

TESL NS Newsletter

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Editorial: Greetings from lovely Nova Scotia, Canada!

We live in turbulent times. So many things have happened just in the past few months. We elected a new federal government; America elected a new president, a historic first in that the new president is black; the world is in the grips of a recession, which originated in the US and spread like wild fire across the globe; and there is trouble on the home front too. Our newly elected government, which came dangerously close to being defeated in a no-confidence vote, has been suspended and our ship of state is, at this moment of crisis, virtually rudderless. To add to our dismay, winter has been knocking on our door. It has already treated us, rather prematurely, to two full-bodied snowstorms.

I wonder to what extent the global downturn will affect us in Canada,

particularly our ESL/EFL classes. For the past few years, the majority of our foreign students have come from Asian and from Arab countries. Will, owing to the global downturn, the flow of students slow enough to put some of our staff out of work? There is a bit of a silver lining around the dark cloud though: China, most of the financial experts believe, will weather the global crisis better than most of the rest of the world; some, in fact, predict that China will turn out to be the economic engine that will pull us through the crisis. Hopefully, therefore, the flow of students at least from China will be undiminished. Much of the world looks to Obama to make a difference too; in fact, the very name "Obama" is virtually synonymous with "CHANGE" now, change for the better.

There are many unanswered questions. However, life must and will go on, and we will continue to teach as long as we are needed – that is, as long as we have students – and hope for the best.

Just recently, we had our ESL Café, a workshop put on by English teacher volunteers under the auspices of TESL Nova Scotia. Most of the articles in this issue are reports on what happened there. Hopefully, thanks to the effort put into it by organizers and facilitators, our ESL Café proved useful to the teachers who attended, especially the new and inexperienced teachers. On behalf of the ESL Community, a big thank you to the crew of officers under the guidance of Ellen Pilon and to all the volunteers.

TESL Nova Scotia wishes everyone a happy, healthy and a blessed Christmas. All the best for the new year and may the new year expand the silver lining to cover the whole dark cloud.

Fe Baculi / SMU - Newsletter Editor

President's Message

As we enter yet another membership year, I'd like to welcome both new members and continuing members. TESL NS is a wonderful way to network with teachers, to learn about what other schools are doing, to share ideas, to get involved.

I'd also like to thank the Board for its continuing enthusiasm and support. Thank you to Anne Grant and Susanne Campbell who decided there just wasn't enough free time for them to continue with us, and welcome to Denise DeLong and Olga Sarycheva.

Our fall World Café was a great success. The nine cafes were well attended and excited a lot of interest. Reports from many of the facilitators are included in this newsletter. World Café participants filled out a questionnaire about what TESL NS could do for them. Results are very encouraging that we are on the right track. A few indicated an interest in serving on the Board and have been invited to participate in our meetings, which are open to all members. Results of the questionnaire are included at the end of this newsletter.

Because the World Café was popular, the Board is planning to organize another one in the early spring as well as the mini-conference and a social event before summer. We have also booked the Citadel Halifax Hotel for the fall 2009 conference, which will be Saturday November 7, 2009. Our share of the profits from the TESL Canada 2008 Conference will significantly subsidize these professional development events for TESL NS members.

Our website has been updated with a new modern look. It also includes some new features. On the first page you will

see there is an invitation to a Grammar Challenge. Email us your grammar question. The question will be included on the website and the answer in a PDF. Grammarian Andy de Champlain will answer queries with the occasional assistance of others on the Board.

We also are starting discussion groups on specific topics. These will be organized through Google Groups and supervised by Kent Fraser. Members who are interested in the discussions send an email to the address on the website, and then Kent replies with an invitation to the discussion group. This will get underway in the new year.

The Board has also decided to change the requirements for student membership application. Now "student" refers to:

- any student part-time or full-time in a Master of Education degree. A copy of their student card must be attached to the application
- trainees currently enrolled in any part of the Saint Mary's Diploma in TESL or in the one-month CELTA are eligible for the student rate if (1) they apply during the time they are training and (2) if they attach a letter from their trainers confirming their current enrolment, or a receipt showing the dates of the training.

