



## Celebration and challenge: Life in QATESOL

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I'd like to thank Elene and committee for the kind invitation to do a keynote at this wonderful celebration, and it is a real privilege to speak. I have spent almost 40 years in language education, most of it in Queensland and since 1985 when I joined the staff of Milpera, my first love has been ESL/EAL (English as an additional language). Elene left it pretty open in terms of the ground to cover, just suggesting a quick look at my early research in Queensland, and some consideration of the current state of play in TESOL in Australia.

In the late 90s, heading off to QATESOL committee meeting, my then 12 year old son David, asked, "What do you do at those meetings?" (Me: look at ideas and ways to teach better, share experiences, keep in touch with colleagues). A true Gen Y pre-teen, he continued, "Do you get paid? (No), then, "So why do you do this?"

Remembering this, I realised, is the first thing we can celebrate today. Since 1972, hundreds of committee members have put tens of thousands of hours into volunteering their time to explore ways to improve teaching and in touch with what is happening, **always** motivated by the desire to help students learn better. In fact we are part of a great Australian tradition in volunteering (31% males and 36% females do some kind of unpaid work – 2012 ABS).

But it is worth considering David's question in more depth – what does QATESOL do, and is it worth celebrating? As someone who has sat for hundreds of hours in often unproductive meetings, in my experience QATESOL committees stand out as a group of quiet achievers - their dedication and commitment is relentless, and this is always underpinned by a vision for social justice and the needs of EAL students, a vision for a fairer society, something that has never been more in jeopardy than today. So we need groups like QATESOL more than ever.

QATESOL has performed many functions in the past 40 odd years, including:

- 1) PD workshops and seminars for teachers across sectors – keeping up to date with pedagogy and policy
- 2) Since the 1980s, members have been also been involved in the production of print and audio curriculum materials for students in the child and adult programs (recent examples are work by Hazel Davidson & Dorothy Court)
- 3) Proactive membership of ACTA, participation in and organisation of national and state conferences. (and via ACTA, links to TESOL International). Conferences have separate subcommittees with frequent meetings and enormous workloads. Many of us remember the 2000 conference in particular.
- 4) Advocacy for our students and their families, often some of most marginalised people in society, those without a voice in policy and curriculum reviews
- 5) Publication of QATESOL newsletter
- 6) Support for teachers who are isolated
- 7) Writers and reviewers for *TESOL in Context*; strong support for research and researchers
- 8) QATESOL also has a history of social activities, like today, that bring teachers (and also students) together, where some of the most creative work gets done.

Like all academics, my knowledge and experience are confined to 'a small bit' of the TESOL picture – research always 'narrows in', rather than seeking the big picture, which is at once its strength and its disadvantage. But Elene has asked me to provide an overview of some of my research in past 14 years or so in the EAL field – and to look at some of the issues and

challenges we face. So I'd like to provide a snapshot of my journey in TESOL and in the time honoured way, then to look at issues of ongoing concern and directions for future focus and attention.

### **My journey in TESOL**

My first ESL job was in Melbourne in 1975, and my last was at Milpera in 2003. In the late 90s I completed a PhD which was about ESL and social identity – that is, how ESL kids learn to speak and to be accepted as speakers of English at school. 10 students in 5 high schools – interviews with and journal writing by the students, interviews with teachers, participation in school events – fairly detailed ethnographic project over 3 years – which resulted in the book *Audible difference: ESL and social identity* (hardly a runaway bestseller with just over 300 copies sold in over 10 years!!).

In a model of audibility and how it is achieved, I tied speaking to social and cultural capital and communicative competence. Who gets to be heard and how? One element of my conclusion was that for many, success and discrimination was more on the basis of audible difference than visible difference.

Luckily I have a sense of irony, because just after deciding how important audibility was for ESL students, the Sudanese arrived!!! For the most striking and visibly different cohort we'd had in ESL, visible difference was back on the table, partly because in this country there is not much social capital in being black.

During the past 10 years at Monash, I have been researching teacher identity and also refugee background students in high schools. I'd add I am part of a vibrant research community in this area. Along with numerous other Australian researchers (Elizabeth Cassity & Ken Cruikshank (Uni of Sydney); Karen Dooley, Jennifer Alford & Annette Woods at QUT; Pauline Gibbons; Jenny Hammond UTS; Jill Brown; Sue Creagh UQ, Megan Watkins at UWS); and many others, we have had an active field for over the past decade, but also a broad field with many specialist strands – A. adult (AMES; tertiary; ESP) and child (international, refugee background, migrant) and B. perspective taken – EAL, SLA, literacy, mental health, social adjustment and welfare). We can certainly celebrate a decade of active TESOL research, with university, philanthropic and ARC funded projects; and hundreds of research theses.

