ISSUES IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO NON-PHILOLOGICAL MULTI-LEVEL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: Many students come from high schools where English has been approached more or less seriously (in some institutions English is not taught at all). Hence, their English proficiency varies from level A1 to level C1 or even C2 and since at every faculty studying a foreign language during at least two semesters is mandatory and most students opt for English, it is the instructor`s responsibility to find different ways so that each individual can benefit from language classes. Dealing with heterogeneous groups of learners can be a tough mission for every teacher—especially for an early teacher who, due to insufficient training sessions during the bachelor and master programmes, can be put in a vulnerable position in the classroom. This article aims to present and offer possible solutions to some challenges that can be encountered during the first years of teaching.

Keywords: NQT, multi-level classrooms, non-philological university students, challenges, solutions

INTRODUCTION

During the bachelor and master teaching training programmes, Romanian university students are given a solid theoretical framework but fewer chances to teach lessons in front of pupils. Consequently, novice teachers have to deal with many challenges—such as students` behaviour, lesson planning, assessing learners (Bennett, 2011), trying to bridge the gap between what they have learned during their training and the practical demands they face in their daily teaching practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In *The Challenges of Beginning Teachers Experience In The Early Years of Teaching*, the authors showed that the difficulties that are encountered by newly qualified teachers (NQTs) are the same in all the 14 countries the research is based on. They have identified six categories of challenges that are encountered by instructors who are at the beginning of their career: "adaptation to school environment, individual factors, support, teaching practices (such as discipline problems or assessing learners), social relations, and formal policies and school practices" (Çelik & Kahraman, 2020).

Another aspect that can be challenging for an early teacher is dealing with multi-level (heterogeneous) classrooms. In *100 teaching tips*, Penny Ur states that "as long a teacher has more than one student in a classroom, then (s)he has heterogeneity" (Ur, 2016). She encourages teachers to include open-ended questions in the activities they design and to "limit tasks by time, not amount" (Ur, 2016).

EVIDENCE

Since the fall of 2022, I have started teaching English language seminars at the Faculty of Chemistry of "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași to first- and second-year students, this being my first real teaching experience. During this academic year, I taught English to 128 students—there were three groups of first years and three of second years. Depending on the group, English classes took place either on odd or even weeks—this reducing the number of seminars per term to 7.

During this academic year, the challenges I encountered were related only to teaching practices, discipline problems, and individual factors (Çelik & Kahraman, 2020).

The teaching-related issues referred to lesson planning and assessment.

As I was highly aware that these learners are different in terms of language proficiency—mosaic pattern, the first step was to assign them a placement test[1] that aimed to assess their grammar and vocabulary knowledge to help me plan the upcoming lessons. After students handed in their placement tests, the teacher assigned each of them other copies of the quiz and asked them to take turns reading the questions out loud, answer them, and justify his/her solutions. Where necessary, the teacher corrected their mistakes and offered additional information. Table 1 illustrates the first years` levels and Table 2 the levels of the second-year students at the beginning of the term.

Level	%
Beginner	3%
Elementary	24%
Pre-intermediate	17%
Intermediate	12%
Upper-intermediate	32%
Advanced	12%

Table 1

Level	%
Beginner	2%
Elementary	13%
Pre-intermediate	15%
Intermediate	17%
Upper-intermediate	17%
Advanced	36%

Table 2

One challenging aspect was to find a textbook I considered as most appropriate. Based on their scores and their expectations from this language course, the upcoming lessons for the first-year students were designed for the pre-intermediate level—they used the *Open World A2* textbook which mainly focused on language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking); I strongly recommend the use of a textbook that comes with a teacher`s guide, especially for teachers who are at the beginning of their career.

On the other hand, the second-year students, whose upcoming seminars were designed for the intermediate level of English, used handouts, PowerPoint presentations, mock level exams, and coursebooks such as *Destination B1* or *FCE Gold Plus* or Michael Vince`s *Elementary Language Practice* (Rotaru, 2023).

As for assignments, since I had multi-level groups of students, the homework they had to upload on the platform before the announced deadlines included tasks of different difficulty levels. Assignments, as well as students` active participation in the classroom during activities and taking progress tests and also a midterm exam, were part of the formative assessment (i.e., ongoing evaluation) (Anon., n.d.) (Anon., n.d.) (Ur, 2016) . For the summative assessment, students took a written test that contained grammar and vocabulary items and a writing task.