It is a joy working with such a happy enthusiastic board. We have wonderful productive meetings planning interesting TESL events for you. We'll keep you posted on what's going on!



Ellen Pilon
TESL NS President

World Café Summaries:

Café: Needs Assessment

Facilitated by: Andrea Purchase (EWP-HILC) and Kate Elms (EWP-HILC)

This world café focused on the important part needs assessment plays in our ESL teaching. Whether you teach at a private institution, in the public school system or with the immigrant population, we all need to do some form of needs assessment.

These assessments can take the form of a formal, required, initial assessment. However, for most who attended this café, it takes on a more informal and ongoing nature.



The café began by dividing the group into 2 smaller groups. One group discussed the role formal NA's play, while the other group engaged in discussing the role of informal NA's and how they are carried out in our varied class settings.

The group discussing formal NA's found that these can be anything from an oral interview, to a placement test, depending on the institution. They tend often to be done at the beginning of a course and while they can be a valuable tool for a teacher, they can sometimes be intimidating for students when they take the form of a test.

The group discussing informal NA's found that doing NA's on an ongoing basis throughout the duration of the course was a good fit when the program allows for this. While observation of student needs was generally agreed upon as the most common way of carrying out an informal NA, surveys (written and picture) depending on level could also be very effective.

The value of ongoing NA's, which was vigorously discussed by this group, pointed to the need for mini-lessons. As we get to know what the needs of our students are within our teaching context, these mini-lessons can be invaluable for our students, allowing us to cater to their more specific needs that may not be in the curriculum that we are working with. As teachers, we can better serve our students and show them that we value them being in our classes.

This world café was a very engaging session that elicited many ideas on the "how, when and why" of both formal and informal needs assessment. Active participation by all those in attendance was greatly appreciated.

Useful website resources:

http://www.cal.org/caela/tools/program_development/elltoolkit/Part2-5NeedsAssessment&LearnerSelf-Evaluation.pdf

<http://esl.adultinstruction.org/NeedsAssessment.htm>

<http://www.ericdigests.org/1998-1/esl.htm>

Café: EAP Challenges

Facilitated by Fe Baculi and Andy de Champlain

[Andy de Champlain and I co-facilitated this café. He did most of the "talking" there, at the workshop, and here am I, doing the "writing, " with a few additional touches of input from me.]

There are numerous challenges to the teaching of ESL in general and EAP (English for Academic Purposes) in particular: some academic such as

competence in spelling, grammar, content, linguistics and methodology; some administrative, e.g. course development and the preparation of exams; some sociologic, i.e. the fact that, having to work with students from vastly different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, we must learn to speak and to understand new varieties of body language; some personal, like the test how long teachers of EPA can go on teaching without losing their sanity; and, finally, some challenges that can't easily be put on the map.

Teachers of EAP, moreover, have to know how to teach "critical thinking" western style to international students, some of whom expect to be "spoonfed" – to learn by merely listening, taking notes and memorizing their notes. All told, EAP teachers must be reasonably conversant with a wide range of areas of knowledge – business, medicine, astronomy, anthropology, philosophy, etc.

I well remember teaching "English for Oceanographers" to deans and professors from various Cuban universities. I had to ask contacts all the way from the United Nations for the latest information re the status of our lakes and oceans.

Evaluating EAP students, which may be formal or informal, is another challenge of EAP teachers. Are they to evaluate students for content or language, or for both? How are they to handle a student who, though he may perform very well in class, may not do well on administratively prepared tests? How many marks are to be allotted to content and how many for language.

Teachers of EAP also do an enormous amount of informal evaluation through their endless marking of class quizzes, essays, summaries, analyses and more. Moreover, all-too often EAP

textbooks are less than perfect and teachers have to torture their brains to supplement them. In the worst of cases, there may be no textbook at all and the teacher has to create a text.