Many of us have been concerned less with New Arrivals programs than with the mainstream story – what happens when students with limited English literacy and interrupted education go into the mainstream? Jenny Hammond and I are currently editing a book for PETA (addressing the needs of art risk EAL students). I'm interested in school English – the academic dialect needed for school completion and successful social integration.

### **Rejection and reflection**

I have done around 40 publications on identity, EAL pedagogy and SL literacy and like much academic writing, they were agony to write. There were many knock backs – and like most research raises new problems, new questions, unanticipated blocks, new dilemmas. I want to share a comment from my most recent paper on scaffolding literacy through content, and the reviewer response received in June (last month). Colleagues and I developed a model for scaffolding second language literacy pedagogy. The reviewer, who rejected the piece, wrote the following (his/her words are in red):

**“It is noted that,** “The model is useful to all teachers seeking to develop both second language learning and literacy through their teaching.” **It is this reviewer's experience that secondary teachers are often not interested in either of these issues.”**

Here is another example:

“The findings of our research suggest that teachers must provide a greater variety of opportunities for practice, varying methods and forms of support to supply both abundance and redundancy (Gibbons 2002).” **What was the rationale for the students to be placed in mainstream classes? Isn't this guaranteeing failure?**

And further – **‘It would seem highly unlikely that students with no or little English, no or interrupted schooling, and with little idea of the culture of school and schooling- the focus of the study - would be enrolled in mainstream subject area classes. ...The proposed strategies appear to this reviewer to be far beyond the skills and abilities of the focus students.’**

These comments place the ESL specialist between a rock and a very hard place. There are three disturbing contentions:

- a) high school teachers are not interested in language
- b) placing high needs EAL kids in mainstream dooms them to failure
- c) content based work is beyond the capacity of these students

If the above statements are true, how do we proceed to offer support? If they are not true, how do we proceed? (Especially when articles on practical pedagogical ideas are not published) I am not whinging here – I am just saying for anyone passionately interested in pedagogical strategies, or some way forward in contemporary classrooms, it is very hard to get the message out there! And while we know teachers are seeking ideas to help at risk EAL students.

### **Things to feel good about**

On a more positive note, what can researchers celebrate in TESOL?

My uppermost thought from 6 research projects in the past 10 years is that, contrary to what many might suggest, great pedagogy today has much in common with great pedagogy 40 years ago. Like Peter Allen's song, 'everything old is new again.' It seems to me that it is not as if functional grammar was the first time grammar was taught well; that scaffolding and modelling were actually discovered in the late 90s; that multimedia was the first time we realised visuals were important. There is no one method, fashionable approach, or '3 word slogan' that can encapsulate the complexity of what good teachers do, or how students learn. Technology is now part of this – but is no substitute for good teaching. Here is one example of this point.

In a detailed 2009 review of 6 high school bridging programs for at risk EAL learners, a team of 3 people interviewed staff, observed classes and looked at materials in 6 schools. Our recommendations included specific organisational and pedagogical elements of successful programs. Leaving the administrative elements aside, the pedagogical ones included:

1. A structured program of content-based learning which incorporates explicit language teaching and core ESL principles
2. A focus on meta-cognitive awareness and 'learning how to learn'
3. Consistent use of visual and multimedia supports
4. Regular formative and summative assessment
5. Explicit teaching of vocabulary, spelling, grammar, reading comprehension and written genres.
6. Adaptation of text resources appropriate to students' reading and language level.
7. Benchmark and regular testing of all students in all language domains
8. High expectations, high cognitive challenge and high support

9. A differentiated curriculum where needed
10. A text-rich room with a range of extension and practice materials

Here is my question to you. What do you see that is new here? I'd like to suggest that EAL specialists can celebrate our 40 years of pedagogical know-how.

