

# CURRENTS

Massachusetts Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

VOL. 21, NO. 1

FALL 1994

## English Spelling: It's Ruff Stuff!

Carolyn Fidelman

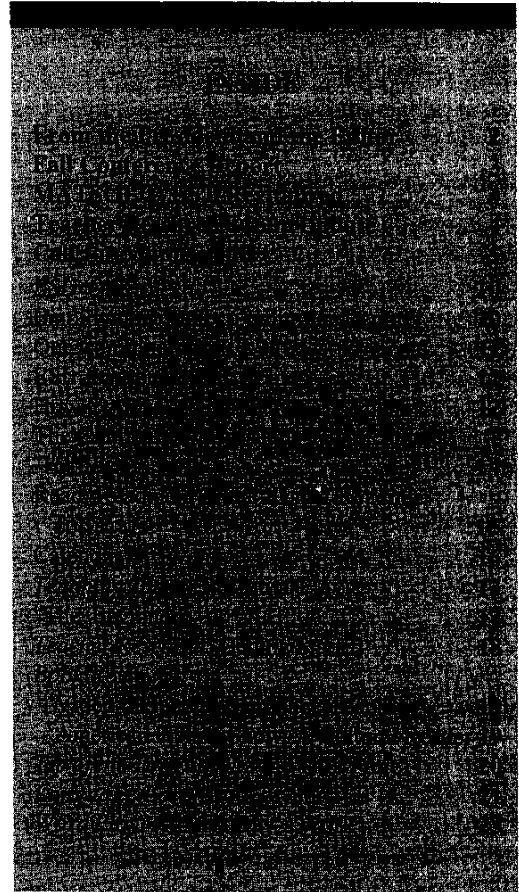
English teachers of all varieties, ESL, EFL, or ENL (English as a Native Language!) have a unique burden to deal with: the (literally) confounded spelling system of this otherwise great language. Glancing through an etymological dictionary, one immediately sees that we are dealing with an array of words, originating from widely diverse sound/symbol systems such as Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Greek, and French. Unlike the French, we have no legislative power to cleanse our language of these idiosyncracies. We have to live with them, and we have to help our students master them. If you aren't convinced of how daunting a task this mastery is, take a look at the following poem:

### Hints on Pronunciation for Foreigners

I take it you already know  
Of *tough* and *bough* and *cough* and *dough*.  
Others may stumble but not you  
On *hiccough*, *thorough*, *laugh* and *through*.  
Well done! And now you wish, perhaps,  
To learn of less familiar traps?

Beware of *heard*, a dreadful word  
That looks like *beard* and sounds like *bird*,  
And *dead*: it's said like *bed*, not *bead*—  
For goodness' sake, don't call it *deed*!  
Watch out for *meat* and *great* and *threat*  
(They rhyme with *suite* and *straight* and *debt*.)

Continued on page 6



## Anglicky in Slovakia

Ron Clark

I had to look for "Nitra" in my atlas. There it was—about seventy-five kilometers east of Bratislava, nine-month-old Slovakia's capital. The size of its dot on the map told me Nitra had a population of 25,000 to 100,000. As vague as this figure was, at least it was something. The Fulbright Scholarship for TEFL lecturing I had received would soon send me to Nitra for the 1993-1994 academic year, and I could find little information on this newly independent country, let alone a second city like Nitra. Reports from Fulbrighters who had been

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ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS  
OF ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS OF  
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## From the President

As this year progresses, I am pleased to see a continued interest, not only from the Board but also from the membership, of what MATSOL as an organization can do and how we can maximize our impact locally and statewide. Our newly formed Task Force on Sociopolitical Concerns has as its mission to 1) identify areas of common concern between MATSOL and other similar organizations within Massachusetts, 2) explore effective strategies for introducing our agenda to policymakers including the possibility of hiring a Legislative Analyst, and 3) make recommendations to the Board regarding the establishment of a standing Sociopolitical Concerns committee with representation on the MATSOL Board.

In line with the creation of such a position on the Board, we have been discussing the need for other kinds of Board representation and some restructuring of responsibilities to allow MATSOL to be increasingly more representative of our membership and responsive to the diverse needs and desires of the members. The addition of Membership Secretary Margo Miller in early summer is such an example. We are currently discussing employment issues as well as our ongoing relationship with the publishers who add so much to our conferences.

Recently, the MATSOL Board authorized a modest grant to A.E.I.O.U. (Adult Educators Intent on Organizing a Union) to cover expenses for an employment survey similar in format to the one completed by the Higher Education folks.

If you have ideas you would like to share with the Board, I am always eager to receive your calls at (617) 625-1335 x 6993. I look forward to hearing from you and seeing you at upcoming MATSOL events.

Betty Stone

## From the Editor



I am pleased to announce the creation of an editorial board for *MATSOL Currents*. The first members, Ron Clark of Boston University and Anne Roberti of Brookline Public Schools, have generously given of their time to edit and proofread this issue. I look forward to an enjoyable and productive relationship working with them. If you would like to be considered for the board, please contact me at (617) 225-2788.