Teachers labor under pressure too. Both the students (and their parents or sponsors) and the administration expect them to perform veritable miracles teaching everything English there is to be taught in the two months of a term so that their students become "fluent" in English, pass all their exams and go on to further studies, with English as the language of instruction. Owing to language and cultural differences, teachers often find it difficult to tell whether a student's problems in learning English are due to problems of language acquisition or to learning problems in general.

Learners, no doubt, have real challenges too; though, at times, it may be difficult to tell when a challenge ceases to be the learner's challenge and starts to be the teacher's. Sometimes the learners' motivation is not clearly focused. Why are they learning English? To please their parents? As a stepping stone to university? As a means to well-paying jobs? As a door to freedom, to the Western lifestyle? Their motivation clearly affects their progress in learning English.

Students are further challenged in learning the skills they badly need to survive in "English" academia: good pronunciation, aural comprehension good enough to understand lectures;

they must learn how to extract meaning from context, how to do timed exams, how to take notes, how to participate in discussions; they must acquire the skills necessary for the writing of essays and research papers – how to organize, how to quote, how to paraphrase, how to summarize. Hopefully they will come away from their EAP courses with their faculty of critical thinking sharpened, a skill which is vital for much of what they will be asked to do later, at university or elsewhere.

Though this may begin to sound like an EAP teacher campaigning for sympathy, it is nevertheless the real world of EAP teaching; that is, if the teacher takes the job seriously, if the job for him is a vocation rather than just a means to a paycheck. As for the paycheck, though, I have yet to hear of an institution that pays an EAP teacher – for that matter, any teacher of languages – “generously.” Till that happens, I would say, the EAP teacher faces yet another challenge – how to battle for adequate pay.:)

Fe Baculi (Instructor)
TESL Center, SMU

Café: No Managers Please! We're whining.

Facilitated by:
Ellen Pilon

The purpose of this café was for participants to discuss issues affecting morale in the ESL workplace and what we can do about it.

Participants shared their observations and experiences. The notes below reflect overall observations from research and years of experience from everyone involved in the discussion;



they do not reflect any one person's opinion.

Possible factors causing low morale:

- Low salaries
- Inflexible policies about hours of work, vacation, time off, etc
- No professional development as teachers
- Not enough intellectual stimulation
- Being too busy and feel taken advantage of
- Not being busy enough and feeling bored
- Lack of job security
- Inability to resolve conflict with one's manager
- Wondering about management receiving (further) training
- Lack of recognition by management for our achievements
- Being underappreciated by our students

Solutions: what we can do for ourselves

- Schools organize PD activities and open them up to TESL NS members. TESL NS contributes to the costs of the PD day
- Participate in appreciative inquiry which is based on generative theory and which can help you approach situations in a different way
- Focus on the positive; focus on the good things in your life, in your day, at that moment. Stay grounded in now.
- Keep negative things outside
- Determine what is important for you and keep this in focus
- Appreciate your colleagues
- Change your behaviour so that you think before reacting too quickly
- Maintain your self esteem
- Ask managers for guidelines, deadlines and expectations so that you can work with the forest not just some trees
- Find out what managers expect of you and work within that framework instead of contributing too much

- Laugh with colleagues: perhaps set up a weekly joke board
- Feel valued by helping colleagues, but don't expect a lot in return
- If the negative outweighs the positive in your work, consider moving on
- If the negativity is effecting one's mental health, move on

