndrome, thinking they are unique to encounter certain issues in the classes they are teaching.

Challenging problems can lead to frustration and thoughts that perhaps it was a mistake to have chosen teaching as a vocation. To show my education students that they are not the only ones who face challenges and occasionally make missteps, I share cases of other educators who face similar problems. One effective way I have found to do this is to build these case studies on stories and essays from popular magazines that enable me to bring a variety of teachers' challenges and puzzling professional situations into our classroom.

As the authors in some periodicals write about education or issues tangentially related to it, I have incorporated materials from such magazines into my classes with future teachers in order to do the following:

- highlight common and unique problems in education, both in other countries and in

my country, and reflect on the ways these issues could be solved;

- show through examples that many of the problems we face as professionals are not unique: we are not the only ones who make mistakes, and therefore our missteps should not discourage us from pursuing our goals in teaching;
- introduce future teachers to quality, contemporary English-language journalism; and
- explore the cultures of the countries covered in the materials.

I especially love working with fictional short stories from some of these magazines; many of them offer excellent material that can be used to organize case studies. As Wassermann (1993, 23) puts it, when working on cases, we can observe the protagonists who “face every imaginable dilemma found in classrooms. You learn how these teachers have made their choices; you learn how to examine those choices analytically; you learn to reflect on how you would choose, given a similar situation.” As a teacher, you are free to build educational cases based on any stories or articles on teaching that will empower you and your students to observe the educational process in action, as if watching a fragment of a recorded lesson.

In this article, the example I use to demonstrate how to build a case study is based on the fictional story “The Intermediate Class,” by Sam Allingham (2018), available in both the print and the online versions of

The New Yorker. The following method might be useful for those who work with people aspiring to pursue a career in education and languages.

PROCEDURE

Step 1. Define the Key Issues

Assign the students to read “The Intermediate Class” at home. As a harmless spoiler, you can give a rough summary of the story: “The teacher in the story is starting a new German course for intermediate-level students. The price of the course is high—300 U.S. dollars. The students are adults who hope to master the language, and because of the money they have to pay, some learners might have inflated expectations about the course.”

Wassermann (1993) suggests the following questions about the assigned material for the students to answer prior to coming to the class:

1. What do I see as the key issues in this case? Have I identified the key issues?
2. Who are the key players? What roles are they playing? How are they performing in those roles?
3. How do the key players interact with one another? Is this important in this case?
4. How would I describe the behavior of the key players? What seems to be motivating their behavior? What examples from the case support my ideas?
5. What do I think the key players should do (should have done)? What data support my position?
6. What would I do in a similar circumstance? What values do I hold that inform my choice?
7. What meaning do I take from this case?

Thinking about the answers to these questions in advance can help students demonstrate more-fruitful work on the case study in class.

Step 2. Describe the Key Players and Their Motivation

The students come to the next class with the text that they are now familiar with. This is crucial because they are going to analyze the story thoroughly and should have a good grasp of the plot and the characters. You can refer to the succinct summary of the story again (see above) and ask questions about your students’ general impressions of the story, but the main goal in this stage is for your students to describe each of the characters of the story in detail.

For this story, I suggest dividing the class into six groups. A representative from each of the groups will pull out a card with the name(s) of the characters in the story: Kiril, Wanda and Morgan (I pair these two characters together because information about them is relatively scarce), Alejandro, Arthur, Claire, and the teacher. The task for the groups is to run through the text together and find as much information about their character(s) as possible. On the board, you can write down the following categories for your students to rely on in their work: age, occupation, appearance, family status, current fluency in German, and motivation to learn German.

Before the students are set to work, remind them that not all the characters are covered in equal detail in the story. As the students work, you can move from group to group and monitor their progress. After a while, you should ask the students to organize the facts about their assigned character(s) in a coherent passage. Then have each group present their passage—describing the assigned character(s)—to the class. The idea is to ensure that the characters are as three-dimensional as possible in the students’ minds, so if you feel that the students’ descriptions are not detailed enough, you can hand out the printed fragments (see Figure 1) to run through the characters’ sketches again.

