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# The Realities of Being a Part-time ESL Teacher

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The Realities of Being A  
Part-time ESL Teacher

Rebecca Jean Banken

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of  
Arts in Teaching degree at the School for International Training,  
Brattleboro, Vermont.

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This project by Rebecca Banken is accepted in its present form.

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Abstract:

In an attempt to describe the position of a part-time ESL teacher in a secondary school, this paper explores what is involved. The components of teaching as well as the components of learning are discussed. The paper also addresses issues faced by part-time ESL teachers and administrators and presents suggestions on how to cope with these issues.

## ABSTRACT

In an attempt to describe the position of a part-time ESL teacher in a secondary school, this paper explores what is involved. The components of teaching as well as the components of learning are discussed. The paper also addresses issues faced by part-time ESL teachers and administrators and presents suggestions on how to cope with these issues.

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Section 1

## INTRODUCTION

I have been a part-time ESL teacher for the past six years: two years in a large metropolitan area overseas; four years in a large metropolitan area in the Midwest. When I began teaching ESL in the States I worked in two secondary schools and two elementary schools. Currently, I am teaching in two secondary schools. The majority of my students are Southeast Asians.

Having had this background, I wanted to write about being a part-time ESL teacher for three reasons. First, I wanted to address ESL teachers in public school settings. Many of them are part-time; they teach students with a wide range of proficiencies in English and work in more than one location. By looking at the components of my teaching and the components of my students' learning, I have raised issues which most part-time ESL teachers face. Hopefully, this will be of practical use for them. Second, I wanted to address administrators. Too often, their information about ESL programs, students and teachers is based on statistics. They are not aware of what is going on in and out of the classroom with the teachers and students. I have tried to make the realities of this situation clearer. I hope this will lessen their misunderstandings. Third, I had personal reasons for choosing this topic. I wanted to write down my thoughts and feelings about what my role in the classroom was and what my students brought to the



classroom. I hoped it would help me to have a better perspective of my role as a part-time ESL teacher. It has been a growing experience for me.

Section 2

## METHOD USED

The best way for me to accomplish my goals in writing this paper was to keep a journal. I had written a journal several times before and found it a constructive way to look at and understand a situation.

I kept two journals: The first journal was written during a two-month period in the fall of 1983; the second journal was written during a two-month period the following spring. Having two journals was ideal for me; I could compare the information to see if it was consistent and I had more material to use. Further, the time between the journals gave me an opportunity to look at what I had written and decide what I wanted to continue to focus on.

The process of going from journal to final draft involved seven steps. First, I developed an outline which covered the components of my teaching and of my students' learning. Second, I marked specific parts in the journals which supported the outline. Third, using that information I wrote my first rough draft. However, it was not complete. I had not addressed all the issues I wanted and needed to move the paper from a personal level to a professional one. Therefore, for the fourth step I went through the rough draft and summarized the key points. This helped me to focus more on generalizations and less on specifics. Fifth, I reorganized the key points into a more coherent whole. Sixth, I selected one example for each major heading of the outline. Finally, I rewrote the paper into its final form.

Journaling as a method of research is not for everyone. It requires three important components -- consistency, honesty and introspectiveness. Being consistent was a struggle for me; however, with my first journal I learned the hard way just how important it was. Some days I would write late at night or a couple days later. I tried to rationalize the delay, saying that writing later would give me a better picture of what had taken place. I was mistaken; it was just the opposite. It made it more difficult for me to remember. With my second journal I wrote the same time every day after school. My mind was clear about the events of the day. I also found that writing at the end of my work day was therapeutic for me, because I seemed to empty myself of all which had taken place during the school day. Thus, I felt relaxed and more at peace with my job and myself.

Being honest was difficult, too. I thought that writing about the events of the day would give an honest and complete picture. That was only partly true. When I wrote about myself it was easy to be honest about my feelings; when I wrote about others I was not always able to understand what they were thinking or feeling. There were linguistic and cultural barriers. Therefore, I knew I had to be careful with my assumptions about others.

Being introspective was easy for me as it is a part of my personality. Kathleen M. Bailey and Robert Ochsner stated in their

research that this is the central characteristic in diary studies.<sup>1</sup> For me, being introspective was the key which linked all the factors together and pushed me to see new insights and patterns which emerged from my journal. Therefore, I would recommend journaling as a method for language teachers or learners who want to look at and understand themselves in their teaching and learning environments.

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen M. Bailey and Robert Ochsner, "A Methodological Review of the Diary Studies: Windmill Tilting or Social Science?" Second Language Acquisition Studies, ed. Kathleen M. Bailey, Michael H. Long and Sabrina Peck (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1983), p. 189.

### Section 3

#### COMPONENTS OF MY TEACHING

To better understand the realities of part-time ESL teaching, one has to look at the teaching components involved. Some of them are brought into the classroom by the teacher; some of them are already there due to the job itself. I have focused on five: class objectives, materials used, class management, team teaching and my personal approach to teaching.

I know I could not teach effectively without class objectives. They are the foundation on which I build my teaching. My class objectives are defined by who and what I teach. At both the junior and senior high, the general areas for which I was responsible were set by the curriculum. They were cultural awareness and listening and speaking, and within this, I set my own objectives.

My objectives for the junior high students emphasized culture in the United States and pronunciation. I felt if the students could improve in those two areas, they would be able to assimilate faster into this culture and be accepted more readily by their peers. Knowing about a culture is certainly not the same thing as understanding it, so I wanted to help the students develop skills to cope with American culture. As they would be experiencing this culture daily, I thought they would be motivated to learn more about it.

My class objectives were only partly successful with these students. Learning about American culture was more important to them

than listening and speaking. As most of them had been children when they left their countries, they did not remember much about their own culture so they were not tied to the past. Besides being open to learn about this culture, they really had no choice in the matter. Situations would come up outside the ESL classroom which required their knowledge and understanding of U.S. culture. To be able to function they had to know what behavior was acceptable or unacceptable to their teachers and classmates. This was especially true with their American peers who would make fun of them when they responded in a culturally inappropriate manner. The ESL students did not want to be laughed at so this motivated them to study culture seriously.