*MATSOL Currents* is also benefiting from the expertise of Jean Chandler as the editor of the new Teacher Research column. Jean is interested in feedback from you regarding ways the column can meet your needs. Contact her at (617) 492-8153 if you would like to have input or contribute an article.

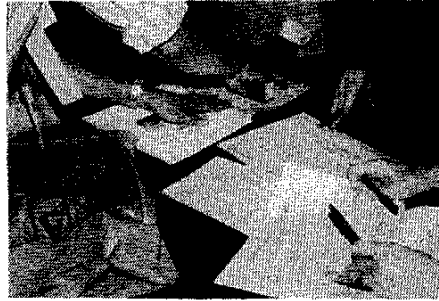
I would like to thank Alison Howe, the publisher liaison for the newsletter, for a job well done. This is Alison's last issue as she plans to put her efforts into other projects. Anyone who would like to join the *MATSOL Currents* team as Publisher Liaison can contact Alison at (617) 641-0964 or ahowe@hiid.harvard.edu for more information.

The next issue for the newsletter should appear around the end of April. See you at TESOL!

Suzanne M. Koons (smkoons@mit.edu)



*Maria and Bethel,  
Conference Co-Chairs:  
sharing a moment of peace*



*The PDP Stamp: credit where credit's due*



*Dang Pham: discussing  
the state of the state*



*Amazing Grace:  
still smiling after all  
those registrants*

## MATSOL FALL CONFERENCE REPORT

**O**n November 5, over 500 participants attended the one-day conference at Simmons College—the largest attendance ever! One of the reasons for this enormous success was the opportunity for public school teachers to earn Professional Development Portfolio points toward certification.

There were 54 presentations, including interest section rap sessions. Dang Pham from the U.S. Department of Education was the guest speaker, followed by the plenary speaker, Sonia Nieto of UMass/Amherst.

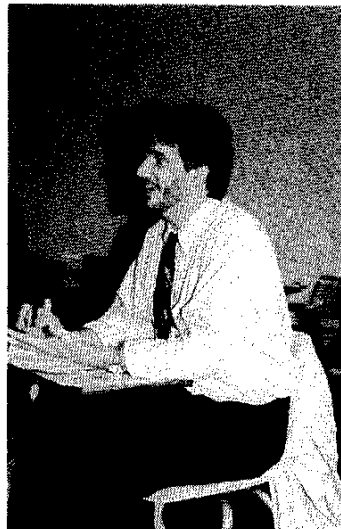
The membership of MATSOL owes gratitude to Conference Co-Chairs, Maria E. Gonzalez and Bethel Charkoudian, and to Conference Registrar, Grace Rooney. (Photos by S. Koons)



*Sonia Nieto: meeting  
with MATSOLers after a  
popular plenary session*



*A MATSOLer gets an  
early start in the  
publishers exhibits:  
reading, thinking, planning*



*Paul Watlington came from  
Falls Church, Virginia:  
sharing ESL Awareness Day ideas*



*Merriment, music, and  
movement: learning actively*

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## MATSOL/WEST Revitalized

*Linda Butler*

**O**n a steamy afternoon in June, about 30 MATSOL members from the western half of the state met at the Jones Library in Amherst for a MATSOL/West Social. It was the first such meeting in several years, a gathering organized for those in MATSOL who live closer to I-91 than to I-95. Those who attended enjoyed delicious refreshments and a chance to connect with colleagues from a variety of schools, colleges, and programs in the Pioneer Valley. While at the social, they completed a survey that they would like more such get-togethers, with a combination of professional and social activities at each meeting. A

dozen members volunteered to help, so we can look forward to more MATSOL/West events.

Postcards announcing this social were sent to MATSOL members with mailing addresses in the western half of Massachusetts. If you did not receive one and would like to be added to the MATSOL/West mailing list, please send a card with your name and address to Linda Butler, 74 Grove Avenue, Leeds, MA 01053.

*Linda Butler writes ESL materials, consults, and teaches in Western Massachusetts.*

## Teacher Research Group Update

**A**t the June meeting, the Teacher Research Group decided to meet in various locations at 10:00 to 12:30 pm on a Saturday in September, October, and at the MATSOL Conference in November. The next meeting is January 21 at Bentley College. For information about future meetings in February, March, and April, please call Erin O'Brien at (617) 335-0475, Rick Lizotte at (508) 388-2844, Kathy Riley at (617) 524-4224, Jane Tchaicha at (617) 449-6815, or Jean Chandler at (617) 492-8153.

Anyone is welcome: teachers, administrators, tutors, paraprofessionals, researchers. You might be interested in coming to a meeting of the group if you feel isolated in your classroom, if you want to reflect on your experience and try out changes, if you want to do a presentation at a MATSOL conference or write an article for *MATSOL Currents*, or if you are contemplating or presently engaged in ESL research of any kind.

At meetings, participants generally talk about their re-

search interests and other projects and provide feedback and support. The agenda is flexible according to the needs of the individuals who come. For example, at the September meeting, some of the research interests expressed were: developmental bilinguals, language learning strategies, teacher response to writing, cross-cultural academic difficulties of Dominican students, tutoring students with writing block, ESL students' knowledge of video and how they make sense of the news, describing teachers' literacy goals for their students and institutional beliefs about literacy acquisition, and using the native language in teaching ESL.

