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Forum

Wisdom from Experience – Thoughts from Stevick Award Winners

According to the website of the Christian English Language Educators Association (CELEA), which also publishes this journal: “The Earl W. Stevick Award honors members of the English language teaching profession who embody some of the characteristics of Dr. Stevick in their teaching, mentoring of teachers, scholarship, service to the profession, and living out the life of Christ in this profession.”

To date, from 2017–2022 there have been six winners of this prestigious award. Given the collective wisdom they represent, we asked them to share with our readers key lessons they have learned over the course of their careers. Five of the six winners were able to contribute to this invited Forum, which we present in chronological order of receiving the award.

What Have I Learned? Four Answers

Robin Gingerich

Winner of the 2017 Earl W. Stevick Award

At a recent faculty assembly, the Human Resources director called me to the front of the room to recognize me for 25 years of service to LCC International University. Afterwards, I wondered, what was I recognized for exactly? Twenty-five years of teaching? Twenty-five years of administrative duties? Then I realized it was probably for twenty-five years of faithfulness and tenacity—nothing more than just showing up and learning lessons. I am not a flashy person or outstanding in any way. I love my work and I have learned a few lessons over the years.

First, stay flexible and open to the Spirit. I love routines. I create personal and professional routines to guide my days and months. I feel confident and stable when I know what will happen next. But teaching demands adaptability and resiliency. I know that for every project, the result might not look much like the initial plan. A lesson changes the second I realize that the technology I normally utilize is cut off by an internet glitch; on the spot, I must trust my intuition and the Holy Spirit to engage my students in a different way. The next day, my schedule is upended by an unannounced visit from a Lithuanian school teacher. I must stop to listen and help even as the tasks at the desk are waiting. At the end of the day, I see that my carefully crafted plans were turned upside-down, and it all worked out better than I could have planned. I will never be perfectly prepared for any lesson, meeting, or presentation. Sometimes I actually hear myself say things that I never could have planned. God’s words come pouring out

of me when I least expect them, but when I most need them. I am still learning to welcome the disruptions and stay flexible to allow the Holy Spirit to guide and provide. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13, NIV).

Second, I have learned to ask a “second question.” Listening is vital to understanding anything well, especially in a multicultural situation. But it is so tempting to dominate a conversation with my ideas, my experience, or my advice. Teachers love to talk, and I am no exception. I have learned to resist the temptation to interrupt. Asking the first question is easy. “What did you think of the reading?” Asking the second question takes patience. “Can you tell me more about that?” For native speakers and for language learners, a “second question” welcomes the speaker to explain, to expand, or to offer a deeper answer. This semester my group of 30 freshmen included students from 13 different countries. We all needed many opportunities to listen well to each other. These “second questions” offer the speaker a listening ear and an open mind to their ideas as they formulate and reformulate their words. “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4).

Third, when the music starts, always choose to dance. I am not particularly graceful or poised. But, twelve years ago, I leaped out of my comfort zone and began dance lessons. I joined a group of energetic Lithuanian ladies who love to enjoy life. We are not professionals, but we have annual festivals and parties. I have learned a lot from being a dance student. Dancing helps me to remember what it feels like to be a student who is learning a new language; I am reminded that my students need thoughtful review as they learn vocabulary and syntax. Dancing is risky; the dance floor is public, and people are watching. I am reminded that when I ask my students to speak in English, I am also asking them to risk. Dancing takes concentration; you must focus your attention to keep in step with everyone. I need additional concentration as my dance lessons are in Lithuanian. I am reminded that when I ask my students to take a test, they too must concentrate and that can be hard. Dancing is a release of tension; when I am dancing, I forget all about my administrative tasks as I enjoy the energy of the music. I hope that I can provide space for my students to relieve their tension and offer space for laughter and joy during our classes. I would hope that all students and teachers have an outlet for their souls to relax, to enjoy, and to move freely. So now when the music starts, I jump up and start dancing because I am learning

new skills along with my students. “Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with timbrel and harp” (Psalm 149:3).

Fourth, remain faithful. Some days are hard. I often fail my students by not having enough energy to explain things well. Some months are long. Winters in Lithuania are cold and the daylight hours are few. But over the years, I have learned to keep showing up, despite rain, sun, or snow. Being faithful has its own rewards. Over time, I have made many Lithuanian friends who have accepted me with all my shortcomings. Over time, I have developed trusting relationships with colleagues. Relationships don’t blossom overnight. Good relationships take many coffees and long walks together. In fall 2021, when the US withdrew from Afghanistan, our Afghani students were distraught. Faithfully listening to their stories helped me to begin to understand their stress. In spring 2022, when war broke out in Ukraine, our faculty quickly realized that faithfully coming to class provided a much-needed routine for our war-affected students. “Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man” (Proverbs 3:3–4).