Pronunciation was different. Working to improve pronunciation was a difficult objective to fulfill. Most of the students would speak their first language at home with their family and at school with their Asian friends. The only place they would actively work on pronunciation was in class. Having to communicate with others was definitely a necessity, but they would get to a certain level and not improve. If others could understand what they were saying, that was all that mattered. Thus, there was not much motivation on their part to improve as pronunciation was not relevant. One consolation for me was knowing these students would have three more years of study at the high school so there would be more time for improvement.

My class objectives for the senior high students were similar to those for the junior high. Regarding culture, I wanted them to be better informed about the world, the United States, their community and

how they related to it. I felt this would help them to form their own opinions and discuss them with others. Regarding listening and speaking, I knew they had to improve their pronunciation. This would be the last opportunity for some of them to consciously practice difficult sounds as they would graduate in the spring and not continue in school.

Did I have success with these objectives? Again, the cultural awareness objectives were fulfilled more easily than those for listening and speaking, as the students' interest level and motivation were higher for culture. They remembered enough about their countries and cultures to know their world was not just the high school. They also knew they were world citizens and wanted to know more about America and its relationship to other countries and peoples. Thus, studying culture was relevant to them.

Pronunciation presented difficulties for them. In fact, they had a harder time with it than the junior high students. I attribute that to their being older and having a harder time breaking their bad habits of mispronunciation. They believed that if they could get their point across in a conversation, they did not care how they sounded, even if it was incorrect.

In conclusion, I met my class objectives for cultural awareness at both the junior and senior high schools. The students' response seemed positive; they wanted to study more about culture. However, it was difficult for me to tell how much faster they assimilated into this culture because of this knowledge.

I did not meet my listening and speaking objectives with the junior high and senior high students. I could not motivate them to improve their pronunciation, because they did not want to and this was extremely frustrating for me. I recognize now that my expectations did not fit their expectations.

Professionals need to understand the importance of class objectives. The ESL teacher must know the students' needs before she can succeed in meeting her class objectives. This knowledge helps the teacher adjust her expectations to fit the students. Reevaluating them periodically helps the program, students and teacher. Administrators need to understand the amount of time which is involved in teaching ESL students culture, listening and speaking, grammar, reading and writing. Too often they have thought because they can communicate with an ESL student, the student understands everything which is said or implied. Administrators have to realize it takes a long time for the ESL student to become equipped with the tools he or she needs to cope in a new culture.

Besides class objectives, another component of my teaching was the choice of materials used in the classroom. They were instrumental in meeting my class objectives; thus, I had to have material which would be relevant to the students and motivate them to participate in class discussions. However, I was faced with not having any class sets of books because of the limited ESL budget. The administrators in our district believed the ESL program would exist for a short time because



the refugee population would dwindle after a few years. They did not want to invest large sums of money for materials; most of the money was allocated for teachers' salaries. Therefore, I xeroxed student copies from my books on cultural awareness. As I felt limited by the number of pages and cost, I knew the material would have to be short and to the point. With listening and speaking I planned to use the blackboard.

It was difficult to find material for cultural awareness to use at the junior high because there was not much which addressed their age and interest level. The material was either written for the elementary student, which was too childish, or it was written for the high school student, which was too mature. I used the following: News For You, A Conversation Book, Book One and Book Two by Tina Kasloff Carver and Sandra Douglas Fotinos, Points of View by George Pifer and Nancy Whisler Mutoh, Beyond Culture by Deena R. Levine and Mara B. Adelman, English Through Poetry by Mary Ann Christison, and Word Games In English by Dwight Spenser.

I would recommend News For You and A Conversation Book, Book One and Book Two. News For You is a mini-newspaper printed especially for the ESL student and can be used with intermediate and advanced levels. My junior high students reacted positively to it as they enjoyed reading the articles and discussing them. Since they had already seen something on television or heard something from their teachers and peers about the articles, their interest level was high. They wanted to know the complete story and be able to understand it as

well. A Conversation Book, Book One and Book Two covers a wide range of topics from parts of the body to ethnic groups. Book One is for the beginning level; Book Two is for the intermediate and advanced levels. The students responded well to both books. All of them were able to participate to some degree in the discussions and found the topics interesting and relevant.

It was more difficult to find good material for speaking and listening. As I stated earlier, most of the students were not interested in improving their pronunciation, so I knew I had to look for material which would challenge and motivate them. I used Improving Spoken English by Joan Morley and would recommend it to other ESL teachers. It has well thought-out pronunciation exercises and innovative listening exercises which can be taught in ten minute segments. My intermediate and advanced students liked this book because they could understand the pronunciation exercises. They also had fun competing with each other in the listening exercises. Knowing they would be working on these exercises for short periods of time helped the students to concentrate and work hard in class.

One other technique I tried for listening and speaking was using rock music. The students would listen to a current rock song. Then I would give them the words to the song with some of them left out and we would go through the song line by line or phrase by phrase. They had to fill in the blanks. The students loved to do this as they enjoyed music. I also liked this technique as it was a good way to cover listening, communication, vocabulary, spelling and culture. The only

problem was that some of the song material was too adult for them to understand, or, if they did understand, it was much too embarrassing for them to discuss. Therefore, I limited its use in the classroom.

It was much easier to find cultural material to use with the high school students as there were more topics which addressed their needs and interest level. They were not threatened by in-depth discussions and wanted to give their opinions and share their ideas. I found the following books helpful: Beyond Language by Deena R. Levine and Mara B. Adelman, Points of View by George Pifer and Nancy Whisler Mutoh, Look Who's Talking by Mary Ann Christison and Sharron Bassano, Values Clarification by Sidney B. Simon, Leland W. Howe and Howard Kirschenbaum, USA Today, and A Conversation Book, Book One by Tina Kasloff Carver and Sandra Douglas Fotinos.