Useful websites:

http://www.nfib.com/object/IO_31121.html

http://www.anonymousemployee.com/cssite/sidelinks/poor_employee_morale.php

<http://www.netmba.com/mgmt/ob/motivation/herzberg/>

<http://www.businessballs.com/herzberg.htm>

Café: Teaching Communicative Grammar

Facilitated by: Andy de Champlain

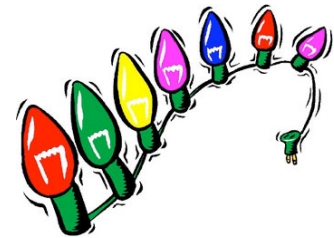
I began this workshop by having the group team up and try to answer some tricky questions about teaching grammar. For example, what's wrong with this sentence: "Economy is good," and how will you explain that to the student who just dropped it on you? Another example: How do you explain the difference between "throw the ball *to* me" and "throw it *at* me"? Of course the point of this exercise was a reminder that sometimes we are spontaneously asked to justify the ways of English to our ESL students, and it can be tricky to answer them coherently. Thinking about this stuff by challenging our grammar-teaching brains can be useful.

Why teach grammar?

In my workshop's brief lecture of L2 teaching method history, I pointed out that

some researchers have argued that learning grammar rules does not necessarily lead to language acquisition; that learning grammar is merely learning 'about' language. My theory, however, is that some learners can apply grammar rules as systems to improve their communicative abilities. At least it helps everyone *understand* language a little more. With some grammar, students might have a little hope of being able to auto-correct, if not in speech, then perhaps in the revision stages of writing.

But grammar shouldn't be the basis of a communicative grammar curriculum. The communicative grammar course should be based on tasks, skills, content/theme, or some combination thereof, with grammar integrated in a way that the *rules* are not usually the focus. I think we shouldn't get too lost in metalanguage, but students do need to know basics—parts of speech, for example. Otherwise they can hardly understand the grammar teacher, or any language teacher who wants to talk syntax.



Some *approaches* to lesson planning that have been defined include:

- Skills-based (e.g., listening for unstressed function words, forming appropriate questions)
- Task-based (e.g., communicate differences between 'before' and 'after' picture)
- Theme-based (e.g., "At the Post office", "In the classroom", "Seeing the Doctor")
- Content-based (e.g., "The Battle of the Plains of Abraham", "Mitosis")

The main task of the workshop was to look at a chart, a giant list of target structures (e.g., adjective phrases,

comparative adjectives, etc.), and try to come up with lesson plans that focus on a skill, a task, and/or a theme in which to frame the grammar for communicative practice. When students practice explaining differences between images, it seems more useful than memorizing the list of adjectives that cannot take the comparative suffix along with jargon like “superlative”.

In the end, I just hope it was a nice chance for us all to bring out our grammar expertise and come up with and share creative fun teaching ideas from which students may acquire – or at least *learn* – some useful target grammar structures.

Café: Depression and Mental Health Issues in the E.S.L. Classroom

Facilitated by Sally Benevides,
Instructor, Acadia Centre for
International Languages

The focus of this café was to offer a brief introduction to the issues of Depression, Anxiety and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which are three mental health disorders that may occur in the ESL and EAP populations. These are prevalent in the population in general, and there are some reasons why international students might be particularly susceptible.

Firstly we discussed the medical and psychological definitions, possible causes, and symptoms of these disorders, and how they are diagnosed by medical professionals. We talked about why international students might be more greatly susceptible to Depression than people who remain in their home culture.

The second part of the discussion included a discussion of research that has been done at Acadia University concerning the relative instances of

Depression and Stress specifically in first year university students, and further, in the case of international students throughout their university careers, and how this compares with the domestic population. We discussed the findings of a 4th year thesis done under Dr. Peter McLeod in the Acadia University psychology department:

Turner, Hollie L.A., (2008). *The Relations Among Acculturative Stress, Depression, and Somatization over Time in International Students*

Café participants talked about co-morbidities and manifestations of depression and anxiety, and how students might behave when they are dealing with such issues.

Finally we went over a list of resources for educators, including local (Nova Scotia) and Canadian resources, websites, student resource centres, and books on mental health topics.