As going on with lessons for level A2 for the first years did not seem a good idea, especially because I had students who claimed that they had never studied English before and struggled to learn by heart the information that was presented, during the spring semester I decided to divide each class into two groups based on the placement test scores. Hence, during each class I had students who were at the elementary level and above and students who were beginners[2]. Even so, in every group there were students with different proficiency levels, so I had to use some strategies:

[1] Link to the placement test: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjk8-y9g_mDAxV4ywIHHd3gBK8QFnoECA0QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.hueber.de%2Fmedia%2F36%2FSF-QUICKplace_rev.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3pF40h-iMNeEr7df8-GpaX&opi=89978449

[2] Beginners were sent separate lecture notes that included lessons such as the English alphabet, numbers and greetings in English, the months and seasons of the year, etc.

"Core and branching" activities (Ainslie, 1994) were useful because "every student achieved progress: starters achieved the basic level and the "more advanced" learners went further" (Rotaru, 2023).

By working in groups (Roberts, 2007) (Ur, 2016), every student was part of a team. Sometimes, the whole class was divided into groups of 2-3 learners because I wanted to engage even the shy students to take part in activities.

Debates and open-ended questions (Ur, 2016) encouraged critical thinking and allowed the "more advanced" students to share their knowledge with their lower-level peers.

By limiting the time instead of the amount of the task, the slow workers could also be integrated, and the fast workers did not get bored (Ur, 2016) (Rotaru, 2023).

Teaching grammar and the four language skills to the "more advanced" students was also a challenge.

To briefly present the grammatical theoretical frameworks (it was a seminar, not a lecture, so I saved more time for practice), I mostly approached the deductive method[3]. The example below illustrates the lesson structure on the simple present tense that was taught last academic year.

The simple present tense
Uses
Adverbs and expressions of frequency
Structure:
Affirmative + examples
Negative + examples
Questions + examples

Of course, for students who wanted to dig deeper into the study of the grammatical aspects that were discussed, some additional classroom materials were added to the platform we used.

One meaningful reading comprehension activity was based on one of E.E. Cummings`s poems whose lines had been jumbled up (***Figure 1*** (Lazar, 1993)). This activity was organised as a competition between two teams: one team of beginners and one team of "more advanced" learners. Each student was asked to put his/her digital device in his/her bag, to avoid the temptation of comparing their version to the original poem. To put the lines of the poem back together, both teams were allocated seven minutes and, to the teacher`s amazement, the group whose version was closest to the original version was the one formed of the beginners.

Two meaningful forms of speaking activities that took place during the first years` seminars were role-plays and group presentations, both based on real-life situations (examples of role-plays scenarios: taking care of someone`s pet while (s)he is not in town, skipping classes for a whole day, phone conversations, etc.; examples of presentation topics: "The bullying phenomenon in Romanian schools", "Fake news", "Benefits and/or drawbacks of using technology", etc.). As I knew that at least some of the students I taught English to were used to read (mostly) everything from the slides, they were instructed how to design an academic PowerPoint presentation (the "dos" and "don`ts" in terms of the structure of the slides, choosing the right font and its colour, choosing an appropriate background of the presentation, designing the charts, and inserting pictures (Aldrich, n.d.)).

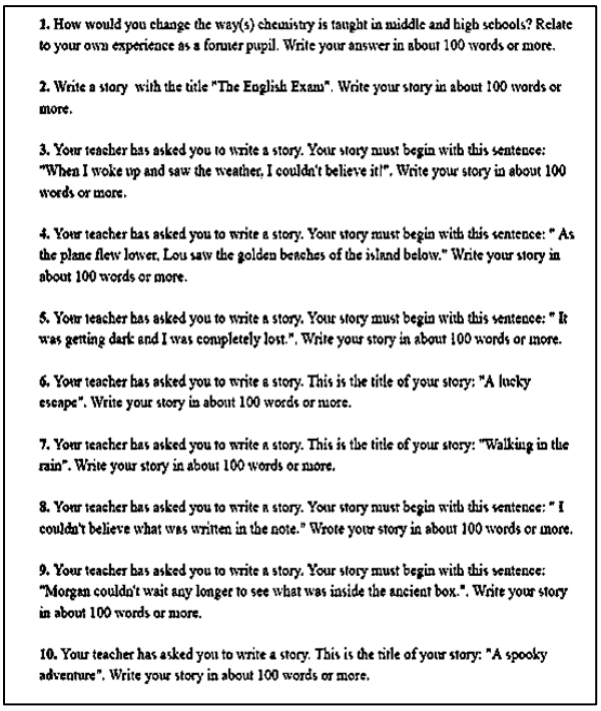
During the fall and spring semesters, several writing activities were assigned (e.g. writing emails, opinion paragraphs/essays, stories on given topics. Writing was also