I have learned other lessons, too. Some lessons were stressful and hard to accept. Other lessons were delightful and brought joy. I reflect on the faculty assembly and the award for serving at LCC International University. I am humbled by God’s generous mercy and unending love as He teaches me more and more each day. I still have a lot to learn, but may I always be a faithful learner.

Dr. Robin Gingerich is an associate professor at LCC International University in Lithuania. She currently chairs the English Department, which includes an MA program in TESOL, a BA program in English, and an intensive English program (PRIME). She also teaches TESOL courses and writing courses in the BA program and the PRIME program. Robin has given professional development workshops for English teachers in Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, Russia, Albania, Turkey, Estonia, and Congo. Her specializations are curriculum development, teacher knowledge, and TESOL methods.

Lessons Learned from Teaching

Marilyn Lewis

Winner of the 2018 Earl W. Stevick Award

The lessons reported here are based on my experience of teaching students of various ages in a number of countries and also of observing others teaching. They are by no means

exhaustive.

(1) Use your talents. One way of expressing this first lesson would be to say, “Be yourself, rather than trying to imitate others.” An example of trying to borrow the talents of others comes to mind from two teachers I once observed. One was someone who always entertained his colleagues in the morning tea room but who became serious (and rather boring) in front of the class. When asked about why this was he said, “Isn’t that how teachers are meant to be?” The second teacher was exactly the opposite. By nature, he was thoughtful and on the quiet side, but in the middle of a lesson he would sometimes come out with a joke, which was often irrelevant and certainly failed to amuse his students. During the after-class debriefing, he said he had observed a teacher who was by nature humorous and who often had his students laughing as they learned. “I thought I’d try to be like him.” In each of those cases the teacher failed to use the talent he had (love of humour, a patient listener) in favour of trying to imitate the talents of others.

Sometimes we don’t know our own talents well enough to use them in class. In that case, one lesson I have learned is to ask others to remind us of what we do well. At whatever stage of one’s career it’s never too late to invite in an observer and to ask for feedback along these lines. “You know me already as a friend and colleague. Please tell me if I am using the best parts of my personality in front of the class.”

(2) Go with the flow? Another lesson is worded as a question. What “flows” should influence us as teachers? The word *flow* could refer to what is happening around us in the classroom and school or it could refer to the wider world of educational changes. In the classroom, there are times when we have to abandon our lesson plans, however worthy they are, in favour of adjusting to what is happening around us. Maybe the wild weather has made the class restless and we have to move to an activity that will calm them down. Maybe the activity we chose is too hard for the class, and instead of reprimanding them for failing to complete it we can model humility with words such as these. “I think I chose something too difficult for that task. Let’s switch to something else.” Occasionally it is good to blame ourselves, not the learners.

When it comes to the wider flow of educational changes, sometimes the answer to the question is “No.” Over the years, methods and approaches have come and gone in language teaching as well as in other subjects, sometimes in an almost circular movement. One lesson

learned is that since students are all different, and learn in a range of ways, it can be a good idea to swim against the flow by varying the classroom tasks to suit students' preferences and abilities rather than insisting on the latest idea. Memorisation is a case in point. There have been times when this practice was taboo, yet some students would make up their own rhymes particularly to remember grammar rules.

(3) Love the unlovely. Another lesson I have learned from teaching a range of ages is that while some students are easy to appreciate, it is the ones who are most annoying, disruptive, and inattentive who most need our attention. Showing them Christian love and care may not be easy but it reaps rewards. This doesn't mean ignoring bad behaviour, but rather combining discipline with words that let them know of their strengths, however few these may be. Here are a couple of examples of what I have learned to say to misbehaving young learners. "I was surprised to see you playing around with your friend instead of answering that difficult question, because I have noticed that you are especially good with questions that others find difficult." "That looks as if it must be a good joke. Would you like to come out the front and share it with us or is it one that's better left for lunchtime?" Once, in an end-of-year card, a primary school boy who was known for being disruptive wrote something to his teacher along these lines. "Even when you have to tell us off for misbehaving you still look as if you like us." In other words, the lesson learned is to combine firmness with showing an appreciation of the student.

Maybe the saying about not judging a book by its cover applies here. Looking at a student's results in tests and examinations may not be the best way to predict that person's future. People who fail to shine at school may rise to great heights later and, of course, vice versa. The "book's cover" can refer to more than academic achievement. A joking, lively exterior can hide a shy individual who will benefit from being grouped with people he or she can relate to for out-of-class activities.