In addition to advertising the group's existence through *MATSOL Currents* and MATSOL conferences, members are doing outreach at UMass/Boston and at Boston University. Kathy Riley invited members of the group to participate in a forum on teacher research at the TESOL convention in Long Beach, California this spring.

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## TEFL Seminar in Eastern Europe & Russia

**T**ESOL professionals in the know will want to take advantage of the opportunity to learn more about the field on this latest EFL "frontier," as well as about issues and concerns on the minds of colleagues in (the former) East Germany, Poland, Byelorussia, and Russia. The seminar opens in Berlin, includes meetings in Warsaw, Minsk, Moscow, and St. Petersburg, and returns via Helsinki, Stockholm

and Copenhagen. Departure is Wednesday, June 14, and return Saturday, July 1. All-inclusive cost for the 18 days (air, hotels, coach/ferry transportation, most meals, seminar meetings, and sightseeing) is estimated to be approximately \$2,299. A detailed itinerary will be available in early January. For more information, contact TESOL Travels, 413 Holiday Dr., Thibodaux, LA 70301-3731.

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# MATSOL Currents

## Call for Manuscripts



*MATSOL Currents* welcomes submissions of interest to its membership of over 800 ESL professionals engaged in the field as classroom teachers (K through adult), program administrators, or professionals in ancillary services such as publishing. We accept articles on matters relating to ESL methodology and techniques, materials, curriculum design and development, teacher education, program administration, classroom observation and research, and employment issues. We also welcome contributions to our regular columns.

Please follow these guidelines in preparing your submission:

### Full-length articles

Articles should be 750 to 1,000 words in length and:

- present new ideas or information on topics listed above;
- discuss research findings that are applicable in ESL classrooms;
- train practitioners to engage in their own classroom-based research; or
- outline your views on ESL-related socio-political and professional concerns.

### Columns

#### Foreign Correspondence

For this column we welcome accounts of EFL teaching experiences. The account should include information about living and working conditions as well as any cultural and political insights of interest to readers. Submissions should be between 500 and 750 words.

#### Program Spotlight

Submissions should describe innovative programs that are successful in meeting defined needs and should be between 500 and 750 words.

#### Reviews

Reviews should be between 500 and 750 words and should evaluate recently published ESL classroom materials. Submissions should be sent to Sterling Giles, Reviews Editor, 62 Chandler Street, Boston, MA 02116.

#### Teacher Research

Contributions to this column (500-750 words) should describe any aspect of teacher research or provide summaries of completed projects or studies in progress. Send submissions to Jean Chandler, 15 Leonard Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139.

#### Teaching Ideas

A contribution to this column should be a detailed account of successful classroom techniques and should include your rationale, procedures, and results. Submissions should be between 250 and 500 words.

#### Technology Showcase

This column will replace the *Database* and *Video Views* columns of earlier issues. It is intended as a forum for introducing and discussing uses of technology both in the class-room and as a professional resource. Submissions should be between 500 and 750 words.

#### Word Play

This column is designed to challenge and amuse our readers. We welcome the submission of puzzles, games, riddles, brainteasers, and any other lighthearted material. All contributions must fit an 8½" x 11" format.

*Readers are encouraged to comment on or react to any article that has appeared in MATSOL Currents.*

## Guidelines

1. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced with 1" margins on top, bottom, and sides of each page.
2. Two copies of the manuscript should be submitted. In addition, if possible, documents should be submitted on a 3.5" or 5.25" computer disk. Your disk will be returned to you upon request.
3. Photographs or illustrations related to the content of the article are welcome.
4. Source citations should conform to MLA or APA guidelines.
5. Your full name, affiliation, home address, day and evening phone numbers and/or fax number should be included.

*MATSOL Currents* retains the right to edit all manuscripts that are accepted for publication. A writer's request for final approval is honored whenever possible.

The submission deadline for the next issue is **January 13, 1995**.

Mail submissions to:

Suzanne Koons  
60 Wadsworth Street #20E  
Cambridge, MA 02142

(617) 225-2788

e-mail: smkoons@mit.edu

## English Spelling Continued from page 1

A moth is not a moth in *mother*  
Nor both in *bother*, broth in *brother*.  
And *here* is not a match for *there*  
Nor *dear* and *fear* for *bear* and *pear*,  
And then there's *dose* and *rose* and *lose* —  
Just look them up— and *goose* and *choose*,  
And *cork* and *work* and *card* and *ward*,  
And *font* and *front* and *word* and *sword*,  
And *do* and *go* and *thwart* and *cart*—  
Come, come, I've hardly made a start!  
A dreadful language? Man alive,  
I'd mastered it when I was five.

(author unknown)

From a letter published in the *London Sunday Times* (Jan. 3, 1968)  
by J. Bland.

Although I do not follow any one language teaching method, I try to follow one particular rule in teaching at the beginning level: as much as possible, let the students hear new words before they ever see them on paper or on the blackboard. Have students pronounce the words several times before they write them. Optimally, students can act out many new vocabulary items in pantomime or hear native speakers say them in context on a video or audio tape. Students need a confident feeling about the sound of a new English word before they are confronted with its written form or it can seriously undermine their oral performance.