Step 3. Identify Challenges of the Protagonist

Now that the groups have defined all the characters and determined their needs, the students should outline the challenges the German teacher might face as a

<p>Kiril is a young man in his 30s, an IT specialist. He lives with his mother, a fact he neither hides nor boasts of. Most likely, Kiril has Russian roots, as he jumps into Russian from time to time when failing to find the right word in German. He is fluent in English, which is not his mother tongue. Kiril is used to jogging in the park to treat his headaches and lessen the pressure on his tired eyes. <i>Motivation:</i> Kiril has always wanted to learn German, as this language has a word for everything from his perspective.</p>
<p>Wanda is a pious woman who has a son. <i>Motivation:</i> Wanda once heard a German chant in church. She became interested in the language and, despite the high price of the classes, enrolled in the course.</p> <p>Morgan is a pale, thin woman with graphic tattoos. In her spare time, she plays slow, sad music. <i>Motivation:</i> It is not explicit in the text.</p>
<p>Alejandro is a young, smiling man in his early 30s. He shares his accommodation with some presumably hot-tempered men who are quick to get into fights. Though mispronouncing some German words, Alejandro's accuracy and fluency are impressive. He is a man with a dignified, yet friendly and open demeanor. Alejandro works as a truck driver and in his spare time watches trains. Sometimes he manages to drive one himself, but based on Alejandro's monologue in German, it is not quite clear which train he is talking about. During pair or group work, Alejandro tries to ask the question "Why?" <i>Motivation:</i> Alejandro wants to learn real-life communication to have true friends.</p>
<p>Arthur is a sullen man in his 50s. He is married to a woman from East Germany who serves in the military. At the beginning of the story, Arthur was badly sunburned. He thinks that the German course is too expensive. <i>Motivation:</i> Arthur is anxious to be able to communicate "a secret language" with his non-English-speaking wife.</p>
<p>Claire is a petite woman, slightly older than Kiril. She lives with her boyfriend. Claire wears large glasses, presumably to enlarge her small eyes. She is meticulous about taking notes in class. During breaks, Claire plays the piano with her teacher in the adjoining classroom. In one of the classes, Claire confesses that she is unable to buy the instrument to practice music at home and is not likely to get the instrument from her boyfriend as a present. <i>Motivation:</i> Claire wants to better understand the lyrics of the songs she plays.</p>
<p>The teacher is a man with a grey beard and a casual style in his manner of dressing. He walks slightly swaying from side to side. The teacher is emotional and empathic, for which he seems ridiculous to his students at times. When switching to German, his personality somewhat transforms, and he becomes quite reserved. The teacher loves classical music and plays the piano with his student Claire during breaks. At times, the teacher struggles to hide his work fatigue. Despite the high cost of the German classes he teaches, he gets only a small portion of the sum for his work. <i>Motivation:</i> The teacher wants his students to find a practical use for the language and some basis for making the new language an integral part of their lives.</p>

Figure 1. The key players and their motivation

professional, working with his class. You might ask your groups the following questions to elicit ideas:

- Given the needs of each character, what challenges might the teacher have?
- What do the students want to get at the end? Does the German teacher have enough resources to meet their expectations?

The students can stay in the same groups to work through the questions. Then you can listen to each group and write down the students' ideas on the board.

Here is a possible list of challenges:

- high expectations of the adult learners from the course;
- discouraging price of the course;
- implicit demands and expectations from the course on the part of the students;
- a variety of ages, personalities, and needs among the students; and
- the nearly burnout state of the teacher.

Step 4. Study the Protagonist in Action

In the story, your students have seen many direct and implicit indications of how the German teacher builds his lessons. In groups, have the students fill in the table in Figure 2 with the techniques and tasks the teacher uses in his work. Encourage the students to be as detailed as possible.

Here are a few questions you can ask your groups to elicit ideas:

- What techniques does the teacher resort to in order to break the ice with his students? To build the right atmosphere? To make the classes more interactive?
- What tasks and assignments does the teacher give?

