



ESL MiniConference

Enid Cocke The Adventure of Learning



Late Summer
2008

Achievement
Profile: Enid
Cocke

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1. What is your main ESL activity now?

I retired from the English Language Program at Kansas State only a few months ago (in May, 2008) and have spent the summer in Colorado, so I don't have a current ESL activity. I still run into my students, and some have asked for tutoring, so I may keep involved in that way. The greatest motivation for retiring was to have the flexibility of schedule to allow travel at optimal times while my husband and I are still physically fit. For example, next month we will be trekking in the Everest region of Nepal.

2. How did you start your ESL related career?

I stumbled into my career in ESL. I was a GTA in the English Department at Kansas State University when a new person was needed to teach the one ESL support course the department offered. I was interested immediately, and I was chosen in part because I had lived abroad and been a second language learner myself. I was certainly equipped with empathy for the students, if not many other skills for the task. From the first day I loved the fascinating variety of students and I loved talking with them about language and finding ways to help them acquire my native tongue.

I went on to teach the international sections of composition and soon became the coordinator of ESL services for the department, conducting language screening and also directing the eight-week summer intensive program that had been

started in the department a couple of years earlier. At that time K-State didn't have a year-round intensive English program, but the Graduate School and the Provost felt an urgent need for one. In 1985 the Provost gave me his backing to start one. I conducted phone interviews with the directors of many programs, attended TESOL, visited the well-established program at the University of Kansas, and hosted David Eskey as a NAFSA consultant. I hired a secretary and three instructors and we opened our doors in the fall of 1986. Miraculously, 52 students enrolled, and the program was in the black, to the Provost's palpable relief. I directed the program for 12 years and taught for another ten. This fall (2008) over 300 students enrolled in the program!

3. What are some of the language/culture backgrounds with which you are most familiar?

The English Language Program has seen the various waves of students: first Taiwanese, then Japanese, then Koreans, more recently Saudis, and currently Chinese. But sometimes it is the individual student from a certain country who makes the deepest impression. For example, a Moroccan student I met over 20 years ago continues to keep in touch. There have always been students from Central and South America. It is fascinating to see the interactions (and sometimes clashes) among the various cultures.

As for my own language and cultural exposure, I have lived two years in France, one in Denmark, one in Germany, and half a year in Sweden. In all four countries I sought out the opportunity to study the language. In France it was a lecture hall with 80 students in it, and in Denmark it was a class of 16 or so. With the proper motivation I think it is possible to learn a language in both situations—if you study and if you keep trying to speak the language after you exit the classroom.

4. If you had to give three pieces of advice to a new teacher working with English language learners, what would these be?

First, recognize that there are different learning styles. We almost inevitably teach according to the way that we learn, but this recognition of differences is still key. I am an analytical learner. Give me a rule, and I can incorporate it into my speech – in time. In Danish tell me that the adverb comes before the verb in a dependent clause, and I've got it. But I remember the Israeli man in the same class who was an intuitive learner. The rules meant nothing to him, but I think he eventually absorbed the structures after enough of the language had washed over him. From personal experience I also know that I am a visual learner. I can't remember a word if I don't see it written down, so naturally, I cover the chalk board with words and examples when I teach. So recognize your own style and try to be aware of your students' learning styles.

Second, the obvious one, come to class with a well-prepared plan with a variety of activities, trying to keep your students' different learning styles in mind. But then don't be afraid to change your plan as you become aware of your students' needs.

Third, bring patience, respect, humor, and energy with you to the classroom. You need patience to go at your students' pace, to back up and repeat when you see an area where they need more help. You must show all your students respect, even the non-performing ones. If they feel that you don't respect them, you may have lost them for the term. Humor enlivens the class and brings you together as a community. The energy that you bring to your task leaves students marveling that the hour has passed so quickly.

5. What do you see as the most important issues facing the ESL/EFL language teaching profession today?

With the establishment of accreditation administered by our peers, we have taken a major step toward increased recognition for intensive English programs and for their practitioners as professionals. It is still difficult for an ESL teacher to provide for a family on his/her salary, but I hope improved salaries, teaching loads, and working conditions will become the norm.

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