**B**y the intermediate level, students are dolefully familiar with the spelling problem. At this point, they appreciate an organized review of English orthography. The most valuable resource for this is a chart that I learned about several years ago while using the Silent Way materials. Its sound/symbol charts form a matrix with the international phonetic symbol (IPA symbol) heading a cell with examples of all possible spellings for that sound. Here are some samples from that matrix:

<b>y</b>	<b>oy</b>	<b>dj</b>
u — use	oi — oil	j — jack
ou — youth	oy — boy	g — gem
ew — few	aw — lawyer	d — soldier
iew — view		dge — judge
eau — beauty	<b>zh</b>	ge — cage
ue — hue	s — measure	gg — exaggerate
ewe — ewe	z — azure	dg — judgment
yew — yew	g — garage	dj — adjective
eu — feudal	t — equation	
eue — queue		

What's good about this chart (which fits on a single legal-size page) is that it shows students that the problem is finite. Students should be encouraged to know that with sys-

tematic, incremental review, they really can master English spelling. The teacher of intermediate students can cover a cell or two every few days for a semester and cover the whole list. Students can be asked to come up with 3-5 more examples for each spelling as homework and to confirm that they are able to apply the speaking patterns to pronunciation when they share their homework results with the class.

**A**nother resource I recommend is the book *All Spelled Out* by H. Elaine Kirn (ELS Publications). Kirn has her own version of the "English spelling madness" poem:

When it's English that we speak  
Why is *steak* not rhymed with *weak*?  
And couldn't you please tell me how  
*Cow* and *now* can rhyme with *bough*?

I simply can't imagine why  
*High* and *eye* sound like *buy*.  
We have *food* and *blood* and *wood*,  
And yet we rhyme *should* with *good*.

*Bead* is different from *head*,  
But we say *red*, *bread*, and *said*.  
*Gone* will never rhyme with *one*  
Nor *home* and *dome* with *some* and *come*.

*Nose* and *lose* look much alike,  
So why not *fight* and *height* and *bite*?  
*Dove* and *dove* look quite the same,  
But not at all like *rain*, *rein*, and *reign*.

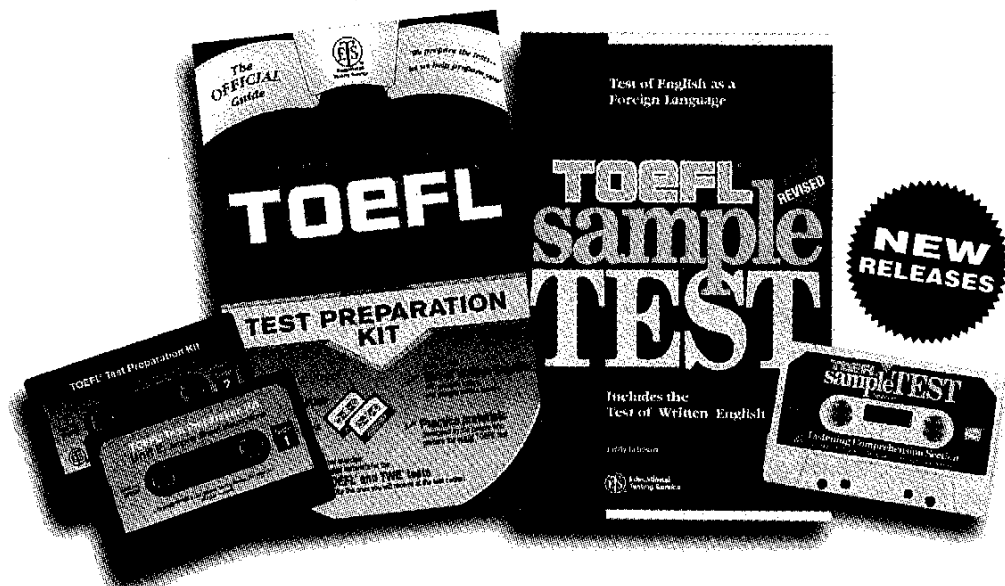
*Shoe* just doesn't sound like *toe*,  
And all for reasons I don't know,  
For all these words just prove to me  
That sounds and letters disagree.

It is fun to go over this or the first poem with students and eventually to have them say it back to you at a reasonable pace with accurate pronunciation. Be careful to save this activity for your intermediate students or higher, however, as it will be overwhelming for beginners.

If your students are discouraged about their spelling or their attempts at pronouncing unfamiliar words they encounter in their readings, remind them that American school children spend six years of their elementary education dealing with this issue in special spelling classes—and we still need spell checkers!

Carolyn Fidelman teaches at Northeastern University.  
e-mail: cgf@world.std.com

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## Anglicky in Slovakia *Continued from page 1*

previously affiliated with my institution, the *Vysoka Skola Pedagogicka* (the College of Education), were frequently contradictory, and conditions were apparently changing so quickly that nothing short of actually *being there* would give me a clear picture. What did the school look like? Could the students speak any English? (For that matter, could my *colleagues*?) Did they have enough books? A photocopier? Chalk? Would I be welcomed or resented? I was about to learn the answers to these questions—and much, much more, I knew—as my wife and I left the lights of Logan below us.