(4) It's time to mentor. Learning how to assist newer teachers is another lesson learned over the years. The move from being mentored oneself to mentoring others can be seamless. Looking back on how others encouraged us early in our careers can be one starting point. What I learned from the kindness of senior teachers in my early career days became a model of ways in which I could, eventually, mentor others. As one example, in my first year of teaching I overreacted and sent a boy to the principal for something not very serious. By morning tea time I was expecting the principal to say something negative to me but my fear was needless. He came

and sat at my table and spoke along these lines. “It was good that you felt you could turn to me when you had a problem. I’m here to support you.”

His example reminded me in later years that I could support new colleagues by walking alongside them without being judgemental. That made me avoid making critical comments or responding to their own self-criticism with a comment like “Oh don’t worry. That’s nothing.” If the teacher thinks it is something serious then that has to be the starting point for our support.

(5) Learn from the student. The final lesson that comes to mind relates to what one learns from students. For me, this has applied most dramatically in the case of refugees. Their life stories before they arrive in our classes can teach us a great deal about how people overcome tragedies. More mundanely, there are lessons to be learned from students every day, one being about perseverance. In the words of Robert Bruce as he watched the spider, “If at first you don’t succeed then try, try and try again.” It can be inspiring to watch “weaker” students who are determined to master something new.

There are many other lessons I have learned during my teaching career, but the five I have explained above are some lessons about teacher-student relationships. I look forward to reading what others have learned.

Marilyn Lewis has taught English and other languages in New Zealand, India, and Cambodia, where she has lived. In her “retirement,” she continues to enjoy leading workshops in person and online. She has written and co-written numerous articles and books, including Teaching Speaking with Melissa K. Smith and Tasha Bleistein (from TESOL Press, 2020).

Lessons Learned as a Christian TESOL Scholar and Practitioner

Michael Pasquale

Winner of the 2019 Earl W. Stevick Award

I have recently marked twenty years as an educator at a Christian liberal arts university. Given the nature of higher education in these troubled times, I don’t take that position for granted. I consider the role of professor as one that allows me to live out my vocation as a servant of Jesus Christ and as a scholar of applied linguistics and TESOL. *Soli Deo Gloria*. Three lessons stand out to me as I look back on my tenure so far.

(1) Community. We are often taught at an early age to think of our own career trajectory, to figure out how we can best succeed in life. The North American society in which I have been raised has put a primary emphasis on individual choice and success. However, I can’t stress

enough how important it is for us to be in community with one another. We can and should be members of multiple layers of community, whether a temporal one such as a semester class, or more enduring ones such as a campus community, a church body, or a professional organization such as CELEA or TESOL. Live into these communities in which you belong and draw inspiration and support so that you can be a blessing and give and serve others.

I have been grateful for the friendships made over the years through CELEA. I had the privilege of helping to lead the transition from the old TESOL caucus model to the establishment of the new, independent CELEA organization. It wasn't easy, but it was very fulfilling to dream, set goals, and work alongside colleagues. I was thankful to serve as the first president of CELEA and those with whom I served in those early days have remained dear friends and colleagues.

(2) Collaboration. I have been blessed with so many fruitful and life-giving examples of collaboration in my career, from team teaching a course on C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien in Oxford on a study abroad trip to co-authoring an article or book with a colleague. At times when a solo effort may have led me to stop when faced with writer's block, working together with colleagues has been a blessing. Find ways to work with others and bless those around you, such as mentoring students and new colleagues. If you are having a hard time thinking about that next step in your scholarship journey, consider co-presenting at a conference or co-authoring a journal article.

My most precious collaborations have been with my wife Monica, a fellow TESOL professional. We are blessed to not only live life together but to serve and work together at times. We complement each other and that only strengthens our workshop, project, or class together. For the past several summers we have worked together to teach English to minor league baseball players. My love of the game of baseball (and sometimes my life as a baseball fan dominates) is balanced by her precision in planning the best English for Specific Purposes lessons for our students.

(3) Collegiality. This sums up these ideas, which all basically relate. What I have learned is the deep need that we have for each other. We need grace as we engage in conversation. We need to show hospitality to our students and colleagues. We need to live out the virtue of love and gratitude to those around us. In this we will find blessing and encouragement in a world filled with stress, anxiety, and fear.

