

Teaching Amid Change: Perspectives from 42 Years in ESL

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Betty Azar

Thank you for the introduction. And thank you, all of you wonderful TESOL people in the audience. When I sat down at my typewriter in 1978 and began to write my first textbook, I never, in my wildest imagination, dreamed that one day I would be here, speaking before you at the opening plenary of TESOL. I'll confess that this is a very special event for me and I'm honored to be here. And utterly amazed at myself that I'm actually doing this. At any rate, you make me feel very welcome.

And in return, I'd like to welcome you to the great and beautiful Pacific Northwest. I'm a born-and-bred Midwesterner, but the Pacific Northwest has been home to me for 25 years now. I live on Whidbey Island, a 50-mile long island just north of Seattle. From my house to the conference center is a 15-minute ferry ride and then a half-hour drive. So for me, getting to TESOL this year was exceptionally easy—except I couldn't help thinking as I came across on the ferry that it deprived me of one of one of my favorite parts of going to TESOL: sitting in the waiting area at the airport checking out the other passengers headed for the TESOL destination city, guessing who else is going to TESOL, saying to yourself, "Ah, that one over there looks like a TESOLer. And I bet that one is, too." Last year going to Tampa, I guessed right about two people in the waiting room—and even ended up sitting next to one of them during the opening plenary and having a nice chat.

I've been coming to TESOL for 30 years now. It used to be really easy to spot a TESOL person in an airport waiting room. Any combination of ethnic clothing, beaded earrings and Birkenstocks was a dead giveaway, myself included. I don't really know these days exactly what it is that makes us so recognizable to each other, but I do know what makes us special as a group of professionals—and I will share that perception with you at the end of my talk today.

But first, I need to go to the beginning and tell you that I started teaching ESL pretty much by accident in 1965 at the tender age of 24. (I'll do the arithmetic for you. I'm 65.) The point I'm trying to make is that I've been around the field for a long time. Fortunately, the theme for this year's conference is Tides of Change, and I've certainly seen lots of changes in our field in theories and methods and materials—and changes in myself as a teacher and materials writer, for that matter.

Starting with Grammar Translation as a college student of French, I've been around for the Audio-Lingual Method, Total Physical Response, Suggestopedia, the Silent Way, Notional-Functional, Peer Counseling, the Natural Approach, Community Language Learning, content-based teaching, task-based instruction, the lexical approach, and ever-evolving forms of grammar teaching and

communicative language teaching. And that's not even all of the options we have. On top of that, there are some in the field who say we are now in the "post-methods era." So my question is: What guides us as teachers amid all these changing tides? How do teachers and materials writers—in other words, we frontline practitioners—navigate the ever-changing currents to find our own way in our own teaching practices and principles?

To answer that, I can't speak for everyone, but I can share some of my experiences and observations and hope they perhaps resonate with some of you as you ask yourselves what guides you in your teaching and materials writing. And in my experience, if you're an English language teacher, you're almost by definition a materials writer in one way or another. English language teachers are inveterate creators of their own teaching materials, at least the ones I know. Somehow it's just part of who we are.

Let me start by telling you about a seminal experience early in my career, when I admittedly really didn't know what I was doing. I was a blank slate, but I learned some very important lessons about language teaching.

In my first year of teaching, I was hired to teach in an intensive summer institute at a university. It used the Lado-Fries audio-lingual method pretty much exclusively. As a new, untrained and inexperienced teacher, I was assigned to teach the red book, the pattern practice book, which pretty much consisted of repetitious oral drills of meaningless sentences (those are my words) for a whole hour. It was deadly, especially after lunch with the Iowa sun pouring in the windows. All of us had a hard time staying awake.

We were dealing with grammar patterns in the audio-lingual drills. The students had questions, so I let them ask them, and I answered them as best I could. I wrote examples on the board, then started preparing handouts with grammar exercises, played around with the structures in oral give-and-take, did some writing exercises, and added some conversation at the end of every class period, with the students in charge of choosing the topics.

One day my class was monitored by the director. I thought class had gone very well. He waited until the students had left, then became very alarmed, telling me that I didn't understand the theory behind the audio-lingual method, I was ruining the whole program, the students brains weren't being properly conditioned, and the students weren't going to learn English if I didn't do exactly what I was supposed to do.

In class the next day, I told the students we needed to follow the book only and exactly because that was the best way for them to learn English. The director had assured me of that. Well, the students weren't buying it and were, shall I say, vocal in their displeasure. They wanted to keep doing what we had been doing in class. I need to explain that these students were all headed for university study. They were experienced learners, many of them experienced language learners who were above the

level of the audio-lingual materials. They were in a hurry, had lots of questions about how English works, and wanted to try their wings in a variety of ways. They rebelled against returning to the pattern practice book.