AND MOLLY WAS CHASED BY A HORRIBLE THING
SO SWEETLY SHE COULDN'T REMEMBER HER TROUBLES,AND
WENT DOWN TO THE BEACH(TO PLAY ONE DAY)
MAY CAME HOME WITH A SMOOTH ROUND STONE
WHICH RACED SIDEWAYS WHILE BLOWING BUBBLES:AND
IT'S ALWAYS OURSELVES WE FIND IN THE SEA
MAGGIE AND MILLY AND MOLLY AND MAY
AND MAGGIE DISCOVERED A SHELL THAT SANG
MILLY BEFRIENDED A STRANDED STAR
FOR WHATEVER WE LOSE(LIKE A YOU OR A ME)
AS SMALL AS A WORLD AND AS LARGE AS ALONE.
WHOSE RAYS FIVE LANGUID FINGERS WERE;

Figure 1

[3] Grammar lessons were taught using the mother tongue.

part of the first-year students` final exam, along with several vocabulary exercises. One week before the test, a list with possible writing topics was uploaded to the platform we used (***Figure 2*** and ***Figure 3*** illustrate the list of writing topics I chose from (Rotaru, 2023)).



1. How would you change the way(s) chemistry is taught in middle and high schools? Relate to your own experience as a former pupil. Write your answer in about 100 words or more.

2. Write a story with the title "The English Exam". Write your story in about 100 words or more.

3. Your teacher has asked you to write a story. Your story must begin with this sentence: "When I woke up and saw the weather, I couldn't believe it!". Write your story in about 100 words or more.

4. Your teacher has asked you to write a story. Your story must begin with this sentence: " As the plane flew lower, Lou saw the golden beaches of the island below." Write your story in about 100 words or more.

5. Your teacher has asked you to write a story. Your story must begin with this sentence: " It was getting dark and I was completely lost.". Write your story in about 100 words or more.

6. Your teacher has asked you to write a story. This is the title of your story: "A lucky escape". Write your story in about 100 words or more.

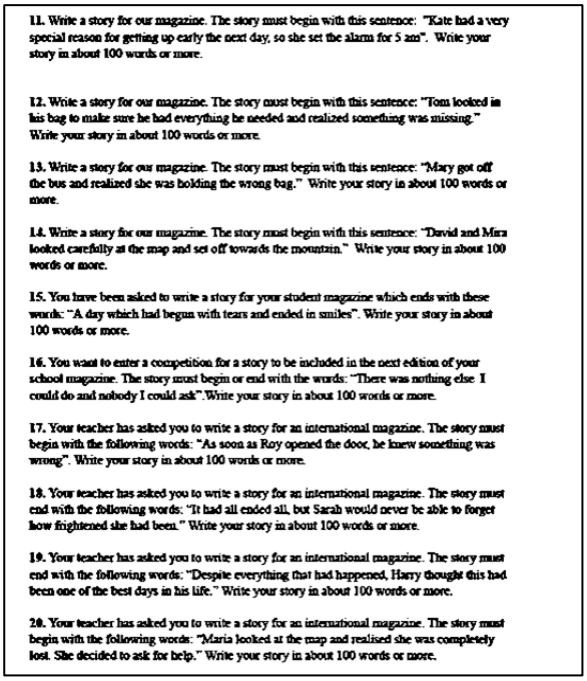
7. Your teacher has asked you to write a story. This is the title of your story: "Walking in the rain". Write your story in about 100 words or more.

8. Your teacher has asked you to write a story. Your story must begin with this sentence: " I couldn't believe what was written in the note." Wrote your story in about 100 words or more.

9. Your teacher has asked you to write a story. Your story must begin with this sentence: "Morgan couldn't wait any longer to see what was inside the ancient box.". Write your story in about 100 words or more.

10. Your teacher has asked you to write a story. This is the title of your story: "A spooky adventure". Write your story in about 100 words or more.

Figure 3



11. Write a story for our magazine. The story must begin with this sentence: "Kate had a very special reason for getting up early the next day, so she set the alarm for 5 am". Write your story in about 100 words or more.

12. Write a story for our magazine. The story must begin with this sentence: "Tom looked in his bag to make sure he had everything he needed and realized something was missing." Write your story in about 100 words or more.