Our words and actions matter in such a world. Let us speak to each other with words of kindness, grace, and gratitude. Let us live out the words shared by the apostle Paul in the book of Philippians 4:5–7 (NIV): “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Michael Pasquale is professor of Linguistics and Director of the MA TESOL program at Cornerstone University, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.A.

Lessons Learned from a Lifetime of Teaching

Kitty Purgason

Winner of the 2020 Earl W. Stevick Award

When I was in elementary school, we used to sing, “Make new friends, but keep the old; one is silver and the other gold.” That’s true of my teaching as well. There is always something new to learn: new research on vocabulary acquisition, new techniques for motivating and engaging learners, new priorities for teaching structures based on corpus linguistics, new ways to use technology to facilitate learning across the miles, and so on. But the old can also be of value. I try to repurpose techniques from the 1960s, such as dialogues and drills, for the 21st century. I don’t want to throw out controlled composition, weekly quizzes, or anything else from the past without extracting from those techniques what might still be valuable. I also want to keep learning and not be afraid of new challenges, concepts, viewpoints, techniques, or technology. Eagerly keeping up with what is new while esteeming what is good from the past is a matter of balance—and the value of balance is another lesson I’ve learned. Accuracy and fluency. Reading/writing and speaking/listening. Input and output. Published materials and student-generated materials. Vocabulary and grammar. Language and content. Quiet and interaction. L1 use or translanguaging and prioritizing the target language. Hard work and relaxed fun. Teacher control and student initiative. (That one is from Earl Stevick!) There are so many aspects of learning and teaching that are in opposition like this. While there might be situations in which one side is weighted more heavily than the other for the sake of student needs, in general, I prefer a level seesaw. Here’s one example from my own recent language learning experience. I can enjoy watching the series *Justice* in Arabic, soaking in the sounds and picking up some phrases.

But unless I sit down and study, watching the show won't take me any further than a greater appreciation for the language.

I believe that the more active the learning, the more effective it is. Action can be achieved in many different ways: A clear goal with achievable steps toward that goal. A fast-paced lesson with multiple components. Lots of opportunities for learners to take responsibility. The body giving the brain a helping hand in the work of learning and remembering.

I have also learned how important love is. Love for our subject (language and pedagogy) and love for our students are like plants and pollinating insects. Their "mutualistic relationship" benefits both. When I love English or experience joy in conveying new ideas in a new language, I long for my students to feel that too, and as I seek to understand how to make that happen for the individuals in my class, I come to love my students. When I love my students, I want to provide what is best for them and that leads me to learn more about pedagogy and the English language, coming to love my subject more, too.

I am grateful for the many things I have learned over the years—from schooling, conferences, reading, colleagues, students, and experience. One might say I'm both smart and qualified. But there have been many times when I have been stumped by the teaching, administrative, or personal challenges in front of me. That's when I rely on this breath prayer: "Resting in his love, wisdom from above" (from, e.g., Psalm 127:2; 1 Peter 5:7; Isaiah 43:4; Psalm 23; James 2:17), which I adopted at a particularly challenging point in my career. It reminds me that God is the source of wisdom. He can help me remember something important, make a new connection, come up with a creative idea, or persevere to find the answer. And whatever the outcome, God loves me, with an everlasting love I can count on and rest in.

Every time I teach a class, I come away with ideas for how I might improve it in the future. The same is true for writing. I want to keep tinkering with it, adding or subtracting ideas, or rephrasing what I've written. Then I remember that I have also learned that the perfect can be the enemy of the good (as Voltaire, and probably many others, have said). So, here is my essay on some of the lessons I've learned, at least the ones which have come to my mind at this point in my life.

Kitty Barnhouse Purgason is professor emerita of TESOL at Biola University. She has a PhD in Applied Linguistics from UCLA. She has lived, studied, served, or taught in India, Russia, Korea, China, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Mauritania, Indonesia, Kuwait, Oman, Vietnam, Spain, and Tajikistan. She is a three-time Fulbright fellow and a U.S. State Department English Language

Specialist. She is the author of Professional Guidelines for Christian English Teachers (William Carey Library).

Reflections on Life Lessons

Mary Shepard Wong

Winner of the 2022 Earl W. Stevick Award

Many thanks to the editors of the IJC&ELT for this opportunity to share 3–5 of my life’s lessons. I encourage readers to write and share their own and look forward to reading them!