I was caught between the students and the director, so I suggested a compromise: a tutorial class. I told the students we could meet at the end of the class day (at 4:00) for an hour every day. I told them we'd do "whatever you want to do. That hour is yours. I will be there."

To make a long story short, word got out about Mrs. Azar's after-hours tutorial. The room filled with students every day as students from other classes asked if they could join. We did pretty much what we'd been doing in class before we were directed to return solely to the pattern practice book. The students also did a lot of writing for me to mark. Yes, it was a lot of extra work for me, but I loved it. It was exciting teaching. It hooked me on ESL. This class was not just a tutorial for students. It was a major tutorial for their 24-year-old teacher. I am sure that I learned more than they did.

This experience with audio-lingual and the tutorial was very instructive—my experience with the notion that there was only one right, best way to teach language, and that teachers were only functionaries or facilitators of method, what I would call interchangeable automatons. If I have learned anything over the years, it is that there are many right ways to teach a second language. No one has all the answers. This means that teachers should never be expected, or expect, to go into any or all teaching situations with a preset method to rigidly follow or some doctrinaire ideological stance that they impose on the situation. To me, that takes the heart, the art, and the humanity out of what it means to be a language teacher.

So, to me, probably the most important guide for a teacher is first knowing his or her students—their needs, expectations, abilities, backgrounds, learning styles, language goals, and educational or work goals—and then adapting his or her teaching methods and materials to those particular students.

Amid all the changes in educational theory and practice, it seems to me that there is one crucial constant in effective teaching through the ages, and that is the capacity for empathy: the ability of a teacher to understand the learning experience through the eyes of his or her students, connect with the students, respond to their needs, adapt methods and materials, and work with them in partnership. Throughout my years in the classroom, my students were by far my most important guides. I've always said that I owe my textbooks to my students. They were my best teachers.

I also learned some things about how teachers make their choices during my encounter with the Silent Way, developed by Caleb Gattegno, another of the many tides in our ever-changing field. One of our faculty members was a real devotee of the Silent Way, so I would sit in on her classes, in the back, a fly on the wall. As she taught, she never said a word, in English or any other language. When she was looking for a particular word from the class, she'd use her hands, arms, and facial expressions

and point frantically at her colorful charts. But when the students had trouble coming up with the word she wanted, I could barely stop myself from just blurting it out, just telling them what the word was or how to pronounce it. Yes, I understood the principle that students need to create their own language and, yes, often teachers talk too much, but I decided that for me to teach the Silent Way I'd have to go to class with a roll of duct tape to put over my mouth.

The Silent Way wasn't for me—and for some very important reasons. As a teacher I need to talk and laugh with my students throughout the class period. That's how I create the kind of accepting, relaxed, fun learning environment I want in my classroom. It's also how I have fun as a teacher, and my enjoyment of teaching strongly affects the students' enjoyment of learning. One of my core beliefs as a teacher is that a good rapport with one's class is vital to good language teaching. A class and I need to “click” for me to feel I'm being my most effective as a teacher. I can't create that click without talking to and relating to my students as real people, and getting us all on the same side.

My way of interacting with a class—a constant verbal give-and-take with lots of humor—is part of who I am as a social being, and how I relate to people.

And, just as importantly, spontaneous give-and-take is also an integral part of my teaching methods. I felt then and still feel that “teacher talk” is a valuable resource for second language students, as long as it is carefully balanced with student talk, too, and students have ample opportunity to create their own language.

So to me, another very important component in what guides us as teachers is this: we have to recognize what methods are suitable for (1) who we are as people, (2) how we see our roles as teachers, and (3) how we believe we are most effective as teachers. And that cannot be the same for all teachers. Teachers need to let themselves be guided by knowing who they are and bring that person to the classroom, not invent a new persona or try to squeeze that person into someone else's idea of what a teacher is (just as I could never fit myself into roles required by the Audio-Lingual Method or the Silent Way, even though other teachers prospered in those roles).

Then there's the Natural Approach. Whenever I think of the Natural Approach, I think of Oscar. You've all had a student like Oscar, I'm sure. Oscar was 18 years old, from Peru. He placed in our beginning class at the intensive program, and about six weeks into the session I and the other teachers noticed that Oscar's English was improving very rapidly, a lot faster than the other students. So one day after class, I said to Oscar, “Your English is getting really good. Are you reading a lot? Are you watching a lot of television? Spending a lot of time with your host family?” And he said, “No, teacher, I don't have time for that. I have an American girlfriend.”

