

Teaching Statement: Teresa Girolamo

My journey to a faculty career has been nonlinear, with prior teaching experience in modern languages and literatures and education. I found that I am driven by intellectual curiosity and by translating knowledge and skills into real-world action. Understanding my own motivation for learning has shaped my perspective on teaching, giving me two broad goals. First, teaching must help students discover their “why” for learning, as well as their own ways of addressing their interests. Second, teaching must connect to social and global issues beyond the classroom. In my teaching, I am passionate about meeting these two overarching goals.

I have taught in diverse contexts in both formal (e.g., teacher) and informal (e.g., mentor) roles. As a Teaching Assistant of Chinese, I taught phonology, reading and writing, and syntax entirely in Mandarin. As a classroom teacher, I taught academics, vocational skills, and activities of daily living to autistic adolescents. As a Graduate Teaching Assistant, Seminar Coordinator, and Guest Lecturer, I integrated interdisciplinary material. As a mentor to 16 diverse minority students (e.g., racial/ethnic, first-generation, international, LGBTQIA+, non-traditional, students with disabilities), I helped form students’ academic, professional development, and research skills, resulting in awards, fellowships, and research projects presented at national conferences. Across these roles, my responsibilities included curriculum development and delivery for an entire class, as well as development of specialized content for a seminar on First Language Acquisition, including small group and individual formats.

Based on these teaching experiences, I have formulated three actionable aims for course instruction: (1) Teaching must be inclusive, transparent, and accessible; (2) Teaching must provide opportunities to scaffold learning, so that students are empowered to acquire content knowledge and skills; and (3) Teaching must provide students with real-world skills relevant for success inside and beyond the classroom.

Aim 1: Inclusive, Transparent, and Accessible Teaching

My teaching and mentoring experiences are driven by the importance of making teaching accessible, or able to meet the learning needs of individuals from diverse walks of life. Teaching must be inclusive, such that students feel that instruction was designed with them in mind (and not for some other group of students which excludes them). Further, instructional design and goals must foster student buy-in. Therefore, my teaching champions principles from backwards design and Universal Design for Learning, which help students understand the connection between course goals and incremental work towards those goals in work and daily life.

To foster transparent teaching, I include explanations of instructional design and encourage dialogue with students. These discussions support students in thinking about their learning and making connections between learning objectives and instructional activities, thus facilitating them becoming *self-directed learners*. As a Graduate Teaching Assistant, I developed a final project for a linguistics course, *First Language Acquisition*, which involved evaluating major language acquisition theories. Prior to the final project, I reviewed with students how this project assessed their mastery of the overarching course objective, which was gaining understanding of first language acquisition. We also explicitly reviewed how this course objective informed development of instructional activities and assessments throughout the semester. For example, we discussed how units on early word-learning and syntactic acquisition contributed to their cumulative understanding of the linguistic dimensions relevant to first language acquisition. Moreover, we discussed how each unit included multiple checks for student learning, from *diagnostic assessments* to assess their prior knowledge at the beginning of each unit via the class discussion board to *formative assessments* to assess their knowledge during the unit via hands-on in-class lab activities and homework assignments. In all, these discussions helped students understand the cohesive and purposeful development of learning activities and assessments.

I also implement Universal Design for Learning, which helps students – and especially those of marginalized backgrounds – focus on learning, rather than grading as gatekeeping. Universal Design for Learning is a framework for instructional design to *proactively* meet various learners’ needs, rather than expecting learners to

know when to ask for support. For example, I provide a comprehensive overview of campus, college, and departmental resources; I post materials ahead of time, number slides, and limit content per slide, which is a proactive way to help students with ADHD and other learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia) focus in class. I have been strongly influenced by Nilson's 2015 book on Specifications Grading, which encourages instructors to build in flexible ways for students to demonstrate learning. Specifications Grading aims to make the hidden curriculum transparent, in that students know upfront how many units and activities per unit they must complete to achieve a given grade (e.g., A, B, C). Within this structure, students choose which modules and activities to complete and have different options depending on their level of study (e.g., undergraduate, master's, doctoral). Further, assignments are graded as complete (and satisfactory) or incomplete, and students have several attempts to complete an assignment. Overall, this structure is meant to facilitate learning and growth.

Aim 2: Scaffolded Learning

Students struggle when course content is overwhelming, such as when the course is not from their own discipline. In these cases, students can "freeze" and appear to be non-responsive, which hinders learning. To prevent these situations, I work to empower students by providing structured opportunities to learn and apply knowledge and skills. Building in opportunities to help students break down large challenges through *scaffolded* opportunities for learning benefits them not only in their coursework, but also in their professional and daily lives.

In my instruction, I create incremental opportunities for learning. For example, when discussing language impairment, understanding how syntactic concepts map onto real-world language is often abstract to students. Students might listen to a short lecture about language impairment; review a related paper on child language; and then complete a mini-lab activity, designing a screener for language impairment. Each step in this activity builds incrementally upon previous knowledge. As students engage in the mini-lab, I circulate the room and monitor progress, with instruction that if groups are stuck, they should ask peers and then myself for help. This approach provides multiple forms of support and helps student to hone their collaborative and interpersonal communication skills. It also leads to the creation of a self-made resource, or study guide, for final projects.

Aim 3: Real-World Skills

Students learn best when course content is meaningful and relevant to their lives. Therefore, in my teaching, I strive to provide knowledge and skills with real-world application. I explicitly talk about and model these applications, which allows students to grasp the relevance of course material and to develop their critical thinking. My aim is to have students develop proficiency in the course material and add to their career skills.

Over the course of an instructional period (whether a unit or semester), I triangulate *course objectives* with *general* and *discipline-specific* knowledge and skills, respectively, to determine how to support students in acquiring all three. For example, students were asked to generate a list of the contexts in which they use oral language (e.g., workplace, grocery store) and to examine which of those contexts required good oral language ability. Students were asked to develop alternative communicative strategies that do not require oral language. This exercise helped students build empathy and person-centered approaches to clinical practice and research.

In all, these experiences have prepared me to develop and implement course content that builds upon students' natural strengths and interests and that supports them in developing life and career skills. I am prepared to cover a variety of course topics. Some courses I might be particularly well-prepared to teach include introduction to speech, language, hearing sciences and language science; foundations of speech-language development, as well as differences and disorders in children; language disorders, and research and diagnostic methods. I continue to build upon my teaching skills and methods to improve student learning. I welcome the opportunity to engage with new teaching methods and to continue learning from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.