
Not So Inexperienced After All

Tom Lynch

During the day I coordinate a Housing Assistance Program and supervise a couple of carpenters to provide minor repairs and major rehabilitation for elderly and disabled homeowners. I am also a part-time ESOL teacher. In this article I will share my perceptions of “multilevel” as it applies to tutors and teachers in adult education and its connections to staff development.

I started teaching ESOL in 1967 while working as a parish priest in Mexico. My parish was located in a small mountain village seventeen kilometers from Cuernavaca. Because my parishioners were poor farmers and could not contribute much to support the church’s efforts, I decided to find a job to supplement our income. Fortunately, I learned of a position teaching English in a small business school in Cuernavaca. I applied and so began the first of my many teaching experiences in ESOL. After Mexico, I continued tutoring part-time for a couple of years while working for a bank in New York City until I left to take a position with a Rhode Island bank. My students in New York were mainly aspiring young professionals who were struggling to make the transition to careers for which they either began training in their own country or which they had selected after they came to this country.

After a hiatus, about two years ago I decided to return to teaching ESOL. I looked around for opportunities to volunteer and for courses available through continuing education programs. It wasn’t long before I began working as a volunteer, tutoring at La Alianza Hispana in Roxbury. Coincidentally, a friend made me aware of staff development opportunities available for ESOL teachers at the Adult Literacy Resource Institute, the Boston Regional Support Center for SABES.

At the moment I teach two different ESOL classes and I am a tutor trainer for the Healthy Boston Project

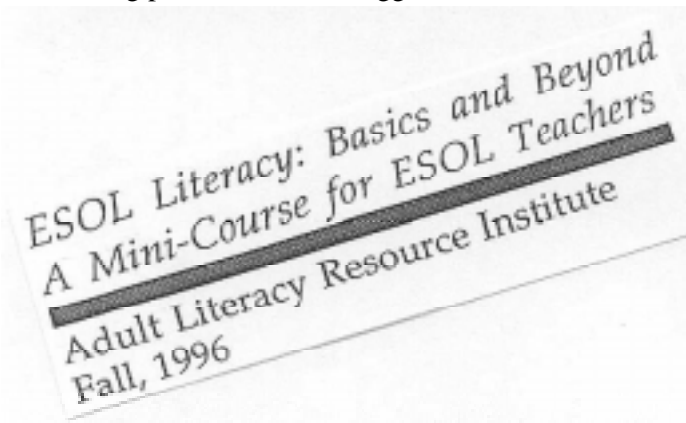
of the city of Boston. My ESOL students come from Central America, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Ecuador and Mexico. My students range in educational background from those who are pre-literate to two university trained professionals, one an electrical engineer, the other an abdominal surgeon. I think multilevel would be an appropriate description of my students.

My Staff Development

Last November I participated in a four-session mini-course at A.L.R.I. The course, “ESOL Literacy: Basics and Beyond,” introduced meaning-based approaches to adult literacy in which learning is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught. I hesitated before signing up for this multilevel course, though I had had prior ESOL teaching experience. I don’t have a Master’s Degree in Education, Linguistics or ESOL, and sometimes that makes me feel self-conscious when I’m around teachers with more formal training. (I have come to realize, however, that I am not entirely an inexperienced teacher after all.) In my other life I attended graduate school in psychology at a big name New York City school. The atmosphere was very cliquish and I came away from that experience with some rather unpleasant memories. I guess I anticipated the more experienced ESOL teachers might react similarly to my lack of teaching credentials and undercut my teaching experience.

A couple of things helped me overcome my discomfort. First, the ESOL community, on the whole, has been one of the more supportive I’ve encountered. Once the mini-course started, I was made to feel most welcome. It demonstrated that a newcomer or less experienced teacher would not be made to feel unwel-

come or ignored. Second, and more important, I have come to recognize and appreciate my talents through my students' eyes. I am fortunate to possess natural teaching skills and I bring valuable knowledge in other important areas to the classroom. After leaving Mexico, I worked as a banker in trust administration for fifteen years, followed by running my own construction business for ten years, and for the last six years I have coordinated a housing program for a non-profit agency. My lifetime training in the priesthood, business and as a case worker, together with my classroom experience, has helped me successfully relate to my students, identify their particular needs, and assist them with learning problems that I struggled with as well.



After dealing with my initial hesitation, I approached the mini-course with enthusiasm. I looked forward to connecting with other ESOL teachers in a learning environment. For the most part I liked the mini-course. I really learned a lot in a short period of time through the hands-on approach. The trainers not only explained the meaning-based approaches currently used in ESOL but helped clarify key differences as they walked us through real-time learning situations. The exercises were not only relevant but challenging. I enjoyed them and, judging from others' reactions, I think most everyone else enjoyed them as well.