Café: Creating an Online Community of Practice Discussion Group

Facilitated by: Colleen MacKinnon

A group of TESL NS members gathered together at this year’s conference to talk about setting up an online community of practice for Language Teaching Practitioners and the greater community in which we live and work. The ultimate goal of our online community of practice, accessible through the new and improved TESL NS website, is to connect practitioners across the province and those we work with in a meaningful way to improve our practice and to facilitate learning for our students. Many of us feel “out of the loop” and not connected to the wider TESL, Education, and Settlement community.

Here is an overview of the issues we discussed, and what we would like to address in our Sharing Community:

- Sharing stories, successes, mistakes
- Working in isolation (set up meetings throughout the year to meet face to face)
- Sharing successful lesson plan ideas (as well as peer reviewing teaching resources and materials)
- Making connections with wider community to access guest speakers for our classes, information for our students: Experts on immigration, professional organizations of Medicine, Law, Engineering, etc., CIC, federal and provincial funders, TIE, etc.
- Sharing information and links to important resources, i.e.: CLB, TESL Canada certification, upcoming conferences and events, etc.
- Fostering mentorships and coaching

Please come join our discussion via the TESL NS website. This discussion forum will be a positive, professional sharing space. Please keep discussions clean and positive. Remember that what you post to the WWW stays in the WWW for anyone to read. Also, the teaching resources section is only as well-stocked as we make it. Please contribute resources as well as borrow.



Café: Get the funk out of my classroom!

Facilitated by Rebecca Stoffer

During this November's TESL NS workshop, members had the opportunity to join theme cafes. Among them, this long-winded title appeared on the sign up page: ***What to do when stoney faces greet your smile...when eliciting feels like bullying...and when the minute hand on your watch won't budge...CAFE***

Followed by promises to this effect.: ***In this cafe we will share strategies for turning "nightmare scenarios" into eager students, endless possibilities and glowing reviews.***

Of course, my co-facilitator, Bill Fenrick, and me didn't know what to expect when we were asked to run the "engagement/motivation" cafe. The theme seemed wide open, but since the ESL/EFL classroom is a two-way exchange – and many of us are drained from giving, giving, giving – I wanted to remind instructors that while student satisfaction is the goal, our job-satisfaction is equally important when it comes to fostering energised courses and group synergy.

We figured on an intimate session with three to five members and, framed by a glossy power point presentation, time spent hashing out fairly dry notes on pertaining questions. However, we soon realised our promotional blurb – above – had struck a nerve. We ended up hosting a full cafe brimming with lively participants, many of them weary with battle -fatigue and eager to trade their war wounds for effective strategies.

Frustrations were unleashed and our slick power point presentation quickly faded into the background... Everyone had the opportunity to share an unpleasant teaching situation or set of

circumstances – past or present – and very few held back.

Bill and me both agree that it was a productive way for a roomful of strangers to find common ground and establish that *Funk in the Classroom* is a universal dilemma and by no means an objection to us – personally, or a reflection of our competence – professionally. If anything, we have to be especially alert to the frustrations that form a part of language learning.

The following is a list of several foundation questions and discussion openers. You'll see that we also introduced our own assumptions; for example,

1) Engagement indicators can include: smiles; laughs; undivided attention; animated facial expressions; appropriate body-language; volunteering Q & As; cooperation; participation; enthusiasm; regular attendance; time flies...

How do you know – *or how can you tell* – when your students are engaged?

2) Disengagement indicators can include: prejudice; boredom; glazed or sullen facial expressions; passivity; slouched or inert body-language; uncooperativeness; furtive glances at wristwatch; yawning; visible confusion or half-hearted attempts to “wake up” when teacher starts eliciting; time drags...

What tells you that your students are *not* engaged? Are there further indicators?

3) Are there universal indicators that tell us when students are engaged? Are these indicators reliable? Could they be misleading due to cultural differences or ulterior motives?