I would recommend Points of View, Values Clarification, USA Today, and A Conversation Book, Book One. Points of View covers many topics from friendship to the elderly. The questions in the book cannot be answered with a yes or no, so the students are forced to think about what they believe. It is written for intermediate and advanced ESL students. My students liked the book; they found the topics were relevant and wanted to discuss them. Values Clarification contains exercises which challenge a person's values. I felt these exercises would help to initiate discussion among the student so I used this book with the intermediate and advanced levels. They liked doing the exercises, because they were questioning their values and wanted to discuss them with their peers. However, to do these exercises, a

teacher must have a good relationship established with her students, and the students must feel comfortable with each other. Otherwise, the students may not open up to discuss their values, because they will feel too insecure to share them with people they do not trust.

USA Today is a newspaper containing articles written about American society, which I used with the advanced level. The students liked the fact that they were reading a newspaper which other Americans were reading. The articles about divorce, drugs, drinking and so forth were real to them, because they had friends who had experienced these things and they wanted to talk about these topics. A Conversation Book, Book One which I described earlier, I used with the beginning level. The students liked the material and enjoyed doing the exercises.

It was difficult to find interesting material for speaking and listening at the senior high level; thus, I faced the same problem with these students as with those students in the junior high. I had difficulty finding material which would motivate them to want to improve their pronunciation. I used Pronunciation Contrasts In English by Don L. F. Nilsen and Alleen Pace Nilsen and rock music. I would recommend both. Pronunciation Contrasts In English is designed to deal with pronunciation difficulties; the exercises are short and to the point. I used it with the intermediate and advanced levels. They were willing to do the exercises for five to ten minutes. However, the students liked the rock music better, so I used it with all the English levels. The beginning students studied vocabulary and speaking; the

intermediate and advanced students studied idioms and culture. They were able to talk about the adult themes in the song material as those themes were relevant to them.

Thus, cultural material for the junior high level was harder to find than for the senior high level, as most ESL books covering cultural awareness were written for a more mature audience. It was not difficult to find material for listening and speaking, but it was difficult to find material which was interesting to the students. Further, their unwillingness to study listening and speaking was also problematic. Therefore, I spent more time covering cultural awareness because of the students' interest in it.

Regarding material, I see four questions which ESL teachers must ask themselves before they order books. First, who is the book for and will it meet those students' needs? Second, will the book meet the needs of the next year's students? Third, will the book be written in and not used again? Fourth, is it financially possible to order a set of books? The important thing for ESL teachers to remember is not to be limited by books. There are good materials which complement books: articles from newspapers, music or games.

Administrators need to remember that the ESL student has a lot of catching up to do with his American peers. This will probably be the only opportunity for many of them to study English. Therefore, it is essential for the ESL programs to receive ample funds for materials. Whether the ESL program is growing or declining, it is a good investment. If the ESL program increases, good material will be needed

for a long time; if the program decreases, the material could be used by students in other programs like reading.

Besides class objectives and materials used, another important component of my teaching was class management. I saw class management as a way to make the ESL classes run more smoothly for me. This meant telling the students what the rules were at the beginning of the school year because once they knew them, I would not have to spend time repeating and explaining them and thus it would allow me more time to teach. Even though I did not have many rules, those I chose worked well with the students. They were:

1. students must come to class on time
2. students cannot skip class
3. students must turn their assignments in on time
4. students must work cooperatively with each other

Also, I saw discipline as a way to make life easier for the students. Having come from stricter and more traditional systems than the American school system, the ESL students were uncertain as to what was acceptable or unacceptable behavior. They needed to know what the boundaries were and what the school expected of them to be able to function more easily in their surroundings. All of the students received a school handbook which contained many rules. However, they could not understand these booklets because they lacked the necessary English vocabulary. Therefore, it was essential for me to explain the rules as I knew no one else would. I knew the way I approached the students would be significant in their acceptance of these rules. If

they did not like my approach, they would not take the rules seriously and there would be discipline problems.

At the junior high, I was strict at the beginning of the year for two reasons. First, was the students' level of maturity. They were at a difficult age: while they were no longer the children of elementary school, they were not the young adults of high school. Their bodies were experiencing many physical changes while their emotions remained immature. They definitely needed more rules to guide their behavior than the high school students. Second, many of them had had me as their ESL teacher before. I could not be too friendly as they needed to know I held them accountable. I did not want them to take advantage of our relationship.

At the high school, the situation was different. The school did not have as many rules as the junior high, so some of the students mistook this as meaning there were no rules so that they could do what they wanted. They saw themselves as adults. Therefore, I tried to approach them as adults.

Were my approaches to these two groups successful? I do not know. The students listened to what I had to say; however, an approach was one thing and the reality of the situation was another. In my opinion, there were four factors which created tension for the ESL students and in some cases lead to discipline problems in school: the age of the students, their family situation, their war experiences, and their being a minority.

The first factor, age, made it difficult. Many of the ESL students were older than their I-94 card said.<sup>2</sup> When they were in the refugee camps, many of them were advised by other refugees to lie about their ages. They would receive more welfare assistance in the United States if they were under eighteen, and they would be able to have more time to get free public education. Therefore, there were many students over the age of eighteen in school who were used to making their own choices and who did not like the rules. Thus, some of them skipped their classes, neglected their homework and fought with other students.

Second, the family situation was a factor. If a student was an unaccompanied minor, he was cut off from his close network of family support. Sometimes the emotional stress of being in this country without his family prevented him from focusing on school. He would be too depressed to cope. Or, since he had made many decisions on his own when he fled his country and experienced a lot of independence, it was difficult to listen, follow the rules and be accountable to others.

Third, the war experience was a factor. Many of the students, especially the recent arrivals, grew up with death and destruction. Some of them killed the enemy. They never had a childhood. The deep sense of loss -- loved ones, country, culture -- was overwhelming.

<sup>2</sup> An I-94 card is an alien registration card which is required documentation for a refugee entering the United States.



These emotional scars would take years to heal. This added to the emotional stress at school and would sometimes result in withdrawal, depression or aggressive behavior.