13. Write a story for our magazine. The story must begin with this sentence: "Mary got off the bus and realized she was holding the wrong bag." Write your story in about 100 words or more.

14. Write a story for our magazine. The story must begin with this sentence: "David and Mira looked carefully at the map and set off towards the mountain." Write your story in about 100 words or more.

15. You have been asked to write a story for your student magazine which ends with these words: "A day which had begun with tears and ended in smiles". Write your story in about 100 words or more.

16. You want to enter a competition for a story to be included in the next edition of your school magazine. The story must begin or end with the words: "There was nothing else I could do and nobody I could ask".Write your story in about 100 words or more.

17. Your teacher has asked you to write a story for an international magazine. The story must begin with the following words: "As soon as Roy opened the door, he knew something was wrong". Write your story in about 100 words or more.

18. Your teacher has asked you to write a story for an international magazine. The story must end with the following words: "It had all ended all, but Sarah would never be able to forget how frightened she had been." Write your story in about 100 words or more.

19. Your teacher has asked you to write a story for an international magazine. The story must end with the following words: "Despite everything that had happened, Harry thought this had been one of the best days in his life." Write your story in about 100 words or more.

20. Your teacher has asked you to write a story for an international magazine. The story must begin with the following words: "Maria looked at the map and realised she was completely lost. She decided to ask for help." Write your story in about 100 words or more.

Figure 2

On the other hand, besides grammar and vocabulary exercises which included writing sentences, writing the plurals of the given nouns, writing short answers, filling the gaps with indefinite articles and with "there is"/"there are"/the correct preposition of place, verb conjugation, writing the time, put the days of the day in the correct order, beginner students were asked to write a paragraph about themselves. Beginners were also provided some suggestions of what they could mention in their composition (e.g. they could mention their first name, where they came from, their favourite colour, day of the week, month, etc.).

During this academic year, a few discipline problems were encountered such as chatting during classes, using digital devices for no learning purposes, arriving late to class, resistance to ongoing activities, rolling eyes, constant criticism, or cheating/plagiarism. Some of these problems were solved by letting my students know what consequences they will have to face if they continue to repeat the same mistake(s) again (e.g. putting the digital device that has been used without permission on the teacher`s desk, inviting the student to take the floor and teach the today`s lesson, assign students a five/ten-minute test from what it has been taught that day, etc.) or, in the case of students who decided to cheat during the final test, their final grades were diminished by one point, mentioning to them that the consequences could have been more severe.

The small age gap between students and teacher made the boundaries difficult to be settled. This challenge was overcome by laying out a firm set of rules, avoiding conflicts, and by keeping a straight face (almost) all the time.

The teacher`s emotional experience (i.e., positive vs. negative emotions) may influence his/her performance in the classroom and also his/her behaviour outside the classroom. Table

3 presents the feelings I encountered during the first year of teaching. It was a tough mission to avoid taking home the negative feelings I came across during classes (Rotaru, 2023).

Positive feelings	Negative feelings
Confidence	Anxiety
Satisfaction	Stress
Happiness	Intimidation
Pride	Emotionally drained
Enthusiasm	Self-doubt
Gratitude	Fear
Amazement	Worry
Rewarded	Confusion
Empathy	Panic
Inspiration	Disappointment

Table 3

This academic year, I decided to change several aspects in the ways the language seminars were going to be approached. Unlike the previous semesters (when the rules were laid out verbally), based on my mentor`s advice, I designed a course outline that included the seminar contents, classrooms materials to be used, organisation of activities, evaluation, and seminar policies.

In terms of seminar contents and classroom materials, the beginner students studied from *Right on 1* (2022 edition), the elementary learners from *Headway: Elementary: Student`s Book with Online Practice* (5th edition), and the intermediate learners from *Headway: Intermediate: Student`s Book with Online Practice* (5th edition). Some additional classroom materials were uploaded to the platform we used for the spring semester: Jenny Dooley and Virginia Evan`s *Grammarway 1* and *Grammarway 2* and *Grammarway 3*.

This semester, my students were assessed as follows: 60% ongoing evaluation (30% in-class active participation + 30% assignments) + 40% written exam.

Being a seminar, attendance was mandatory. To get a final grade, students had to attend at least five seminars out of seven, otherwise they would have to retake the seminar next year. Also, students were made aware from the very beginning they would fail the class if they were caught cheating during the exam—they had to score at least 50 points on the final test.