A day and a half later my education began. The school was not a noble, ancient, ivy-covered thing but a low concrete sprawl. The facility was, however, adequate and so were, somewhat surprisingly, the offices, equipment, and resource materials of the *Katedra Anglistiky* (English Department). Though our department secretary and librarian could not speak English, my colleagues certainly could, and over the next few weeks, in spite of the endemic bureaucratic inefficiency and red tape associated with virtually any transaction, the hospitality and helpfulness of Julka, Stefka, Anton, Zdenka, Dana, and others made me feel welcome and comfortable in the hallway and offices where I would be spending much of the next nine months.

### The department and assignment

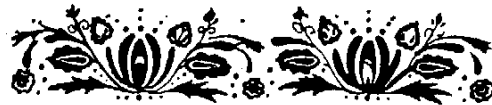
The English department runs three different programs designed to serve the exploding need for English teachers in Slovakia. In addition to the normal, five-year undergraduate teacher training program in which I taught and a three-year “fast track” program, it also retrains former teachers of other languages, particularly Russian (which only a few Slavophiles now study). The regular curriculum is extensive, including language skills, literature courses, linguistics, and TEFL methodology. I was asked to work on fine-tuning language skills; therefore, my five sections of “Practical Language Seminar” for fourth-year students (I’ll call them “seniors” even though it’s a five-year program) would focus on providing fluency practice, pronunciation via speaking and listening, and academic writing, a weakness for most students since it is not, apparently, taught in the school system at any level. Also, having discovered a decent collection of videos in the A-V room and plenty of VCRs, I planned to make use of them. In the spring semester my seminars were reduced to three so I could also design and teach two sections of a new “American Culture” elective for first-year students.

### The students

The English background of the students varied widely: even after three years of majoring in English, a significant minority of the seniors had problems with fluency or accuracy or both, mainly due to extremely limited practice opportunities. In fact, a number of the freshmen were more advanced

than many of the seniors since they had already had, in most cases, the benefit of four years of high school English, “post-communismus,” an adolescent environment their upperclassmen hadn’t enjoyed. Exposure to English was gradually increasing, however, as more native speakers were making their way into Slovakia (which, like most of Eastern Europe, is now a focal point for various U.S. and British programs) and more students were taking advantage of exchange programs or summer “au pair” or fruit-picking work in Great Britain or Ireland. (Only a few had spent time in the U.S., usually compliments of relatives, since the cost was generally prohibitive.)

The students were, for the most part, cheerful, polite, knowledgeable, and helpful. In general most were “good students.” They resiliently put up with some very long school days (due to lack of classroom space); dozens of different “lessons” (a forty-five minute “hour” of class time) each week in two disciplines (all students having two majors); long waits for services and access to their teachers; and unpredictably changing class times, rooms, and regulations. Those who simply couldn’t commute were forced to pay for and endure very poor dormitory and cafeteria “services.”



My seminar students and I enjoyed working on listening and pronunciation, vocabulary, and cultural topics using Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* and *East of Eden* with James Dean. They were appreciative of the alternative methodology. Often though, vocal student participation did not come easy. There was usually a sizable group of quiet, non-committal, though adequately-operative students in each class. It seemed to me they had learned too well in their fifteen years in school how to “succeed” in an educational system (mirroring society at large) which required them only to listen, memorize, and repeat information. In such an environment, one learned not to stick out or to take risks.

After a lot of explanation, coaxing and practice, some even came to appreciate a process approach to writing: remember, throughout their educational life it was the regurgitated *product* that had pleased the powers-that-be. The system had discouraged creativity and critical thought and had encouraged, really, what sometimes appeared to us foreign lecturers as outright plagiarism. In this, students needed continual re-education.

Sadly, though we were a *skola pedagogicka*, I’d say more than sixty percent of my students had no desire to teach: in spite of the demand, the very low pay and long days of Slovak teachers had convinced them to seek English-related

*Continued on the next page*



## Anglicky in Slovakia *Continued from page 8*

opportunities in tourism or business, for example. On the bright side, all these industries sorely lack employees with English ability, so at least important needs will be met. Fortunately, many of the best and brightest, it seemed to me, *did* want to teach, and a few of those seniors were already teaching English part-time in primary schools.

### Colleagues

Clearly, some of Slovakia's best and brightest already were educators: I was a bit surprised, but quite impressed, with the variety of my colleagues' backgrounds and interests. Their dedication to the profession was evident, given that they continued to suffer teaching hours and pay in an ever-widening inverse proportion. The English ability of a few of these professionals was excellent for citizens who had never had the chance to travel to an English-speaking country (and, unable to afford it, most *still* hadn't taken that trip). A few, on the other hand, and not surprisingly, had proficiency significantly below those best few. Most were somewhere in between.

Hard work and an impressive resume does not always, however, an excellent teacher make. In Slovakia, an interactive, student-centered class was rare. Most college professors preferred to stand in front and lecture on favorite or known topics; you see, they, like the students, had learned the tricks of the trade in the "old school." The English department seemed somewhat better in this regard, however. Even still, though many of my peers were *aware* of trends in language teaching methodology, according to student reports, a number were not practitioners.