Oscar shows how important meaningful input is, and especially how important meaningful interaction is, plus the importance of motivation, using one's natural aptitudes, and getting lots of real-time experience with the language—all the things we try to encourage in our communicative

classrooms. Maybe we should create a new approach: the Dating Service Approach to Language Acquisition. I bet we'd get great research results.

At any rate, I learned a lot about what guided me as a teacher from my encounters with the Natural Approach and the theories of Stephen Krashen, who has had many positive influences on the field, especially in popularizing aspects of communicative language teaching.

The big buzz words at our curriculum meetings in the 70s were “communicative competence,” a term coined by Dell Hymes. Then the Natural Approach appeared in the early 80s. And ideas about communicative language teaching are still undergoing continual development and redefinition. I think the evolution of communicative language teaching is easily the most significant development in second language teaching during the time I've been in the field.

But those in the naturalist movement in language teaching argued, often zealously, (actually overzealously at times, I thought) against any teaching of grammar at all, to native speakers and non-native speakers alike. Indeed, grammar instruction all but disappeared in the United States and the United Kingdom school curricula for first language students because of the naturalist movement. It was under attack in second language teaching as well. And here I was, a brand-new author of grammar-based materials.

We practitioners run into a number of theories about second language acquisition and, when we do, I don't think we have any choice as teachers but to evaluate a theory by testing it against our own observations—saying yes, this makes sense to me, or no that doesn't coincide with my observations. In my case, zero-grammar and the premises upon which it was based didn't make sense to me nor did it reflect my experiences as a teacher or as a language learner myself. It was my observation that a grammar component in a balanced program of second language instruction was helpful for the students I taught—I'm not talking about all students, I'm talking about my students—and certainly my students seemed to think so, too. Of course, it's possible we were all simply delusional, but I don't think so. I think we teachers know when something we do in class works or doesn't work. We need to trust our own pedagogical observations, trust the validity of our own perceptions. We are often our own best guides. There's an expertise that comes from cumulative experience in the classroom that can't be learned in any other way.

One of my perceptions is that grammar teaching and communicative language teaching are not, and never have been, mutually exclusive. Those who say you can't teach communicatively if you teach explicit grammar are giving you a false choice. Grammar-based teaching and communicative teaching fit hand in glove. They are meant for each other.

And I certainly was not alone in trusting the observation that a grammar component was helpful for students. The numbers of teachers using grammar-based materials skyrocketed during the zero-grammar heyday of the 80s into the 90s. There was a real disconnect somewhere in our field.

Nor was I alone in the observation that grammar teaching could be blended with communicative teaching. It seems to me that practitioners (both teachers and materials writers) were ahead of the curve on that. In the many reviews of my textbooks that I've read (all written by teachers) starting back in the 80s, it was abundantly clear that many teachers had no intention of throwing the baby out, but were mixing a variety of communicative methods and materials into the bathwater, looking for what one teacher recently called "a hybrid that works."

So there we have another important guide. All of us are guided in very significant ways by our fellow teachers. I've learned a lot from reviews about what works for other teachers. But I also learned a whole lot about language teaching while drinking coffee in the faculty lounge between classes, or in numerous curriculum meetings, especially after some of the faculty returned from a TESOL conference. I love shop talk with other teachers. I have a new co-author now for the textbooks. She's an experienced teacher and an experienced materials writer. No matter how long I've been doing this, I continually learn from her. And she from me. I think we're representative of a lot of teachers—teachers teaching teachers, always open to new and better ways of doing what we do.

My favorite presentations at TESOL are always those by other teachers: how they use authentic materials (like fortune cookies or flower seed packages) or use the internet for restaurant review blogs (as in the program this year) or collect oral histories, or—something that's always interesting to me—how teachers deal with the grammar and writing problems of their Generation 1.5 students, the ones for whom accuracy within fluency did not "just happen" as naturalist theory would have it. There are several sessions related to that in this year's program. I love to read through the whole TESOL program and see what teachers are up to in their classes.

Experienced teachers who are still full of enthusiasm and still trying new things in their teaching are some of the best guides any of us could ever hope for. It seems to me that English language teachers are exceptionally resourceful and innovative, are great experimenters, constantly trying this and trying that. Teachers are researchers, too. Every day that they walk into the classroom and try something new, they're engaging in research. And when they share what they have learned about teaching and what works for them, they guide the rest of us in our own practices. A number of teachers share what they learn in their own teaching by presenting at conferences or by becoming published materials writers. Most of the textbooks you see in the exhibit hall were written by former or present classroom teachers, just like you.