Finally, being a minority was a factor. I tried to emphasize to the students that it was especially important for them to obey the rules. As the Asian population was smaller than the Caucasian population, the Asian student who broke a rule would be remembered more easily than a white student. There were also racial incidents between these groups. Most of the Asian males responded to these incidents by fighting because they did not want to lose face. Their honor, family name and whole identity were involved. Therefore, they had difficulty understanding the school rules about fighting. Why should they be suspended if they did not start the fight? Why not fight if an American student harassed them? If they were challenged, they fought.

Even though I had a good relationship with my students, I was still a white, middle-class, American female who was not a minority. I knew the male students dismissed much of what I said about not fighting. However, the students were able to vent their feelings of anger and frustration in the ESL classroom which helped them to calm down. Also, these incidents brought the ESL students closer together as a group. They were able to say things to each other which helped them more than I could.

In conclusion, I approached my students in different ways due to their levels of maturity. The students seemed to accept my approach and were able to function in school. Those who had problems with

discipline were those whose age, family situation, war experience and minority status affected them the most.

I believe it is important for the ESL teacher to create a warm, loving and secure learning environment where her students can share what they think and feel, where they can be accepted completely. Also, she needs to clearly explain the school rules and stress how important it is for the students to obey them because she wants them to function successfully with their American peers.

The ESL teacher becomes the advocate for the ESL students, because most Asian parents will not contradict the school system. As the ESL teacher represents the students and their parents, she is the one who has to get out of the ESL classroom and talk to the teachers, administrators and American students. She is the one who must communicate the ESL students' special background and needs. Therefore, the ESL teacher is an important link between the ESL student and school.

Administrators need to understand the minority status of the ESL students and the problems involved, especially in racial incidents. These incidents must be diffused before they become bigger problems. For example, at the high school it helped to have two assistant principals come to the ESL classroom and talk to the students. They told the students how much they wanted them to be a part of the school and would do everything possible to stop the harassment they were experiencing. However, they wanted the ESL students to stop fighting. They explained what the consequences would be if they continued to

fight. This helped to diffuse the tension, because the ESL students realized these administrators cared about them. Also, it helped to have men in positions of power talk to them, because the students respected authority.

At the junior high there was a committee which helped to diffuse racial tension. The Human Rights Committee was made up of students and staff. It worked well. One reason this committee was successful was because the punishment was decided by the students and not the teachers. It was amazing to see what peers could teach their peers. It was also successful because it helped to sensitize teachers to the problems of minority students. Therefore, there are practical and meaningful ways for teachers and administrators to diffuse racial tension and help ESL students feel they are a part of the school community.

Along with class objectives, material used and class management, another important component of my teaching was team teaching. Many ESL teachers in the public schools work part-time. Some of them share their positions with other ESL teachers. I shared my position with the junior high lead person and the senior high lead person, who were responsible for the ESL programs at their school. I had both positive and negative experiences when I team taught.

On the one hand, team teaching was positive for three reasons. First, there was the support system. One of the joys of team teaching was having this support system with the teacher with whom you were

working. For me, being able to talk to either of the teachers about the classes and how the students were doing helped me professionally and personally. Professionally, it helped to get feedback and exchange ideas about reaching my class objectives. Personally, it helped to know I was not alone. I shared my thoughts and feelings with two people who would know exactly what I meant and who were committed to help the students as much as possible.

Second, there was variety. I am the type of person who does not like the same routine every day and become restless if I have to follow it. Therefore, team teaching gave me the opportunity to have a nontraditional teaching schedule. Monday and Tuesday I taught at the junior high, Wednesday I did not teach and Thursday and Friday I taught at the high school. I liked being with two different faculties, student bodies and ESL programs. I found it challenging and not boring.

Third, there was the time factor. I had only two days a week with each class which helped me to focus on my lesson plans. I had to be well-prepared and organized. Also, it was healthy for the students and I to spend a limited amount of time together. They were able to experience two teachers with different personalities and teaching styles. I did not become bored teaching them, because I knew I had only two days with each class. Thus, I felt able to enjoy them more.

On the other hand, I found two aspects of team teaching which made it a negative experience. First, there was scheduling which took a great amount of time. Schedules had to be juggled to find time to talk

about and plan the program, come to agreement about the students' grades, group the students according to their ability, share valuable information about the students and so forth. Having two teachers with different schedules made it important to communicate. For example, what took place between the other ESL teacher and students at the high school on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday might have an effect on their behavior in my class on Thursday or Friday. Thus, I had to know and be prepared.

Second, there was the lack of continuity which caused confusion for the students and me. The students would often forget what their assignments were as they had two teachers they were responsible to. Many of them failed to turn in their homework because it was too difficult for them to keep an assignment so they lost it. Switching back and forth between two teachers who taught different areas of ESL confused as well as frustrated them. I also found it confusing because I had only two days at both schools to work on culture, listening and speaking. There could be no continuity knowing that Friday's discussion could not be continued until the following Thursday. This made it difficult to prepare lessons and teach.

In conclusion, team teaching was both a positive and a negative experience for me. It was positive due to the professional and personal support I received from the other ESL teachers, the variety which challenged me and the time factor which helped me to focus on my objectives. It was negative due to scheduling which took an enormous

amount of time and to the lack of continuity which caused confusion for the students and me.

Team teaching affects ESL teachers and administrators. As team teaching takes much time and communication, ESL teachers should have a regular time scheduled each week to meet with their team teachers. This is essential for the good of the program, the students and the teachers. Administrators should give ESL teachers who are team teaching sufficient meeting time in addition to preparation time in their schedules. Also, if they hire ESL teachers with similar goals for the program and students, they will help to build a good foundation for the ESL program and for the professional relationship between team teachers. Therefore, administrators have an important role in developing a team teaching approach.

The final component was my approach to teaching. For me, this component was the most important one. If I did not know what my approach was, I could not grow professionally because I would have no direction or goals.

