

Pedagogical Observation Report

Tonya Kaushik

ESL 5315

Fall 2010

Vanessa Parmenter is an Australian teaching English as a Second Language at the Doris Henderson Newcomers School in Greensboro, N.C. She is a veteran teacher with almost 20 years of experience teaching ESL. She earned her bachelor of education degree from the University of Sydney with a concentration in humanities. She became interested in teaching ESL during her last year as an undergraduate when she had the opportunity to study TESOL and volunteered at one of Sydney's Intensive English Centers, government-sponsored programs designed to teach immigrants English. Parmenter taught ESL in Australia for six years before moving to the United States. Parmenter took additional coursework in ESL here in the U.S. in order to obtain her North Carolina ESL licensure. She has taught in Guilford County for 12 years, first at High Point Central High School, then for the past three years at the Newcomers School.

Guilford County created the Newcomers School four years ago to help the district's immigrant population, many of whom are refugees, learn English and adapt to American schools. Attendance at the school is not mandatory, but when new families register their child(ren) for school, the county's traditional schools are required to tell recent immigrants about the Newcomers School. The parent(s) can then decide whether to enroll their child(ren) in the Newcomers School or in their traditional neighborhood school. Since the goal of the Newcomers School is to help students transition to the county's traditional schools, students are only allowed to spend one academic year at the Newcomers School. At the end of the school year, the students are placed in mainstream schools where they would still be eligible to receive ESL instruction and accommodations.

Parmenter is part of the high school faculty at the Newcomers School. Her classroom is a modular unit (trailer) that has its own bathrooms and water fountain. The space is fairly large, with two closets and built-in shelves for storage. There is a large dry erase board at the front of

the class, and she has an LCD projector and a 3-D projector. Students sit at desks with separate chairs arranged in groups of three or four, although there are a few larger tables for group work. Posters decorate the walls to help instruct and motivate her students. Many of the posters are print-outs of literary terms that form a “word wall” of English literary terminology. There is also a large print-out of “power words” – a list of commonly used question starters and an explanation of what those words mean. Her bulletin board is decorated with a map of the world and photos of students. She has an area of high-interest, low-level books that students are free to borrow at any time. Finally, there are 3-D teaching aids such as beach balls and oversized dice with questions on them used for review games.

There are 70 high school students at the Newcomers School. Although most students at the Newcomers School are at the lowest level on the county’s assessment scale, the more intermediate students are placed in English I (ninth-grade English) based on their scores on the WIDA Access Placement Test for English proficiency. They are required to pass the North Carolina End of Course test for English I just like native speakers in traditional schools. Beginning students are placed in a reading course, where the focus is on basic English literacy skills and pronunciation. Parmenter has one English I course and two reading courses this semester; her reading students will take English I with her in the spring.

Parmenter’s fall English I class has 24 students from seven countries who speak nine different languages. Students are from Burma, China, Congo, Laos, Mexico, Nepal, and Vietnam. They speak Burmese (two dialects: Karen and Chin), Chinese, French, Laotian, Nepali, Spanish, Swahili, and Vietnamese. The reading courses are smaller (less than a dozen students each) but with a similar variety of nationalities and languages. Class instruction is entirely in English, partly because Parmenter is only fluent in English and partly because state and federal

standards require an English-only approach. However, since there are so many languages present in each of her classes, Parmenter often has her students use their L1 with each other to make sure all students understand literary terms as well as other English words used during the lesson.

Parmenter believes grammar should not be taught in isolation but rather in context. Some lessons have to be more focused on grammar than others, she said, because her English I students are required to take the North Carolina EOC, which has a large percentage of grammar questions. She includes grammar mini-lessons as bell work assignments, tasks her students are expected to do when they first enter the classroom. During one observation, students started class with a short reading assignment which had six questions about grammar. This assignment is modeled on questions the students will see on the state EOC test. The class had about 15 minutes to read the passage and answer the questions on their own. They were encouraged to use their bilingual dictionaries and consult students in their seating group. As they completed the assignment, they handed their paper to Parmenter who checked for any mistakes. She gave them individual feedback on which questions needed correction. She also returned their homework assignment from the previous night, which required the students to add a predicate to make a fragment a sentence. Again, Parmenter gave the students feedback and an opportunity to correct any mistakes. With both assignments, Parmenter praised each student for his or her effort, even if the student made many errors.

In addition to classwork, Parmenter relies on the school system's benchmark tests as error analysis for her English I course. These tests are practice EOC tests that are used to assess students' skills in certain areas. Her students were weakest in grammar on the first benchmark test, so Parmenter is including more grammar mini-lessons in her lesson planning. The class does individual work during which they are allowed to consult with others near them, followed by a

group discussion of the assignment. Parmenter uses the 3-D projector to enlarge the worksheet so the students can follow along as she explains the best ways to solve grammar questions. In addition to teaching the students correct grammar, she also teaches them test-taking skills such as using a process of elimination to solve difficult questions.

One of the grammar questions focused on word order and asked students which response would enhance the clarity and flow of the sentence. Parmenter had each student look up “enhance,” “clarity,” and “flow” in their bilingual dictionaries, “So you’re not going to be scared of these words if you see them again,” she said. She gave the students time to look for these words and asked the students who were more advanced to tell their classmates who shared their L1 what those words mean in their native languages. She then went around the room asking for translations in several languages before answering the grammar question. The question had several prepositional phrases that were in the wrong word order, but Parmenter did not use the grammatical term “prepositional phrases” with the students. It was enough for the students to know that “things are in the wrong place.” She did use grammatical terms during the discussion of other questions, e.g. tense, singular, plural, and subject-verb agreement.

An example of grammar teaching from the lower-level reading class was a comparison of phrases and clauses conducted as part of a pen pal assignment. The class’s pen pals from another school had sent four different snacks along with index cards with either a phrase or a clause written on them that related to the taste of the snacks. As they ate, the reading class students had to do two things: match the card’s descriptive language to the correct snack and then determine if the statement was a phrase or a clause. As part of the grammar instruction, Parmenter had the students look up phrase and clause in their bilingual dictionaries as well as an English dictionary. After students sorted the cards, they were asked to create their own phrase and clause to write on

a thank you card. Parmenter made this assignment the students' "ticket out the door," an assignment that must be completed before leaving the classroom. Students who shared an L1 worked with each other to complete the assignment. Students seemed to be more comfortable identifying the phrases and clauses other students had written than creating their own.

During my observations, I could tell there was an obvious difference in the students' levels in the English I class and the reading class. The English I students were more comfortable with their assignments. They were able to answer most of the questions with a minimum of help from Parmenter. The reading class, however, was at a very basic level of understanding. They tried to speak English but were often difficult to understand. Several of them had just recently immigrated to the U.S. and did not seem comfortable in a classroom setting. Parmenter had to show one girl how to use a bilingual dictionary, for example. Parmenter also had to use more repetition and questioning with the lower-level class. At one point she said, "You cannot say, 'I can't do, don't understand, because I gave you examples.'" She seemed to be frustrated that the students were not willing to try to use English in order to thank their pen pals for the food.