We then kicked off with another list of assumptions; some obvious, some less

so. For example, we believe learners are engaged when their hopes and expectations are met... When they can experience a sense of measurable achievement. Also, many learners need to justify time and money spent – they're searching for value, perhaps through,

- a quality language model
- professional, goal-centred instruction
- individual attention
- ongoing inspiration, stimulation and motivation
- good facilities and/or extracurricular services
- the opportunity to develop cultural competency and insights
- new relationships and useful social contacts
- kindness and consideration...

But is it really simply a matter of providing good value and lots of attention? Could this *funk*, in the broadest sense of the word, also be a symptom of something much deeper?

As *ESL* instructors here at home we are obliged to routinely admit loneliness, depression and anger into the classroom whether we like it or not. Personally, I have experienced *ESL* teaching environments where culture shock – or disharmony in the student's personal life – undermines a great deal of learning potential. This often needs immediate attention or watchful, ongoing management.

So. Can *funk in the classroom* be successfully controlled? In very general terms we went on to discuss tried and tested measures, all within our immediate grasp, with rapport-building at the top of the list

- Smiling
- Working friendly, personal and disarming banter into classes
- Memorizing and using learners' names

- Putting a student-centred approach wholly to work
- Finding ways to elicit genuine feedback
- Demonstrating a commitment to learners' needs
- Expressing concern for their success, wellbeing and difficulties
- Offering tailored solutions which put learners firmly in the "driver's seat"
- Etc!

To conclude, I'd like to say thank you to MISA/HILC for allowing us to use their facilities. Unfortunately, a tight schedule prevented us from exploring the above questions and assumptions in any great depth... Nevertheless, we sensed a tangible boost in morale and participants walked away from the cafe with a number of strategies. These included,

- ✓ taking an inventory/survey of what makes a good/bad teacher and what makes a good/bad student at the beginning of each course or semester – then following up with a "class contract"
- ✓ using charts which illustrate a detailed and extensive range of facial expressions and moods to encourage low level ESL learners to indicate – with precision – how they are feeling (apparently such charts can be located on through the web)
- ✓ employing journals as a way for learners to convey regular feedback constructively and discreetly
- ✓ facilitating student-to-student rapport-building activities – questions drawn from a hat, for example – to foster an atmosphere of trust and friendship; also useful where unspoken prejudices or misconceptions need to be addressed

*Following the success of their foray as facilitators, **Rebecca Stoffer** and **William Fenrick**, both instructors at Saint Mary's University TESL Centre, are now contemplating the lecture circuit as self-styled Motivation Coaches to the professional ESL/EFL community.*



Seasons
Greetings

**TESL NS Questionnaire – Fall 08
Responses from 35 members**

What do you want from TESL NS?

1. I enjoy a fall conference with workshops and expert speakers on TESL.
AGREE 100%
2. I prefer for the conference to be in a hotel.
AGREE 9% **DISAGREE** 40% **NO OPINION** 51%
3. I think keeping the conference fee low (under \$25) is important.
AGREE 80% **DISAGREE** 0 **NO OPINION** 20%
4. I would attend World Cafés if they were several times throughout the year.
AGREE 83% **DISAGREE** 8.5% **NO OPINION** 8.5%
5. I would like to hear a famous keynote speaker at the fall conference.
AGREE 34% **DISAGREE** 17% **NO OPINION** 49%
6. I think our conferences should include non-TESL fun speakers, such as Body Lingo (conference 2007).
AGREE 32% **DISAGREE** 34% **NO OPINION** 34%
7. I'm happy with membership and nothing additional.
AGREE 26% **DISAGREE** 51% **NO OPINION** 23%
8. I enjoy socializing and learning from teachers in other schools.
AGREE 100%
9. I would buy books from ESL publishers if they were at the conference.
AGREE 66% **DISAGREE** 11% **NO OPINION** 23%
10. Suggestions:
 - More information on website
 - TESL NS health benefits
 - Functional workshops and outings
 - Perks with memberships: email, private access to parts of website
 - Later start time for ½ day events
 - Sharing classroom experiences in cafes and conferences is great
 - Longer workshops