And guess what – these are very much like the ALL guidelines written by Scarino, Vale and McKay in 1988, 26 years ago. Here are the 8 guidelines:

1. Learners treated as individuals with their own interests and needs
2. Communicative and reflective use of English on a topic
3. Comprehensible input relevant to learner's frame of reference
4. Deliberate focus on forms, skills and strategies to support SLA and conceptual development
5. Opportunities to focus on culture and community
6. Awareness of language and culture in different subject areas
7. Appropriate feedback
8. Opportunities to manage their own learning (autonomy).

Penny also published these in TIC in 1990. Here is my next question. Is there anything in these guidelines that does not fit with technology?

This does not mean complacency and self-satisfaction is the answer – far from it - and it is relevant now to look at some contemporary issues in EAL which make the need for the vision, commitment and dedication of current and new QATESOL members perhaps more urgent than ever. There are wonderful things from the past, but transformation is part and parcel of educational practice. New generations of teachers need the autonomy and agency to develop new practices or to make time honoured principles and materials their own. So what do they face?

#### **Four challenges that remain in the EAL teaching field**

- Shifts in populations
- Changes to funding models
- Complexity of EAL teacher roles
- Pre-service education

- a) Shifts in populations – refugee background students, international students, migrant program students; LBOTE students; Indigenous students. All of these groups have different backgrounds and needs. One problem is that most policy and research does not disaggregate categories of students, so blunt recommendations are made. Additionally, the high needs students tend to end up in low SES areas and disadvantaged government schools.

Teese's (2006) paper "Condemned to Innovate" demonstrates that disadvantaged schools (where many of the highest needs EAL students reside) are perpetually forced to comply with multiple policy and curriculum shifts: teachers experience reform fatigue as new programs are relentlessly introduced to combat persistent poor relative performance. Australian students are highly segregated along social and academic lines, with residential segregation and the increased privatization of schools in Australia reinforcing the divisions.

- b) Funding changes in most states devolves responsibility for EAL to schools, so the status of EAL and EAL specialists is at risk. Cuts in funding at both Commonwealth and state levels have increased emphasis on school autonomy and financial responsibility, and have also cut funding for EAL consultants and system-level professional development programs. Schools

are increasingly responsible for how EAL support is organised and funded. One consequence is that mainstream teachers are required to assume further responsibility for the education of all students, including At Risk EAL students in their classes. Many feel that the mindset of current state and federal governments, a corporatised user-pays model, is not supportive of the most marginalised in our community. In all of our ARC schools we witnessed instances of material deprivation that were in sharp contrast to the conditions and resourcing claimed or assumed to be universal in Australian education by those who set curriculum, pedagogical, and assessment norms (examples print resources, ICT access and provision, and staffing - high turnover rates, reliance on short-term contracts, instability in time-tabling and teachers working outside of the areas they were trained in.

- c) Role of EAL teacher – welfare vs language acquisition & literacy. Much research takes a holistic qualitative approach or is done in more accessible and productive settings – primary or NAP. The challenge is to be responsive to affective and welfare needs of students while maintaining highest possible academic expectations and cognitive challenge. We can't teach well without attending to the effect on our students, but helping them to feel good is a small part of our role. In a recent ARC project by UWS researchers, “developing proficiency in English language and literacy” was in the top three priorities of 90% of 5128 teachers surveyed, and top area of need for 64%. The urgent question is, how can we be caring and supportive, but also rigorous and demanding in our teaching?
- d) Pre-service education crisis - although some attention to student diversity is mandated nationally for pre-service teacher education programs, this potentially encompasses a wide range of issues and types of learners, such as special needs, gifted and talented, indigenous students, gender, sexual diversity, social class, and culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Coverage is therefore often tokenistic and minimal within a crowded curriculum. Courses are shorter than even 5 years ago; practicum placements are increasingly problematic and the disconnect between schools and faculties of education is also a problem.

## Conclusion

There is much to celebrate in TESOL – we're here because we identified it as THE most rewarding form of teaching. We are most fortunate to have landed here. I have always found EAL colleagues to be genuinely interesting people – they love language, they read, travel, have an ear for discourse and an eye for cultural nuance. I believe that being interested in everything and therefore interesting makes teaching a lot easier, and effective.

But these are difficult times politically, professionally and educationally for our students. There is a need for reinvigoration of professional associations as highly experienced teachers and researchers retire – and we have more challenging groups of students. The challenge is to maintain the energy needed for the next 42 years – of professional development, publications that help, conferences that nourish teachers and researchers, and of ideas and materials that genuinely move our students towards success at school and in life.



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*Jenny is also a past QATESOL Vice-President.*