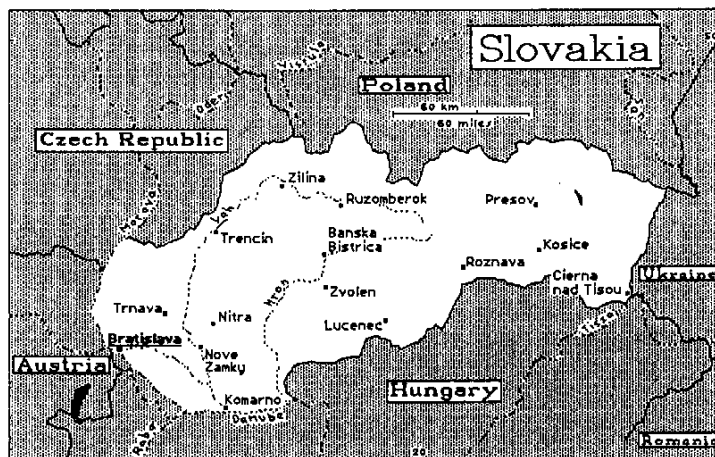
### Administration

I experienced problems with keys and classrooms, misunderstandings and mistakes, irresponsible students and—as I saw them—irrational decisions and policies, but the most intense frustration felt by all (five) of us visiting lecturers was that caused by the virtual lack of administrative communication. Important developments, such as the change of the department phone number, were learned by word of mouth, sometimes weeks after the fact. Invitations to receptions in our honor were given to us the morning of the event. There were, perhaps, only two or three departmental meetings in nine months—and only one memo. Believe me, teaching under such conditions is not, as might be imagined, refreshingly uncluttered; on the contrary, conditioned as we "westerners" were by "the information age," this vacuum was *the* biggest challenge. To my eyes, many administrative and departmental decisions or plans appeared last-minute, crisis management; so the too-late or lack of information was in fact the perfectly logical result of poor management. Or, too, perhaps, since information was power, one kept it to oneself, or perhaps released it when most effective or when

safe to do so—that is, when it was too late for anyone to challenge it.

### All for the best

But I dwell on the negative. Much was positive. A number of my students were wonderfully intelligent and sensitive and



caring; they brightened many a day darkened by professional or personal frustration. Many could always be counted on to risk an opinion, take a chance, or grab an opportunity. The future is theirs. That any one of my colleagues spoke English as well as she or he did was a testament to their own determination and passion for learning. Even those stuck in the pedagogical past could, nonetheless, be experts in their fields, whether that be Slavic morphology, deconstructionism, or James Joyce. These twenty good people educated hundreds of students every semester in dozens of classes starting at 7:30 in the morning and ending at 6:30 at night. Some credit too must be given to administrators who do, somehow, in their own way, keep it all going under the strain of yearly budget cuts—perhaps 30% this year! And as for myself, I was finally able to put myself in my students' shoes: I lived and worked in a foreign culture for the first time in my life. I learned a second language and used it in the streets and in the shops and on the buses, testing my theories of language learning and life. Therefore, in spite of the occasional confusion, frustration or setbacks, or classes that went bust, the experience was eye-opening, challenging, and utterly unlike anything I had gone through—in short, a total success. (And I haven't yet told you about *living* in Slovakia—the shopping and socializing, the castles and villages—stay tuned. . .)

*Ron Clark teaches at Boston University's CELOP and serves on the editorial board of MATSOL Currents.  
e-mail: rclarkjr@acs.bu.edu*

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# ESL Outrages

Joe Pettigrew

## An Outrageous Double Standard

A few years ago an ESL teacher was offered a standard job (part-time, mediocre pay, no benefits) at an ESL program in the Boston area. A few days before classes began, she was offered a much better, though still part-time, job at another program. The administrator who had offered her the first job was furious when the teacher said she was going to take the other job. "You'll never work in this town again!" she was told. (Honest! That's what she was told.)

As it turned out, she did work in this town again, steadily, for a few years until her husband was offered a job in another city and they moved away.

The galling part of this story is yet to come. This same administrator has regularly dropped teachers who are deemed unnecessary, not just at the last minute, but after classes have begun. This happened to a couple of teachers that I know of two weeks into the semester. (The students were reassigned to other sections of the course, creating a nightmare for the students and their new teachers.). This is something of an

extreme case, but hardly a rare one.

Why do so many administrators expect "loyalty" from their teachers when they refuse to offer any in return?

The irony of the situation is that the teacher who left at the last minute was able to do so for the same reason that this administrator can drop teachers even after the start of classes: contracts are withheld from the teachers until it is absolutely certain they are needed. Most of the time, this works to the administrator's advantage. So I don't think this person has much right to complain when the tables are turned.



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## Employment Issues Committee

The Higher Education Section of the MATSOL Employment Issues Committee (EIC) has disbanded. The members felt that they had done all that current circumstances would allow. They were able to accomplish a great deal—the MATSOL Employment Standards, the May Day Conference, and the Sur-

vey of Higher Education Programs, to name three—and hope that some of the issues will be taken up by the new MATSOL Sociopolitical Concerns Task Force. If you're interested in becoming involved, contact MATSOL (617) 576-9865.