In ESL teaching, my role as teacher is instrumental in the classroom in affecting three areas: control, the learning environment and the relationships with the students. The first area, control, is influenced by me both in and out of the classroom. In the classroom, I am responsible for choosing the materials, presenting lessons, testing and evaluating the students, assessing the students' affective and cognitive needs, communicating to the students which behavior is

acceptable or unacceptable and setting goals for the students and myself. Outside the classroom, I must communicate with the family or sponsors of my students, other teachers and administrators, and if possible, the community, especially since I work with refugees.

However, I do not have control in a rigid or traditional sense over my students. I do not center all the learning around me because the focus is on the students, so they can be involved as much as possible.

The second area, the learning environment, is affected by my role as teacher in that I determine the environment which is secure. A learning environment is one which I have tried to make the students as comfortable as possible. It is one where the students do not feel threatened by my redefined role in the classroom nor the active role I ask them to take in the learning process. It is one where they can be themselves. It is set up this way for the students because I know they learn best when they are comfortable with their surroundings, with themselves and with me.

The third area is how my role as teacher affects my interaction with the students. I try to be open to the verbal and nonverbal feedback of my students. Then I try to be secure enough about who I am so I do not take it in a personal way and realize it is all involved in the students' process of academic and personal growth. I also try to see my students as individuals who bring their needs to the class, as this approach is a wholistic and humanistic one. Further, I strive to

respect each student's world as this provides a foundation for learning, communication and growth.

In the past, my role as teacher was not a positive one in the areas of control, learning environment and interaction with the students. In the area of control I was too teacher-centered. This was due to the insecurities I had about being an ESL teacher, the job itself and the expectations of the students. Teaching conversational English overseas for two years to middle-class Japanese did not prepare me for refugee students. What should I concentrate on? What were their special needs? What did they want from me? Since I was not confident about the situation, I tried to hide my fears. I over-compensated and became rigid. I was afraid of losing control so I controlled too much by centering much of the learning on me. I did that by monopolizing the conversations and not letting the students interact much with each other.

The job itself also added to teacher control. This was especially true when other teachers wanted to talk to me about a particular student. Too many times they should have dealt directly with that person. The ESL students noticed this and thought I had more power than I actually did. They continually came to me with requests, so I did more for them and became more involved than I should have.

The students' expectations made the situation worse. Most of them came from Southeast Asia where the teacher was respected and honored as the most significant person in class. Therefore, they easily gave up more control to me because of their cultural background and, in a way,



they were learning about culture through the way in which I defined my role as a teacher.

In the area of learning environment, I felt I was more successful. I tried to make the students feel comfortable by being personable with them and using humor. As time went by, they felt less threatened and risked more by opening up. I saw this as part of the healing process for refugee students because the students would be more ready to learn if their traumas had been addressed. I think it helped, but I knew some of the students would not completely recover from their war experiences.

This area of my interaction with the students was positive and negative. On the one hand, I saw my students as individuals. The classes were small, which made it easier to be personal with each other. In some ways we were a family. The students came to me with their problems and knew I would try to help. They trusted me and knew I was their advocate. On the other hand, my interaction with the students became too emotionally involved. I knew refugee students had great needs as they had gone through so much hell to come to the United States. All of them had suffered some kind of loss. The closer we got, the more I took on the role of surrogate mother or older sister. I began to put my relationship with the students above my lesson plans. For example, if the class got off the subject to address the needs of a student, I did not mind. I felt their personal needs were more important than anything else. This was true up to a degree, but I lost my perspective. The balance between the students' affective and

cognitive needs was absent, so a mutual dependency developed which was too stressful. After two years, I was emotionally exhausted.

My teaching role slowly improved this past year in the area of control, learning environment and interaction with the students. There were three reasons for this. First, I was more secure about my capabilities as a teacher of refugee students. I had two years of experience to draw on and knew what to expect. I knew my strengths and weaknesses and was more confident about my teaching role. I saw the students' affective and cognitive needs as complementing and not rivaling each other thus allowing for a balance between these needs. The students also observed what was going on with me and seemed to be willing to take more risks as learners.

Second, the students' expectations of what a school and teacher should be were changing. The longer they were separated from their country and its culture, the less rigid and more open to American ways they became. They realized the teacher did not always have to center the language exercises around herself. This gave me the opportunity to use material which would actively involve the students, so we were free from the traditional roles of student and teacher.

Third, my job had changed. I was no longer the lead staff person at the high school, responsible for the ESL program. My responsibilities had been reduced which meant I no longer worked on the students' schedules, talked to their parents or sponsors or made the final decisions. I could not have had more control even if I had wanted it. This helped the students and I to interact in a better way.

The students knew I was not able to do as much for them as I had in the past so they would ask others for help. I was not as personally involved with them which helped me to be less emotionally involved. We were no longer mutually dependent which lessened the pressure and tension in our relationship.

In conclusion, my role as a teacher was influenced by my approach to teaching. In the past, my teaching had not been positive in the areas of control, learning environment and interaction with the students. However, this past year it had slowly improved due to my growing confidence, the students' changed expectations and a reduction of my job responsibilities. Thus, I showed myself I can change and improve professionally and personally.

The role of the ESL teacher is important to both teachers and administrators. ESL teachers should write down what they see their role to be in the ESL classroom. This is a good exercise in comparing realism and idealism. They might see something which will either reinforce what they are already doing or will motivate them to change. Administrators should develop an ESL job description which will best fit the affective and cognitive needs of the refugee students. Hopefully, the ESL candidate would have a previous language learning experience and cross-cultural experience because those experiences would help to sensitize a teacher to the needs of her students better.

This section has dealt with the five components of my teaching: class objectives, materials, class management, team teaching and my approach to teaching. There are probably some teachers who would

disagree with the components I have chosen. Yet, these components have influenced me the most as a teacher in the past and I see them continuing to influence my professional and personal growth in the future.

