



ESL MiniConference

Greg Kessler

Giving ESL Students (& Teachers) New Tools for Learning



Winter 2006-2007

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1. What is your main ESL activity now?

I wear a few different hats at the moment. I am the director of the Academic Oral Communication Program here at Ohio University. This involves overseeing and teaching in both the International Teaching Associates (ITA) program and our elective graduate student courses. This is the only direct ESL work that I am currently doing. The Other major area that I am involved in is teacher preparation. I have been teaching classes in our TESOL MA program for the past five years. We have a very rare focus on Computer Assisted Language Learning here and we offer a total of five courses in this area. Teaching these classes is what I enjoy doing most. I also teach our pedagogical phonology course.

2. How did you start your ESL related career?

I began teaching in Los Angeles in 1989. I had just moved there after finishing my BA in English and was looking through the newspaper for a job and came across an ESL position at a new all Japanese school. I had never thought of

teaching ESL. My BA was in poetry. Anyway, I went to the interview and the next day I was put to work building desks and designing curriculum. I knew nothing about teaching, but it felt extremely natural. My lack of pedagogical background was a constant source of inspiration and motivation. I basically jumped in head first and figured out what I was doing much later.

I was working with Japanese business leaders and their families. Most of the students were high level executives at the LA based North American headquarters for Panasonic, Sony, Mitsubishi and other large companies. The classes ranged from rather official business English to engaging in casual conversation. Many lessons focused on student requests such as how to tell jokes on the golf course. It was a lot of fun. I soon realized how exciting and rewarding it could be to teach and went back to school to get my TESOL MA.

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

At different times I have taught homogenous groups of Japanese, Korean, Brazilian, South African, Middle Eastern, and Indonesian students. It is so different to work with a homogeneous group of students and I think this is a very good way to get to know a culture. Each of these experiences has taught me something and I have valued them all. However, most of my ESL teaching has been in the US in diverse classrooms so it is hard to say that I am most familiar with any one group or culture. I am currently involved in long term projects in China and Eastern Europe so these are the groups that I am most interested in currently.

I have studied Spanish and Indonesian formally and learned some Korean, but I have never been a very good language student myself. In fact, I think this realization has helped me have a great amount of empathy for students. I realize how difficult it can be to learn a language and take this into account every day. When I travel for work I usually find myself in situations where everyone wants to use English so it makes language study more difficult. I have lived in Korea and Mexico for longer periods of time, but I have also taught in shorter consulting trips to Hong Kong, Japan, China, Greece, Kazakhstan and Egypt.

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

- Be Patient

There is a general rule of thumb that I have heard in the past that you should allow a student fifteen seconds to respond to a question. Fifteen seconds of silence can seem like an eternity to a new teacher, but it is time well spent. I have supervised many novice teachers who do not allow students the time necessary

to process their thoughts. Similarly, it seems that many new teachers do not take the time to listen to their students. After all, if you plan a lesson sometimes you can feel that you have to keep it on schedule. Often it is important to deviate from a lesson plan to really begin to teach. I think it is important to realize that lessons are like travel guides. If you do everything by the book you will not have the same adventure you would have had if you had used the book as a reference or springboard.

- Be Selective

Every lesson that you teach is the result of many decisions. If you use a textbook you decide how much to deviate from it, how much time to devote to any one segment and how much you allow the textbook to dictate your pedagogy. If you have any control over it, never let a textbook dictate pedagogy! Unless you are the author of the book it is probably not absolutely perfect for you, your teaching context and your students. If you create your own materials you need to put careful thought into their design. Just because you are teaching listening doesn't mean you can't also provide a grammar, vocabulary and writing lesson into the instruction. Every word in an instructional document or activity has significance; choose them carefully.

- Be Flexible

This may be the most important piece of advice. Sometimes it is impossible to predict how a day of instruction will proceed. Sometimes lessons fail miserably. Sometimes environmental circumstances demand flexibility. The conscious teacher can adapt to changing circumstances quickly and resiliently. For these teachers the most profound and meaningful lesson may be the unplanned or unexpected.

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

I have some very strong opinions on this topic. As an instructional technology educator I can't help but see this area as a great weakness in ESL teacher preparation. The role of technology in education is impossible to deny. Teachers must be prepared to harness the potential of technology in order to teach effectively in today's technologically sophisticated classroom. Unfortunately teachers are barely taught to have basic digital literacy skills. In most cases, they must rely on their own wherewithal to advance beyond this basic level of use.

It seems there is a small group of teachers who are enamored with technology and they seek out any and all resources available. However, the vast majority of teachers do not have appropriate background knowledge in the theory, methodology and materials associated with CALL. I think this problem is similar

to what TESOLers in recent decades identified as a deficit in the understanding of grammar among teachers.

My dissertation was an assessment of CALL preparation among TESOL MA programs throughout North America and it was surprising how little formal CALL preparation seems to be occurring. It was also troubling that graduates were typically displeased with the little preparation they did receive. In general I found that people are confident with their technology knowledge, but they are not using technology much for teaching.

I am currently part of a team of writers drafting TESOL's technology standards. I see this work as a promising step in the right direction. I hope that these standards contribute to changes in actual practice. In order to ensure that all teachers are able to utilize instructional technology effectively we must make language teacher technology courses available to them.

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