As I thought about the mini-course later, I recognized the multilevel flavor of the class and the trainers combined to create an animated and productive learning environment. While we mirrored the diversity our students bring to the classroom, the educational, cultural and experiential diversity of the group added to the meaning of multilevel when applied to the teachers. We were different colors, ages, and sexes and had different educational backgrounds; a good percentage had a master's degree or higher; others are still studying for their degrees. Then there were those, like myself, who improved their skills by attending mini-courses and workshops. In addition, there were a couple of participants and one trainer whose first

language was not English; they added yet another important dimension to our multilevel learning experience.

While I learned a lot from observing individual reactions during the open exchange and working with others in the small group exercises, I paid particular attention to those for whom English was not their first language. I was particularly interested to hear what they had to say about the language training they received and what benefits they saw or experienced from using the meaning-based approach. Their appreciation and endorsement of the meaning-based approach helped convince me not only to reevaluate how I prepare lesson plans but how I will actively involve my students in the process.

This multilevel group, particularly the more experienced teachers, helped me analyze and digest the course material more comfortably. And yet, even though the mini-course was stimulating, I felt let down afterward. As a part-time ESOL teacher and volunteer with a full-time job, I don't always have the opportunity to share ideas with colleagues. As a result, I felt a bit frustrated as I began to implement what I had learned. I looked around for opportunities for follow-up. While I wasn't immediately aware of the opportunities available, I was fortunate enough to learn from an A.L.R.I. staff member that the A.L.R.I. (and other SABES Regional Support Centers in Massachusetts) offers ongoing support to area teachers at programs funded by the state Department of Education, *if they seek it out*. A.L.R.I. staff can visit classes, team-teach, etc. However, there are many literacy programs in the Boston region and only a small number of resource people who go out into the field. So programs also need to be creative in finding ways to offer support to new teachers, such as co-teaching, teacher observation, teacher research, and other staff development possibilities that link teachers of various abilities, interests and talents.

On-line Staff Development

One way teachers can become involved in staff development, no matter what level they are at, is to explore the opportunities on-line. Not too long ago I happened to be browsing the stacks of the A.L.R.I. library, looking for information about on-line teaching and e-mail communication. I came across a report entitled "ESL On-line Action Research." It was a report on a collaborative venture between two adult education programs in Pennsylvania to create an infrastructure to support state-wide practitioner research by linking them to a telecommunications venue. Using this infrastructure, Pennsylvania practitioners were able to communicate with their colleagues on a state and national level, at any time of the day or night, thereby reducing practitioner isolation.

The summary of the “ESL On-line Action Research” findings suggested that on-line action research holds great promise as an avenue for on-going professional development for adult educators. Not only does it help to create a sense of community among practitioners who, for a variety of reasons, have very little opportunity for regular collegial interaction, but it also exposes practitioners to the wealth of information about their field. Further, the practitioner research process gives adult educators a systematic way of examining their practice and making important decisions about day to day activities. The combination of practitioner research, Internet technology and collegial interaction creates a powerful professional development tool that adult education practitioners find exciting and insightful.

We are truly in an information society where time is measured in nano-seconds. Now more than ever, those of us in the field of ESOL need to be able to find ways to enhance professional development, maintain communication with one another and improve our support systems. In light of the many advantages the Internet offers in the delivery and exchange of information, the possibilities it offers for professional development seem unlimited. I have been on-line now for about a year and a half. In that time, I have found a wealth of ESOL information that I might not have had time to access otherwise. It has opened up new connections to others in the field through an e-mail exchange

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on the local ESOL-M Listserv. This discussion group provides the ESOL community an opportunity to interact with one another in the fastest way possible, short of normal conversation. Through e-mail we can now consult with each other about materials, lesson plans, administrative tasks, grammar points and cross-cultural communication issues, to mention but a few topics.

In addition to our local connection, there is an international listserv, TESL-L, managed through CUNY in New York City, that offers a wide range of postings describing activities, resources and other related newsgroups

that discuss topics of interest to ESOL teachers. TESOL also offers on-line mini-courses. This past spring they returned with an on-line course based on the book by Marie Wilson Nelson, *At the Point of Need: Teaching Basic and ESL Writers*, discussing the language experience approach which teachers with a whole language philosophy implement. There are other interesting web sites, like “Dave’s ESL Cafe,” which offer a wealth of ESOL resources.

Today in adult education we are facing another challenge to create a new professional development prototype which builds on previous delivery models and continues to be responsive to the needs of the multilevel group of practitioners. My hope is that we are successful in incorporating new ideas and new technology into our professional development support system. •