#### Section 4

### COMPONENTS OF THE STUDENTS' LEARNING

If I focus only on the components of teaching, my understanding of part-time ESL teaching will be incomplete. The components of the students' learning are as important as my components of teaching. Therefore, I have focused on four: family, education, mental health and maturity.

The first component, family, influences the students' learning in three ways. First, the family is the basic unit of society in Asian countries. Compared to the nuclear family structure found in the United States, the Asian family is radically different.<sup>3</sup> An individual's identity is secondary to his family membership. Families are judged on the behavior of individual members, so the role of the family is to govern the behavior of its members. What the family decides, the individual does. Therefore, the family controls and directs its individuals; this has a powerful influence on the students. For example, the family influences the students' choices concerning education.

Second, family background is important. The refugees who fled their countries in 1975 had had professional, managerial and technical

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Dept. of Education, "Indochinese Family Structure," Indochinese Adjustment Services Manual and Directory, (Washington, D.C.: n.p., n.d.), p. 84.

skills and were well-educated; those who fled after 1980 had fewer job skills and less education.<sup>4</sup> This was true for the families of my students and it influenced the students' learning. The students who first enrolled in the school district came from families where their fathers had had a lot of education and good jobs. These families had high expectations for their children. They wanted their children to do well in school, graduate and go to college. They would thus have many opportunities to succeed in this society. However, the students who enrolled later came from families where their fathers had had little education and menial jobs. Their expectations were less for their children. Usually, they wanted their children to complete their high school education. They knew it was important in American society to have a high school diploma because it was difficult to get a job without one. Thus, family background seems to influence the students' learning.

The situation of the family is also important. Many of the students come to the United States with their parents. However, there are some who have come without, those who are with relatives and those who are unaccompanied minors. These students are usually males. Because their families do not have enough money to buy freedom for everyone, they will often send their eldest son who would be recruited

<sup>4</sup> J. Donald Cohon, "Psychological Adaptation and Dysfunction among Refugees," International Migration Review, 15 (1981), 263.

by the communist army if he remained.<sup>5</sup> Also, it is less dangerous for a boy to escape than a girl. Many of the families who want to flee receive letters from their relatives in the United States telling about the hardships of escape. In 1982, statistics showed that one out of two Vietnamese refugees was victimized by pirates once or even several times at sea, and 40 percent died after fleeing.<sup>6</sup> However, most of the students had their parents with them and those who did not either came with a relative or were unaccompanied minors.

Whether a student has someone from his family to live with or not seems to make a difference in his ability to succeed in school. As stated earlier, the family is the source of identity for Asians. Without this support, it is difficult for a student to function well in school. Those students who live with their parents or a relative have family support and do well in school; those students who are unaccompanied minors have more difficulty because there are no family members to give them the support they need.

Both the students who are with family and those who are not experience family conflict. For those who are with their families, there is conflict as the adults and children learn new ways of life. They have different expectations. What happens when a daughter wants to try out for cheerleading and her parents do not want her to expose

<sup>5</sup> Lynell Burmark - Parasuraman and Lan Nguyen The Process of Americanization: Problems of the Vietnamese Refugees (Hayward, California: Instructional Services Division, 1981), p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Burmark-Parasuraman and Nguyen, p. 47.

her legs? What happens when the children have better English than their parents and are given more responsibilities? In both cases there is conflict. These students also experience conflict when they act like their American peers at school and act in their traditional roles at home. This results because of the necessity on the part of the students to function biculturally. There is conflict for the students because the school represents the new dominant culture and the family represents the old culture.<sup>7</sup> Their parents accuse them of rejecting their culture and identity. Sometimes this conflict upsets the student so much that he becomes too distracted or depressed to study.

Those students who are here without their families also experience family conflict. Their families expect them to send money home. Before they come here, these students have a mistaken idea of how easy it is to earn money in America. Once they arrive, they realize how difficult it is. They have to learn English first and even if they do, it is still difficult to earn a large amount of money at minimum wage. However, their families do not understand this, so it causes conflict between them. The students often try to work thirty or forty hours a week to meet their family's expectations. This gives them less time to study. It seems that the unaccompanied minors, as well as the students who live with their families, experience family conflict which affects their learning.

<sup>7</sup> "Indochinese Family Structure," p. 84.



In conclusion, the family as the basic unit of society in Asian culture has a powerful role. The family background, education and position in society influences the students' expectations. The present situation of the family influences the students' school performance and causes family conflicts. Thus, in my teaching experience, the family is an important component of the students' learning.

Professionals need to understand the Asian family. ESL teachers should know the family backgrounds of their students as these influence the students' performance in school. This will make the ESL teachers more aware of the expectations and attitudes of the families toward education. Administrators need to recognize the important role the family has in Asian culture and the background of these students so they can understand the conflicts of the ESL students

A second component of the students' learning consisted of educational attitudes and background. First, there are the ideas many Asians have about education. ESL students come from countries where education is held in high esteem. Compared to an American child, the Asian child is generally under more intense pressure to study. Coming from cultures which place high value on learning, many Asian parents pressure their children to succeed and this pressure can cause conflict. There was a Vietnamese father who came to a parent-teacher conference. He complained about his lazy son because his son had not received all A's. The father felt his son's report card was bad and was disappointed in his son's performance. Even though I explained how

difficult it was to compete with American students when his son had lived here only three years, the father was not satisfied. He continued to lecture his son on doing better, which the son resented. He showed his resentment by not studying as much as he had before.

Adding to these pressures are the unrealistic expectations of the ESL student and his parents. Most of the students want to go to the University of Minnesota to continue their education and their parents agree with them. I often disagree because I feel some of these students could not compete successfully with their American peers, because they have studied only two or three years in an American high school. Many have not developed skills in research or critical thinking, because most learning in Asian countries involves memorization and repetition.<sup>8</sup> Most of the course work is dictated by the teachers and copied by the students causing the students to become dependent on the teacher as the source of knowledge. As teachers have such elevated positions, the students do not ask questions, so there is little student participation in class discussions. Therefore, I believe the University is not always the best choice for all the students because I know they need more help due to their low English proficiency. I often try to persuade them to attend other public or private colleges in the area where the classes are smaller and they will receive more help. However, many refuse to do this because for them the University is prestigious and they believe it to be the best

<sup>8</sup> Burmark-Parasuraman and Nguyen, p. 71.

school to attend. These unreal expectations cause conflicts for the students because their expectations are too idealistic. They expect to be able to compete equally with their American peers even though they are handicapped by their English. For example, I taught a Vietnamese student who graduated third in his high school senior class. After a year at the University, he had a nervous breakdown, because it was harder to compete and excel. He could not cope with the pressure and his expectations were unrealistic.