(1) Seek God. “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). This verse is not a personal promise that God will give us what we desire, rather it speaks to the reward that results from seeking God. When we delight in God, our hearts and desires are changed to align with his. As Hudson Taylor put it, “I used to ask God to help me. Then I asked if I might help him do his work through me.” We find our purpose in serving God with all that we are, including all of our talents and our flaws. It is there that we find fulfilment. When I pray passionately for outcomes that are not granted, I accept the loss at first with disappointment and gradually with thanks, surrendering my will to God’s, seeking his desires, not mine. Sometimes this leads to a change of circumstances in which I am presented the very thing I had surrendered. Moreover, there have been times that the loss of what I wanted allows for an even greater opportunity. There are also times I’m left to wonder why there is seemingly no response, but this results in a deeper dependency on God, which I have come to learn is the desire of my heart.

(2) Follow your dreams. Seeking God does not mean abandoning our passions and dreams, as they are part of us and how God made us. I resonate with William Carey’s words “To know the will of God we need an open Bible and an open map” (and I might add, an open mind). At Urbana ’79, I felt called to Asia. My dreams have taken me to China, Thailand, and Burma through teaching and later through scholarship. However, my dreams have changed over time. For example, I taught in Thailand annually for over 20 years (pre-COVID). Early on, I learned of refugee camps along the Thai/Burma border. After finally getting access and learning more, I took groups of students to teach in the camps a few times, and eventually also in Myanmar. This led to a shift from teaching just English to teaching for peace and social justice, and a more complex understanding of language-in-education policies and practices. I had no grand research plan at first. I just followed my dreams like bread crumbs, and these lead to bigger dreams.

(3) Take risks. “Dream a dream so big that unless God intervenes it will fail” ~ Hudson Taylor. “Expect great things from God, receive great things from God” ~ William Carey. These two quotes inspire me. But I must say that a Ph.D. did not at first seem like a remote possibility for me, nor did authoring/editing five books, getting three Fulbrights, or winning external grant bids. I would not have been able to plan all this from the start, or believe it was achievable. I just followed my dreams and prayed, and one thing led to another. Kind of like finding my “ZPD” (à la Vygotsky) of goal-setting and accomplishing a dream, led to a slightly bigger one. I gave a keynote address in Paris at TESOL France on professional development not long ago, and asked the participants to provide a one-page visual of their professional journey with dates across the top and boxes of accomplishments below. I had mine as an example on a PowerPoint slide. Then I thought this might be intimidating to a new teacher (as it would have been to me decades ago). I thought of sharing a visual that showed my failures, an “anti-CV” if you will, with all the grants I didn’t get, the journal submissions that were rejected, the schools that didn’t accept me. It would be three times as long as my accomplishments. That turned out to be one of the best take-aways of the talk. We need to take risks and embrace failure to accomplish greater things, but we can take it one step at a time. Bread crumbs, follow the bread crumbs, and find your ZPD for dreams so you can dare to take one little risk at a time.

(4) Sort out your priorities. One of my favorite lines in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* is the exchange when Hermione states: “Now, if you two don’t mind, I’m going to bed before either of you come up with another clever idea to get us killed or worse . . . expelled!” and Ron retorts, “She needs to sort out her priorities!” While on my Fulbright at Yangon University, I stayed in housing where two young girls did my laundry. I asked to have my *clean* silk shirts and longyis pressed. They did so, but only after first laundering them with all the other clothes, ruining the silk fabric and running the colors. When handed my garments, I asked what happened. Not much more was said, but I sensed they were hurt and I had tarnished our relationship, which took a while to repair. I learned “people are more important than things,” including silk shirts, publications, and the whole lot. Sorting out priorities, keeping God first, is one of those lessons I have had to relearn time and again. I try to be aware of how conflicts and setbacks can provide an opportunity to recalibrate.

(5) Collaborate. My joy and success in publishing has come through collaboration. I asked Suresh Canagarajah to co-edit my first scholarly book, Zoltán Dörnyei and Carolyn

Kristjánsson my second, and Ahmar Mahboob, my third. In international grant applications, I pulled in Andy Xuesong Gao and Icy Lee, and currently I am researching educators in exile from Myanmar with a graduate student, David Kareng from Kachin State, Myanmar. I have learned that collaboration is vital to my scholarship. Who could you collaborate with on a project of your dreams?

Mary Shepard Wong is a three-time Fulbright Scholar and author/editor of five books. Her doctorate is in International Education (USC), and two master's degrees are in East Asian Languages and Cultures (UCLA) and TESOL (APU). She is Professor and Director of TESOL at Azusa Pacific University in southern California. She has taught for 40 years in the US, Hong Kong, Thailand and Myanmar, conducted over 150 presentations, and written over 30 articles and chapters. Her teaching, writing, and research focus on critical intercultural studies, social justice and peacebuilding in Myanmar, and religious faith in teacher identity and development.