



Summer
2007

Int'l Reading
Award Goes
to ESL
Teacher in
California

Stranger in
Town

Petition
Drive to
Reinstate
Tim Stewart
at Essential
Teacher

The Magic of
Stories

Tougher ESL
Visa Rules in
China?

More articles
to come!

/Index/
/Letters/
/Profiles/
/Search/
/Podcasts/

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ESL MiniConference

An Oldie But Goodie from ProLingua Associates

Why I Like Lou Spaventa's "Stranger in Town"

I have been teaching ESL since 1982, and I took my first TESL course in the spring of 1980. Over the more than 25 years I have been aware of the ESL profession, I have reviewed hundreds of textbooks and served on numerous curriculum committees selecting books and materials to help ESL teachers and students. Nothing I have seen or heard quite matches the creations of the four or five individuals who started ProLingua Associates (www.prolinguaassociates.com) as a "mom and pop micro business" in Brattleboro, Vermont, in 1980.

There is a smart simplicity to the books and resources that they publish. Their company philosophy, printed on the first page of every one of their books, is truly inspired.

At Pro Lingua, our objective is to foster an approach to learning and teaching which we call Interplay, the interaction of language learners and teachers with their materials, with the language and the culture, and with each other in active, creative and productive play.

I learned of ProLingua Associates for the first time when I was teaching in Japan, because a number of the best ESL teachers I had the good fortune to meet and work with there came from either the School for International Training (now World Learning, Inc.) or Peace Corps, or both, and that SIT-Peace Corps nexus is also where several of the founders of ProLingua experienced the language learning and teaching events which led them to eventually start publishing their own materials.

One of my mentors in Japan--during the year we both spent at the University of Nevada-Reno's Tokyo campus as well as the two following years I spent working for him at Ohio University's OPELT program in Chubu University--was Dave Hopkins, very well known today for his sensitive and intuitively appealing approaches to ESL teacher training, and someone whose cross-cultural leadership at OPELT, from 1989 to 1995, helped to establish one of the most successful U.S.-Japan educational exchanges of that era.

Dave is a native of Brattleboro and one of the original SIT graduates--

from the 1960s, when this innovative campus did not even award a degree to those intrinsically motivated early cohorts who, in turn, went on to fill many key administrative posts in ESL and TESL programs, as well as peace corps projects, around the world during the next three decades. "They eventually called us back to campus for 'retreading'," Dave explained to me, "and a majority of our group voted to accept the masters degree for our earlier work," although he quickly assured me that he himself had voted against it, believing on principle that a piece of paper could never adequately represent the special learning experience they had enjoyed together.

Anyway, my friend Dave Hopkins knew Ray Clark, Mike Jerald, Pat Moran, and Andy and Elise Burrows when they started ProLingua Associates, and he contributed to a text, "[Experiential Language Teaching Techniques](#)," that Clark and Jerald edited. And we had a number of ProLingua products in the OPELT Resource Room at Chubu, including the world-famous (among ESL professionals, that is) Lexicarry--the old one, bigger, thicker, and in black and white--and the ageless "ESL Miscellany." Both of these books have been revised (radically so, in the case of Lexicarry, now in color and [online](#)), and are two items no English teacher should be without when venturing upon a trip abroad.

I met Ray, Andy, and Elise for the first time at the [2001 New York TESOL conference](#), in Rye Brook, little more than a month after September 11th. They were friendly and really perked up when I mentioned their friend and mine, Dave Hopkins. I attended a session at which Andy Burrows demonstrated one of their new publications that year, "[Celebrating American Heroes](#)," an ingenious collection of 13 original plays, in clear and simple English, by Anne Siebert (with wonderful illustrations by Marilynne K. Roach). Andy got 25 people in a small room to take on roles and read their parts from scenes in several of these plays. Anyone who doesn't have a specific role gets to read and speak the part of a "Greek chorus," so no one is left out. I was so impressed by this book that I made it one of the required texts, along with Lexicarry, in an ESL Methods and Materials course that I developed several years later at Fort Hays State University, in Hays, Kansas. (The other text for that course was Diane Larsen-Freeman's "Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching," published by Oxford--but Larsen-Freeman is another member of the SIT-Peace Corps nexus.)

I had a nice chat with Ray Clark a few months later, at the New York TESOL Applied Linguistics SIG's [24th annual winter conference](#), and learned a little more about his personal history and how he got into the field of ESL in the early 1960s. I am hopeful that one day soon I can

present on the ESL MiniConference a full set of Achievement Profile interviews with all five of the original founders of ProLingua Associates. If you have attended any of the recent international TESOL conventions, it is hard to miss this company's booth--there just is not the same "buzz" at the others. I saw them at San Antonio and again this past year, at Seattle, where I could not resist joining in the fray of avid lovers of "interactive play" stretching to get a good position from which to explore their new materials and some "oldies but goodies," too.

One of the nicest treasures I came away with that day in Seattle last March was a play for ESL called "**Stranger in Town**," by Lou Spaventa. I bought the play book and a CD-ROM "radio play" with good quality voices and some nice sound effects, and was excited about sharing it with my vocabulary class--students from the lowest three of five levels in our intensive English program--when I got home.

This play is about a main character who arrives in a small town, and starts to go about getting settled there. He meets nice people and bad people; some townsfolk are friendly; others, downright rude and unwelcoming. Through it all, as the main character goes through various experiences, his own personal history is slowly divulged as well. The story hits a nice pitch, with a fair amount of tension, and then the students are asked to imagine and create the final scene.

Lou Spaventa developed this play with the idea that ESL learners could readily understand and relate to the common experiences faced by a "stranger" in a new place: ordering food, finding a place to stay, looking for a job, making friends, etc...

And it really worked with my students. We would go through each scene, reading much of the play out loud, and with them also getting chances to act out certain parts. And then we would listen to that scene (and review previous ones) on the CD-ROM. It seemed like we really enjoyed tapping into this fictional world, and the students clearly could tell that one purpose of the story was to help them express (and understand) their own experiences as recent arrivals to America. The illustrations by Patrick Moran were very helpful, and I would use these sometimes at the start of a class to review different parts of the story.

When you go through a story with a group of students, it enriches nearly everything else you do with them, because words, phrases, and situations have a certain familiarity that everyone in the class shares a feeling for. The smiles, the laughter, and other emotions tied to the meaning of the language are powerful enablers and confidence builders.

I suggest taking a peek at the one or two [free scenes](#) available for reading at the ProLingua site, and I also invite you to take a glance at a short [online quiz](#) I prepared for my students on [surveymonkey.com](#), to give you some of the flavor of this language learning activity.

I firmly believe that products like this would not exist if not for thoughtful "mom and pop" publishing houses like ProLingua Associates. This article is my way of saying "thank you" to the folks at ProLingua for the love, care, and artfulness that they bring to their work.

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