The second consideration of education was the disruption of schooling. Most of the Asian students had experienced disruption which added to their learning problems and frustrations. Many of them had had no formal instruction since 1975. For example, a Vietnamese student's schooling stopped in 1975 when Saigon fell. When he enrolled at the high school in 1983, he had not attended school for eight years except for a minimal amount of English instruction in the refugee camp where he had lived for two years. Because of this, it is difficult for him to sit in school all day and to concentrate during his forty-five minute classes. He is not accustomed to it. Since he was not accountable to any teachers in camp, he found it difficult to be accountable to the teachers here. However, at least he and others like him could read and write in their own language.

There are some students who are illiterate in their first language. They had attended school in their native country for a short time, but the war had disrupted their schooling. They were so young when this happened, they forgot how to or never learned to read and

write in their own language. These students seem to have more trouble learning the English language. They cannot transfer any of their skills in reading and writing from their first language because they have none. Thus, the disruption of schooling appears to cause learning problems for the students.

In conclusion, many Asian ideas about education put the students under intense pressure to succeed and give them unrealistic expectations which cause conflicts. The disruption of learning adds to these conflicts because the students lack the necessary learning skills to succeed in school. From my experience, educational attitudes and background greatly influence the students' learning ability in English.

Professionals need to understand the role of education in most Asian cultures. It is important for ESL teachers to look at their students' expectations and guide them in finding a realistic approach. They can take their high school seniors to observe a variety of colleges and vocational schools, which will give the students an opportunity to compare programs. Administrators need to realize the importance of education to Asians. Asian students must have opportunities made available for them to attend public school as long as possible. In my district, students can attend until the age of twenty, which lessens the pressure on them.

Besides the components of family and education, there is the component of mental health. This is an important component of the students' learning because they have experienced so much trauma due to

the war, migration and adjustment process and all of these factors affect their learning.

Most of the students had spent part of their lives in conditions of continuing violence. Added to these experiences was the interaction of these stressed children with their traumatized parents and other significant adults in their lives. The combination of this excessive stress with the starvation many of these students experienced in early childhood has presented a syndrome similar to those of concentration camp survivors.<sup>9</sup>

Many of my students told me about their war experiences. Some saw a mother or sister starve to death; others saw people killed by soldiers. I even know of one student who killed a Vietcong soldier. All of this trauma affects their learning. I have had some students whose behavior has become aggressive and volatile due to their war experiences of suffering and death. Either they were put on medication or they were taken out of the school. Some fight a lot and were extremely defensive when anyone touched them or said one bad word to them. The trauma of war seems to interfere with their learning.

The second factor was migration. Research done by Harding and Looney suggests trauma related to the flight out of one's country, as well as the loss of individuality due to placement in massive refugee

<sup>9</sup> Earl E. Huyck and Rona Fields, "Impact of Resettlement on Refugee Children," International Migration Review, 15 (1981), 250.

camps affects mental health.<sup>10</sup> Also, Bar-Yosef in his research found migration is an interruption of life's natural expectations which causes cognitive stress.<sup>11</sup>

My students often talk about the escape from their country and life in the refugee camps. Both were traumatic for them. Many of those who escaped by boat often experienced hunger, robbery, or rape. Those who escaped by land encountered hunger and death. Most of the refugee camps were dirty, crowded and lacking in good food. The following excerpt is from a paper written by one of my students:<sup>12</sup>

I left my country because of the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge were trying to take over my country by killing people and starving them to death. Each day all we saw were people dying and begging for food. We sneaked out of the country with a couple of other families. While we were running into the forest we heard guns shooting after us. We were very lucky that nobody got hurt. We walked to Thailand and it took about six days to get there. We had few rests and very little food to eat.

Then we got to a camp. It was a refugee camp in Thailand. The place was very dirty and crowded. They didn't give us much space. We had to stay inside the fence. My parents and I wanted to leave but we didn't have much choice. We either stayed in the refugee camp or went back to our country and died. So we decided to stay. We got free food every week. The food was terrible and they gave us very little. Each family got six bowls of rice and three sunfish each week. One bowl of rice didn't even feed one person for a day. So each day we had to make rice soup. We didn't get much water either to clean ourselves and to cook.

<sup>10</sup> Joan P. Rudnik and Larry P. Molstad, "Implications of Cross Cultural Foster Care: Stages of Adjustment," (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, 1984), p.3.

<sup>11</sup> Henry P. David, "Involuntary International Migration: Adaptation of Refugees," International Migration, 7, No. 314 (1969), 70.

<sup>12</sup> S.P., "My Journey to America from Cambodia," (n.p.: n.p., 1985), p. 1.

This story is typical of what happened to many students. The trauma of escape and camp life are not forgotten easily. I am supportive when the students want to talk about this in class, because I feel it is positive for them to express it. I see it as part of the process of accepting the trauma they have experienced and dealing with it rather than avoiding it. Of course, this works with the intermediate and advanced students who know the language well enough to express themselves. It is different for the beginners who cannot express themselves well. Therefore, I watch for physical signs of stress. One of the beginners kept leaving the ESL tutor room to go to the bathroom and throw up. He remembered people dying on the boat and others ate them because they were starving. His progress in ESL is slow and I believe it is due to his traumatic experiences on the boat. His experience and other students' experiences lead me to believe that the trauma of migration does affect learning ability.