## TESOL Part-Time Task Force

The Task Force on Part-time Employment is examining the current condition of ESL teachers in adult and higher education settings in the U.S. This group is gathering information and needs help from you to complete its studies and make recommendations for further action.

David Tillyer, City University of New York, would like feedback on the Massachusetts employment standards in higher and adult education. He has published those standards on TESL-L. Other states are interested in cre-

ating a set of standards, and David is collecting information about how the standards are being implemented in Massachusetts. Contact him if you would like to contribute (212-650-6289 or [datcc@cunyvm.cuny.edu](mailto:datcc@cunyvm.cuny.edu)).

Tracey Henniger-Chiang is collecting narratives of efforts to improve conditions for part-time teachers. She is interested in written accounts of your personal experiences with colleagues, unions, and administrators. If you would like to contribute, contact her by e-mail: [chiang@bvc.edu](mailto:chiang@bvc.edu).

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# Our Administrators: A Modest Proposal

Joe Pettigrew

Our administrators are often seen as “the enemy” by teachers. Yet despite occasional evidence to the contrary, I believe none of them truly wants to see their teachers overworked and underpaid. The vast majority are former teachers themselves trying to cope with university bureaucracies or a bewildering array of funding agencies and government regulations. They deserve our sympathy. And most often they get it.

However, we shouldn't let sympathy turn into unquestioning acceptance of everything administrators do—or don't do—for their faculty.

It's safe to say that most administrators in this field have had little or no management training and often lack the skills to go about getting more money and more full-time positions for their programs. There's quite a bit of anecdotal evidence to suggest that some administrators are simply too intimidated by their superiors to even ask for more positions; or if they ask, they often give up after the first “no” they hear.

In one sense, it's understandable. There are no courses on “University Politics” or “Making a Case for Better Salaries” in our masters programs. Yet there are people in bureaucratic organizations who do learn to “work the system” for their programs' benefit. Unfortunately, most of them aren't in ESL.

It's important for administrators to realize that this is not a moral or intellectual failing on their part. They shouldn't feel embarrassed to get some help with aspects of their jobs for which they have had little or no preparation. Few people

could be effective teachers without some training and feedback. Why should administration be so different?

There are consultants who have the knowledge and skills to help others cope with the organizations they are in to get more money and better conditions for their employees. They are more likely to be found in business schools than in ESL, but we need to remember that the organizations we work for usually see things from a business perspective, even the non-profit schools and agencies.

Anyone who has worked in a program with poorly paid faculty or an overwhelming number of part-timers knows the effect that this has on quality. Bureaucracies may not care that paying a lot of part-time teachers poverty wages and no benefits is morally reprehensible. However, they might be made to see the light if they can be shown that the quality (and even the bottom line) of a program can increase when its employees are treated fairly. It is possible to make such a case more often than we might think, and a good consultant could help our administrators do just that.

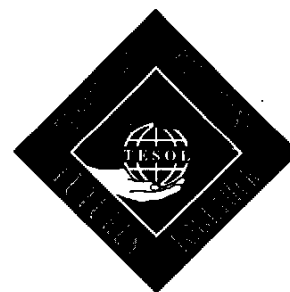
Unlike a lot of ESL teachers, such consultants do not give their services away for free, so I'd like to suggest that MATSOL take a look at this. I for one would consider my dues well spent if our professional organization were to invest in a little real-world management training for some of its members. The potential payoff could be enormous—for all of us.

Joseph Pettigrew teaches at Boston University's CELOP.  
e-mail: [jpettigrew@acs.bu.edu](mailto:jpettigrew@acs.bu.edu)

## Sociopolitical Concerns Task Force

The MATSOL Board announces the establishment of a task force whose goal is to provide ESL professionals and students in Massachusetts with greater visibility and influence on legislative, educational, and employment issues. Anyone interested in joining should contact MATSOL at (617) 576-9865.

Updates of the group's efforts will appear in *MATSOL Currents*.



## TESOL '95: Building Futures Together

March 28-April 1, 1995  
The Long Beach Convention Center  
Long Beach, California USA

A joint conference with the  
California Association of Teachers of English to  
Speakers of Other Languages (CATE SOL)

# Massachusetts ESL Awareness Day Contest — 1995

We are pleased to announce the Second Annual ESL Awareness Day Contest to all Massachusetts teachers and students of ESL. Here is some information to help teachers prepare their students for this event. Please encourage your students to participate.

**Categories** This year there will be three contest categories: **Poster, Essay, and Video**

**Topic** The subject will be "My Turning Point"

**Levels** Poster Contest—elementary, middle, and high school levels  
 Essay Contest—all levels  
 Video Contest—small group and class entries for all levels

**Deadlines** We will accept entries any time before February 3, 1995. The entries should be sent to:

MATSOL Contests  
 P.O. Box 391887  
 Cambridge, MA 02139-0008

**Prizes** Winners and their teachers will be notified by Friday, February 17, 1995.

Winners and their teachers will be invited to attend the signing of the ESL Awareness Day Proclamation by Governor William Weld on Wednesday, March 1, 1995 and the MATSOL Spring Conference, where there will be a ceremony to distribute prizes.