Give students time to do the work. Then listen to each group and write down the students' ideas on the board. If you decide that the students have not found enough examples or have overlooked something, you can hand out the printed table below to run through the techniques and tasks again.

You might lead your students to the idea that all of the above initiatives of the German teacher suggest that he has really invested a lot of energy into the course, and yet we may see some breakdowns in communication.

Step 5. Analyze Problems in Communication

Ask the students to look for instances of teacher–student communication misunderstandings and failures in the story. The students work in groups and use these questions as a guideline:

- Why did the break in communication happen?
- How did the teacher solve the case?
- How would you solve it?

Later, the groups share their answers and ideas together as a class.

Techniques	Tasks

Figure 2. Template for listing the techniques and tasks used by the German teacher

Here is a possible list of communication failures:

- The teacher’s comment on Claire’s boyfriend and a piano as a present from him
- The teacher preventing Alejandro from asking a “Why?” question and using it in his turn
- The teacher’s comment on Claire’s provocative essay “An Interesting Week”
- A farewell party that went wrong

Step 6. Reflect on the Topic

To summarize the session, ask the students to share their personal reflections on the story:

- Have you had any challenging students yet?
- Have you had groups of students or individual students who disapproved of your teaching style?
- What have been your biggest challenges in teaching so far?

You can have a class discussion, after which you might ask the students to reflect on the issues raised in the story in the form of an essay, possibly as a home assignment.

WHAT’S NEXT?

This lesson could be one in a series of sessions devoted to teaching. You could build a similar case study based on the story “Me Talk Pretty

Techniques	Tasks
<p>—The teacher creates a linguistic environment; for this purpose he uses a bell as an interactive element.</p> <p>— Understanding the complexity of the material, the teacher gradually introduces challenging constructions. As an example, he avoids the question “Why?” at this stage of language acquisition.</p> <p>—The teacher demonstrates empathy and tact towards his students. This is shown by his ability to pause and give his students a moment of rest during the class when interest and motivation are flagging.</p> <p>—The teacher is available and open to his students. As an example, he plays music together with Claire.</p> <p>—There is reflection on what motivated the students to study German.</p> <p>—The teacher organizes a farewell party.</p>	<p>— Preparing a monologue statement on the topic “Free Time”</p> <p>— Writing an essay, “My Family,” using the past tense</p> <p>— Preparing a monologue statement on the topic “Work,” using the target vocabulary</p> <p>— Pair work on the topic “My Home Life”</p> <p>— Working with poems and authentic materials</p> <p>— A frontal discussion of plans for the holidays</p> <p>— Pair work on the topics “My Childhood” and “My Student Life”</p> <p>— Work on written assignments in pairs and together as a class</p> <p>— Practice using the future tense in an informal party setting</p>

Figure 3. Possible lists of techniques and tasks used by the German teacher

Such work with stories or articles should help the students to look critically at themselves and the teaching profession. Perhaps they will recognize themselves in some of the characters or find certain learning situations familiar.

One Day,” by David Sedaris, in which an adult learner struggles with the French language (Sedaris 2007). Alternatively, you and your students could explore tangential topics related to teaching. The story “The Gospel According to García,” by Ariel Dorfman, could be material for a case study on what makes a teacher a leader. The conflict of this story is built on the scene in which a substitute teacher comes to replace a charismatic teacher and how the class meets this outsider (Dorfman 2015). The short story “Buttonty,” by Fiona McFarlane, shows how a primary-school teacher, without realizing it, loses leadership over a class to a small child and what comes out of it (McFarlane 2016).

CONCLUSION

Such work with stories or articles should help the students to look critically at themselves and the teaching profession. Perhaps they will recognize themselves in some of the characters or find certain learning situations familiar. By analyzing the stories’ characters and looking at the educational process from the outside, the students might find answers to their questions and solve pedagogical problems that they may have been putting off confronting or that they might face in their future careers.

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