The third factor concerning mental health is the adjustment process itself. Two studies about refugee mental health were done in Seattle and San Francisco; the Seattle study showed that cultural adaptation takes time and illnesses persist during the process while the San Francisco study showed depression as one of the biggest problems for refugees.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Cohon, p. 261.

Many of the students experience stomachaches and headaches. I believe these are often psychosomatic due to their feelings of grief and loss. Also, most of the students try to learn English as quickly as possible. Then they realize how hard it is to learn and become discouraged. Adding to this discouragement are the letters they receive from their families. At first they are happy to have heard from them, but soon they become depressed because they realize they might never see them again. I can tell when a student has received a letter because he becomes despondent, sad and shows no interest in class work. The adjustment process takes a long time and some students may never adjust because the trauma is too much. In my estimation, the adjustment process does interfere with the students' learning.

In conclusion, mental health was an important component. The students' mental health was affected by the violence of war, the trauma of migration and the depression of the adjustment process. All of these factors influenced the students' learning.

Professionals need to understand the importance of mental health to refugees. I feel ESL teachers should let their students talk about their grief, because it is important for the students to share their feelings with other refugees and not feel alone. Also, as the students improve in their English, they should be given the opportunity to write their stories about the war, migration and adjustment. It can help them to understand their past and, hopefully, be proud of it. Administrators need to realize the trauma these students have experienced. They need to understand that some of the students'



problems in school are a direct result of their mental health problems and it will take a long time for them to overcome.

The final component of the students' learning is maturity which I see as self-image and interaction. First, there was self-image. The students who have positive self-images seem to be those who have gone through the grieving process, overcome it and feel positive about themselves. They are motivated to do their assignments and usually do well in school. The students who have negative self-images are those who continue to grieve and are overwhelmed by their feelings of depression. They feel guilty because they are alive while other family members and friends are dead or they feel guilty because they are living in a free country while their family and friends are not. Either way, they do not like themselves. This causes a lack of motivation to study which means they do not do well in school. In my experience, self-image seems to be an important part of maturity which influences students' learning.

Second, there is interaction with others. Many of the Asian students are older than the American students in age and in life experiences. It is difficult for the Asian students over twenty to relate to the American students under eighteen. In life experience, the Asians are also more mature. Since they have lived through war, escaped and adjusted to a new culture, they do not have much in common with the American students. Therefore, many of the ESL students interact only with other ESL students, especially those from their

native country, because they feel these students understand them better than anyone. These students do not succeed in learning English as rapidly as those who interact with native English speakers.

Observations by Ann K. Fatham suggest that when speakers of the same language are isolated from each other, they learn English more successfully than when they are together.<sup>14</sup> I agree, but found it difficult to isolate the students. However, the ESL tutoring program at the high school did help this situation. American students receive class credit for tutoring beginning ESL students. The Asian students are forced to speak in English as their tutors do not understand their language. This interaction is positive and usually helps to improve the English of the ESL students. Thus, interaction appears to be an important part of maturity which influences the students' learning.

In conclusion, I divided the component of maturity into self-image and interaction with others. If the self-image of a student is positive, he seems to do better in school; if his self-image is negative, he seems not to study and does poorly. It also appears that the students who interact positively with others, are more successful in learning English than those who do not. Thus, in my experience, a student needs to have a good self-image and to interact positively with others in order to reach a level of maturity which results in a worthwhile learning experience.

<sup>14</sup> Ann K. Fatham, "Variables Affecting the Successful Learning of English as a Second Language," TESOL Quarterly, 10, No. 4 (1976), p. 441.

Professionals need to promote a positive self-image and interaction among ESL students. ESL teachers need to find better ways to help their students develop positive self-images and find more opportunities to have their students interact with American students. Administrators need to find ways to publicize the stories of their ESL students to the entire school district and community. This could be done by contacting the local newspaper and T.V. station. Also, they need to continue to make the ESL students feel they are a part of the school community, which will help to improve the students' self-image and interaction.

This section has dealt with the four components of the students' learning; family, education, mental health and maturity. The components of family and education are influenced by Asian culture. The components of mental health and maturity are influenced by war. These have helped to shape the students the most as learners. However, there are negative as well as positive aspects to these components; thus, I continually marvel at the progress the refugee students are making in school and in the community. They are an inspiration to many American students and teachers.

Section 5

## CONCLUSION

My intention here was to give readers, especially part-time ESL teachers and administrators, a comprehensive look at a part-time ESL position, thereby clarifying issues and dispelling misconceptions. Most of the issues do not have easy answers. Yet, if teachers and administrators are sensitive, well-informed and open to the needs of ESL students, the ESL program in their school district will be strong enough to face the issues and grow in positive ways.

This paper has helped me to look at my teaching role in the classroom and hopefully it will help me in the future. As I wrote this paper, I learned that I had been accepted as a teacher trainer in a refugee camp in Phanat Nikhom, Thailand, for a year. I will train Thai teachers to teach English to adolescent refugees.

I look at this position as an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity because I will share the knowledge and expertise of my four years teaching adolescent refugees. Knowing what refugee students face once they enroll in a public school in the United States will help me to sensitize the Thai teachers to their students' needs. I also see this as a challenge because none of the Thai teachers has taught in an American public school system. Therefore, I think it will be difficult for them to relate to my experiences. Will I be able to train them to be sensitive to their students' needs not only for camp but for the

future? Will I be able to successfully communicate my experience in an American public school? Will this program really help the refugee students adjust to school in America? Thus, I have many questions which cannot be answered until I begin my job.

The reaction of my students to my leaving has been interesting. Most of them expressed a desire to go with me as they lived in one of the Thai refugee camps. Even though their camp experiences were unpleasant, Thailand represented a part of their past. It was part of Asia and a part of their identity. I also believe that they wanted me to experience being a stranger in a land known to them, just as they had experienced being strangers here in a land known to me.

I am uncertain, scared, excited and hopeful as to what my experiences will be in Thailand, but I am certain I have made the right decision. This decision will lead me to new directions in professional and personal ways.

## APPENDIX

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