And if I could take my hat off for a moment to my fellow materials writers. They are another important guide in the field. I have been strongly influenced and guided by other materials writers, especially when I was a new teacher.

There's a lot of on-the-job-training in learning to teach a second language effectively, and materials writers often give us footsteps to follow as we're seeking our own path as teachers. I'll mention just one materials writer who was an important guide for me in the beginning: Thomas Crowell, who

wrote *Index to Modern English*. That book was a real life-saver for me. My students asked me things about English grammar that I couldn't answer, which sent me running to his book. And his insights into how to make linguistic information about English accessible for second language students gave me the foundation, the starting point from which I later developed my own pedagogical grammar materials.

And that leads us to yet another important guide. It goes without saying that we are guided by the observations and ideas of those who study and write about language acquisition, the researchers and theorists, the scholars among us. Our field is rich in academic resources on second language teaching. And there has been an explosion in research in the past decade or so.

Two writers about language teaching who I found very helpful in my early teaching days were Wilga Rivers, who basically said at one point, and I'm paraphrasing, "If it works, use it." (I loved her pragmatism) and Earl Stevick, another pragmatist. I couldn't begin to list them all. There have been many more since then. I'm sure all of you can name mentors and teachers who have led you to changes and growth in your teaching practices.

Those who research and write about the teaching of language offer those of us who are practitioners a wealth of ideas and information to explore and evaluate. They support us, challenge us, inform us, and guide us in the decisions we make. But we are the ones who have to make the decisions about our own practices and principles. And I believe we practitioners are the ones who ultimately determine the directions our field takes by finding—eclectically and pragmatically—ways that work for us and our students.

I think what matters most in creating successful language learning experiences for our students is not any particular approach or method or materials, but the teacher—the observant, responsive, informed teacher making good choices for and with her or his students.

There is one other important part to what guides us. Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language takes teachers far beyond considerations purely of materials and method. Part of what guides us is our desire to foster cross-cultural understanding and international perspectives, which is just a daily part of our jobs. As a professional group, we are aware of, are especially sensitive to, and are respectful of cultural differences and diversity.

But as English language teachers in our day-to-day work with international students, we see beyond—or rather beneath—those differences. We see that our similarities as human beings are far greater and far deeper than cultural differences. One of the best parts of being a TESOL professional is getting to reach our hands across cultural barriers, connecting human being to human being with our students in ways that many people never get to experience.

I'd like to share one more story, about a correspondence I had with the Greater Greensboro North Carolina Public Library ESL Conversation Club. (If they could just say the name of their club,

I figured their English was pretty good!) One day in the mail, I received a booklet made to thank me for my books, a class project. You know when a student out of the blue comes up after class and tells you, “That was a really good class. I really learned a lot.” Or students get together and give you a small gift at the end of the term to thank you for your teaching? You get a rush, the cockles of your heart are warmed, and you say to yourself, “Yes, this is why I’m a teacher.” That’s what this correspondence was for me.

In their correspondence, the ESL Conversation Club said that they felt they knew me through my books, and that they could see that I knew them, and that they could tell I cared about their success. They ended by writing this: “As Mowgli used to say, ‘We are of one blood, you and us.’” And it was signed by people from seventeen countries: Brazil, Bosnia, Japan, Ukraine, Vietnam, the United States, Germany, Peru, Egypt, and more. A veritable mini-United Nations. They were, of course, quoting (not exactly but close enough) from *The Jungle Book*, by Rudyard Kipling, the winner of the 1907 Nobel Prize for Literature.

And now, 99 years later, I recently heard a radio interview with the winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature, Orhan Pamuk of Turkey. In the interview, he warned against buying into cultural generalizations or cultural stereotypes as ways of dividing the essential oneness of humanity. He said that he felt the role of literature, in particular his role as a novelist, is to make us understand that, “We are the other.” This is the kind of understanding we in English language teaching foster among real human beings every day of our work lives: the understanding that we’re all in this together, and we’re really not that different from one another; the understanding that there’s just one earth, and one humanity, and one global society.

When you think of all people from other cultures and countries this group in this room right now has touched—the literally millions of people we in this room have touched through our teaching and our writing—it’s clear that, collectively, TESOL professionals add up to a significant positive force in the goodwill and understanding we help create among the peoples of the world. And ultimately, that is what guides us in our professional lives.

Thank you.

There is a link to a video of this talk at the AzarGrammar.com [Author’s Corner page](#).