The exam for the second-year students was planned to take place asynchronously. The exam topics were sent via email as a Word document together with the necessary instructions and submission deadline—they had 11 days to send their answers by replying to my message. Intermediate learners were given an input text about an elderly Chinese woman and two pots[4]. The first tasks aimed to test students` reading comprehension, paraphrasing, reasoning, and critical thinking skills—that is why they were requested not to use the same words from the text when they answered the questions. Also, students were asked to type each answer in no more than three lines.

Reading comprehension exam questions:

Which character was personified? Support your idea with relevant examples from the input text.

What is the attitude of the pot towards its imperfection? Why?

What is the old woman`s attitude towards the pot?

What is the message of the text?

Do you think the old lady did the right thing in the end? Why?

[4] Link to the input text: https://cabiojinia.com/the-cracked-pot-the-perfect-pot-a-short-story/

In your opinion, what do flowers represent?

Besides the reading comprehension questions, intermediate students were assigned two writing tasks, as follows:

Answer the following question by writing a paragraph (10-15 lines): Do imperfections make us different in a good way? Support your ideas with relevant examples.

In 100-150 words, write your own story, on whichever topic you like, in which at least one of its characters is personified.

On the other hand, beginner students were assigned two texts based on which they had to decide whether the given statements were either true or false, answer two sentences, identify what certain words from the text referred to, and write a missing word from one text to complete the given sentences. For the writing part, students were given a set of pictures and were asked to write what Garfield does every day and at what time (Lefevre, 2022).

A challenge that was encountered while I was grading the second-year students` papers referred to a tough decision I had to make. I realised that three papers were identical. ***Figure 4*** presents the similarities between students` writings (please see the highlighted sentences). According to the official syllabus that was uploaded to the faculty`s website and to the course outline that was uploaded to the Google Classroom group, these three students should have retaken the seminar next year, but I decided to give them a failing final mark (i.e., 1/10) but also a second chance to get a passing grade by allowing them to take the resit exam—this time, onsite.

