

OBSERVATION REPORT

INSTRUCTOR OBSERVED: Syelle Graves

CLASS OBSERVED: Engl 331 - 52

DATE OF OBSERVATION: 3/13/12

Ms. Graves emailed her syllabus and class materials to me well in advance of the class. The plan for the day (evening actually) was to review a previous syntax assignment and then begin the study of phonetics. After taking attendance, Ms. Graves and the class turned to the analysis of the last three sentences of the previous assignment, comfortably using the tree diagrams for analysis. Looking at the sentence “The little girl hit the child with the toy,” the ambiguity of the phrase with the toy was explored. Does it describe the child or does it tell what the little girl used to hit the child? Each analysis depends on context and underlying structures. Ms. Graves explains completely with no questions considered too basic.

The class moved on to phonetics. Ms. Graves makes considerable use of the computer and slides which her students found engaging and explanatory. They readily participated. She worked through a series of varied, challenging, and increasingly difficult slides and exercises. For example, the first slide consisted of a list of words that were not spelled the way they sounded, including though and rough. In the second slide, she asked students to identify both the number of separate letters and sounds in each of the following words: best, fresh, laughed, though; for the third slide students had to identify the word or words containing the same sound as the initial word: 1) push: duty sugar pump although; 2) intend: this whistle baked batch, etc; for the next slide, students were asked to pronounce the first and last sound of each word aloud: going, thrill, fix, quack, know. These were engaging exercises. The students worked in pairs or small groups with Ms. Graves circulating, explaining, and asking excellent questions.

Next, the class considered syllable stress, i.e. long, louder, and higher-pitched syllables. Ms. Graves made the important point that once you identify the stress syllable, you know whether or not the vowels are stressed. This may lead to less confusion over use of the schwa. Using the first names of the students, she asked them to divide the names into two groups, one with stress on the first syllable, one with stress on the second syllable.

Having worked through a variety of phonetic concepts, Ms. Graves put up a slide of the IPA consonant symbols and examples by place and manner of articulation; she followed this with the vowel symbol charts, the schwa, and the English diphthongs. The students posed excellent questions about the symbols and their use; Ms. Graves patiently and thoroughly answered of their questions, clarifying use of the IPA.

Then, Ms. Graves had the students work again with partners to translate the following words into phonetic symbols with syllable stress where applicable: Asian, singer, younger, boy, chip, hit, took, short, and shy – a list that required use of a variety of sounds. These single words were followed by an exercise to transcribe a sentence -- How do they judge the Athens fox? -- another challenging task. Ms. Graves provided many examples and lots of practice with using phonetic alphabet symbols. She assigned phonetic exercises for the next class and summarized what they had done that day.

This was an outstanding class. The syllabus seemed so well-conceived that I have decided to reorder my own Engl 331 syllabus the next time I teach the class to reflect a sequencing of concepts more similar to hers. I learned a great deal from this class. Ms. Graves is knowledgeable, makes the material interesting and challenging, and provides sufficient practice to make sure students understand the concepts and how to apply them. All of the students were engaged, participating, working with one another, and seemed genuinely interested. This is a very positive observation.