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# ESL MiniConference

## Time to Rethink Listserv Specifications? Disgruntled TESL-L Members Vent Frustrations

In the early 1990s, as several ESL/EFL related listservs were experiencing their first challenges, a key dilemma was whether to have a moderated or an unmoderated list, and another problem regarded the appropriate length of messages.

As one of the early participants on the TESL-L and SLART lists/bitnets, I can recall heated discussions about the meaning, purpose, and guiding policies for our exchanges via a technology that was new for everyone. I remember that the SLART (Second Language Aquisition Research and Teaching) very early committed itself to being an unmoderated list. Discussions were wide ranging, and some messages--including my own--were lengthy. TESL-L experimented at first with unmoderated discussions, but the list owners quickly decided that too many irrelevant messages were being posted, and so the TESL-L list structure which still exists today was established, requiring every message to be vetted by the moderator(s) before being distributed to all subscribers.

Today, SLART no longer exists, except in archive form. The exchanges got so vitriolic that the list was put to rest in 1998 or 1999. The same core of individuals were posting messages over and over again, and basically had hijacked the list, driving it into obsolescence.

On the other hand, TESL-L continues to thrive, with more than 30,000 subscribers today in many different countries around the world depending on this source of information, comradery, and motivation for ESL/EFL teaching enthusiasts.

Yet there were recently some off-list exchanges among frequent posters to TESL-L regarding what some consider an outdated length limit on postings (90 lines). "TESL must be the only place in the Internet that forces short messages these days," wrote one person. "That policy has been abandoned by the rest of the Internet world long ago. Time for TESL to catch up."

Several replies agreed that TESL-L was placing unreasonable restrictions on message length, and also suggested that messages of acceptable length are sometimes rejected for other questionable reasons, connected

to the style or relevance of the posting, as determined by the list editors. "I suspect that messages are blocked when discussions seem to lead to directions or conclusions that do not suit the editors' mind-frame or agendas," wrote another disgruntled TESL-L subscriber, who signed himself "Fed up."

But others in this off-list e-mail exchange wrote to remind the rest of us that list moderators work for free. "Can mistakes be made?," this person asked. "Sure, the moderators are after all, not computers, but people, and people do make mistakes....For the most part, when my messages have been rejected as too long, I have been forced to become more concise in my explanations....not necessarily a bad thing."

On about the third day of this exchange of ideas regarding moderation of the TESL-L list, someone wrote that she had "come to accept that a list is, in fact, an autocracy and not a democracy....A little shared complaining has its place, but unless you have a long-term strategy that has a chance of changing things, more than that becomes....sort of like continuing to spin your wheels angrily when you are mired in mud."

These messages which were cc'd to me and about 15 other people reminded me of an exchange on the now-defunct SLART list in which members were looking for a way to post full-length articles without irritating the majority of other subscribers. Here is a message retrieved from April 22, 1992, written by Lloyd Holliday:

> Like the idea of papers archived electronically. I suspect even a concatenation of references etc. supplied to a requester of info. wud be a useful base for other researchers. The updating of the catalog will be a pest for you. One will need one giving an idea of contents or some keywords as the archives then wont be a monthly dated bulletin. I suggest you put it strongly to LIST members that they do supply some form of summaries of issues they request info on. An appeal such as the one I am replying to I suspect is ignored because it is embedded amidst too much other info. I suggest the conferencing nature of SLART be retained, but members should direct replies about email addresses to the requester. I noticed a while back people were corresponding privately on the open board. Headers to postings also help tremendously in sorting through one's mail.

Taking a cue from Lloyd Holliday's post of 14 years ago, perhaps TESL-L needs a new sub-list, where people can submit longer posts for various reasons, such as extending on a discussion that the moderators of the main list feel has come to a natural end, or submitting bibliographies or even short articles.

If there are other thoughts on the questions that have arisen regarding the moderation of the TESL-L list in the 21st century version, readers are invited to submit letters to the editor of the ESL MiniConference Online, at letters@eslminiconf.net.

TESL-L has a track record of providing nearly two decades of incredible service to teachers in the ESL/EFL global industry. It is going to be fun to watch the new innovations TESL-L introduces to continue offering its members relevant leadership.

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