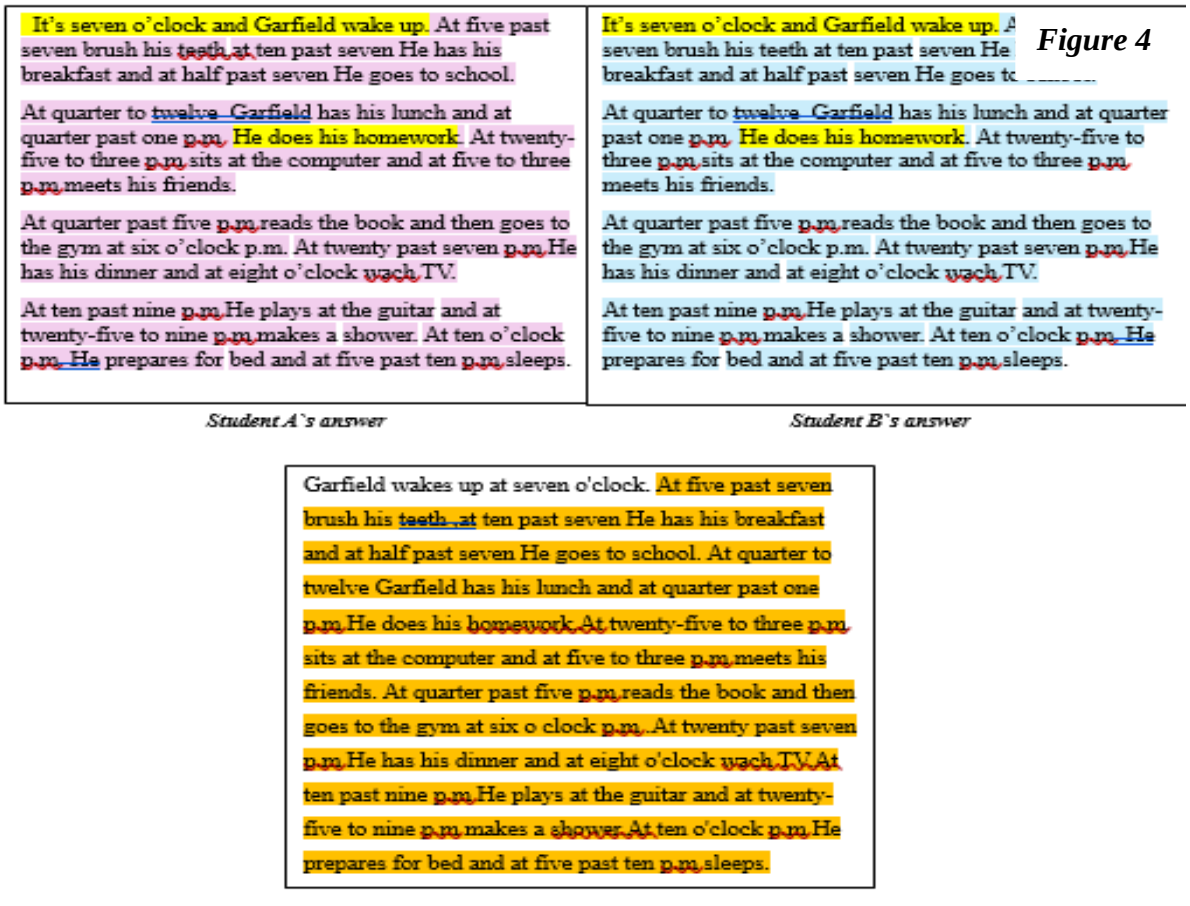


FIGURE 4

This was not the first tough decision I have made—last academic year, at the end of the fall semester, I decided that the final grade should be the average between all the grades my

students got during the ongoing evaluation and the grade they got for attendance, resulting in higher final scores. Another compromise I made during the fall semester of this academic year was to let a student who attended only two seminars (out of seven) take the final exam because he came up with a plausible excuse.

A special situation occurred while I was calculating the first years` final scores at the end of the fall semester of 2023. One of my students got a mark for in-class active participation

(7.2/10), a passing mark on the final exam (5.5/10), but had no assignments submitted, so the final score was 4.36/10 which normally would be a failing grade. However, as the student succeeded in passing the final test, he was allowed to pass the class.

As groups were divided into "more advanced" and beginners and each group had a different syllabus and different materials to work on, students` progress was reflected in their final grades (***Figure 5*** and ***Figure 6***). Students who were marked as "absent" either quit university or did not show up for the final exam.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER APPROACHES

Focusing on the roots of the challenges that are encountered by early teachers, the literature shows that "the practical experience is, in most of the training programmes, too short, too late, and not sufficiently focused on reality of the classrooms" (Crandall, 2000).

As for possible solutions for newly qualified teachers who have to deal with multi-level university students, I came to the conclusion that, if each class is divided into groups of beginners and "more-advanced" learners and the teacher works with them differently from the beginning of the semester—even if it is tougher to work with two groups concomitantly, it is more likely for the instructor to get better outcomes.

Asking learners for an end-of-term written feedback seemed to be useful because I realised that my students prefer topics that are related to real life, with a greater emphasis on conversations (and some of them more challenging tasks), to grammar, writing essays, or text analysis. Consequently, the lessons that were planned in advance for the spring semester of 2024 will mainly focus on communication, but students will (still) have a number of assignments and submission deadlines.

For "more advanced" first-year learners, instead of assigning them sets of tasks after each class, the assignments (together with their instructions and deadlines) were included in the course outline from the very beginning (Ur, 2016). The first assignment will consist of a recorded presentation: students will be asked to choose a colleague/two colleagues to work with, choose a presentation topic from an assigned list, and create a 10/15-minute report. Also,

they will be asked to design a PowerPoint/Prezi presentation—while watching the audio-video recording, the viewer should see the presenter and his/her slides at the same time. The second assignment will be based on the audio-video recording that will imply filling in the self-and peer-assessment grids. The last assignment will be a research-based essay of at least 100 words. Students will have to type their essays and correct each other's papers using the "Track Changes" function before uploading them to Moodle (Turnitin plugin will be activated) and, if their originality report indicates a higher percentage than the one that was mentioned in the course outline or plagiarism, they will have the possibility to resubmit their work before the deadline. In preparation for the final exam, elective (but highly recommended) writing tasks will be assigned—students will not win or lose points for fulfilling them, but they will be offered suggestions for further writing skills improvement.

On the other hand, to achieve progress, beginner learners` assignments will consist of:

doing all the exercises from "Revision and evaluation" section from the end of each unit from the textbook and bring them to class so the teacher can grade them and give feedback; a 3-minute audio-video recorded role-play on a topic they will chose from the assigned list.

From personal experience, I strongly believe all beginning teachers should have on one hand, the opportunity to be monitored by a mentor who corrects trainees` approaches and, on the other hand, the support from the teaching and administrative staff of the institutions they work for, both being important as they make the NQT feel as part of the community.

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