## Contest Guidelines and Rules

You should have already received in the mail instructions about what information to include with the submission of the essays, posters, and videos. Only original student work will be considered.

*You can direct inquiries about the contest or ESL Awareness Day to co-chairpersons Eileen Feldman (617-272-9477) and Josephine Vonarburg (617-254-0411).*

## Here's How Your MATSOL Dues Are Spent

This breakdown of the MATSOL dues is based on the Income and Expense Report 1/1/92-5/26/94.

1. Conferences	\$9.40	5. ESL Awareness Day	\$ .98
2. Newsletter	\$4.50	6. Office/Secretarial	\$ .60
3. Job Bank	\$2.20	7. Mail/Postage	\$ .32
4. Professional	\$1.26	8. Board	\$ .26
Anne Dow Benefit		9. Socials	\$ .24
Certification		10. Miscellaneous	\$ .24
Teacher Research			
Teacher to Teacher			
TESOL			
MATSOL Grant			
Donation			
MATSOL Past Presidents			
		<b>Total</b>	<b>\$20.00</b>

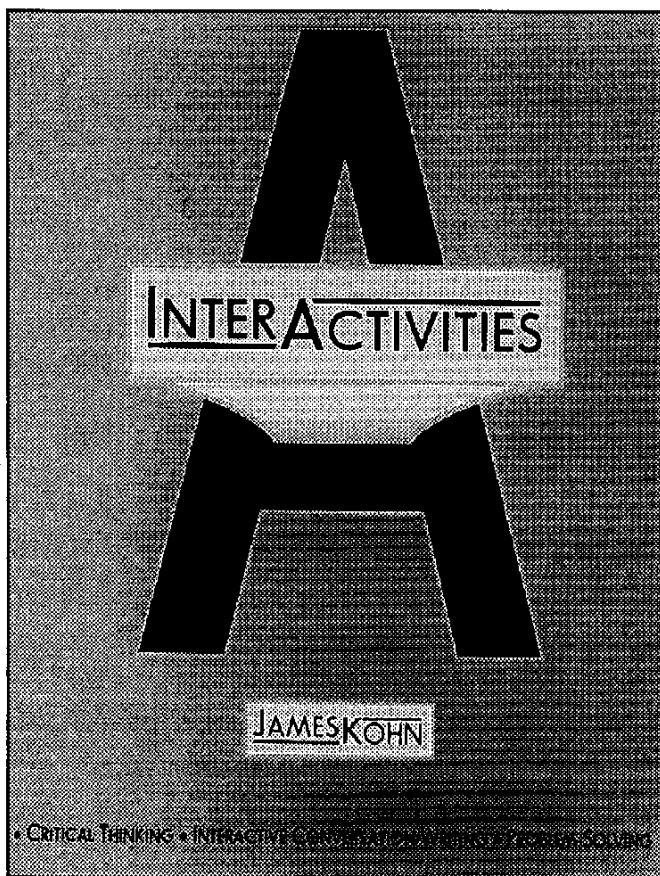
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# The Challenges of Visually Handicapped Students

Tom Woods

Last September, after six years of teaching high school ESL in Arizona, I joined the teaching staff at Marshall Senior High School in Los Angeles. At Marshall I had, for the first time, "normal" ESL classes of thirty-five. Quite a shock after Arizona, where ESL classes were capped at eighteen.

Seventy-five percent of the students were Spanish speakers while the other 25% were from diverse language backgrounds. In one of my intermediate ESL classes of thirty-five, I also had four visually handicapped students. I wondered what a teacher could do for visually handicapped (VH) students in such an environment.

These non-native VH students were required to be in ESL classes, apparently by state law, but had previously only received oral/aural instruction. My job was to oversee the start of their mastery of the ESL curriculum's reading and writing skills—in Braille. In addition to the class size, there were several other problems to solve: there were potential motivation problems resulting from the school's promotion policy; I knew no Braille and the VH students had not yet mastered it; and the VH students needed one-on-one instruction but also had to be integrated into the class as much as possible.

The VH teacher felt strongly that the students should master the ESL curriculum no matter how many semesters it took. One of the problems that this requirement posed was that the students had to be failed in order not to be promoted to the next ESL level, creating a potential motivation problem. We decided to try Individual Education Plans (IEPs), which would make it possible for students to be retained at one level until they mastered that curriculum, no matter what their grade was. Motivation was also addressed by ensuring that all work was reviewed and given credit.

My lack of knowledge of Braille proved to be the least of my worries. For each hour of class, the VH Department provided a teaching assistant who knew Braille. Unfortunately, the teaching assistants also had to be monitored to keep them on task. To my horror, I frequently found one of the assistants having VH students read the text letter by letter; instead, she should have had the students follow in Braille while she read the text and then read it back to her. Another assistant firmly believed that the students needed to be able to spell words orally and had to be stopped from spending an inordinate amount of class time on what seemed to me to be a completely useless skill.

The department also transcribed materials for the VH students to use in ESL class. Because of their lack of Braille skills, the VH students had to begin with a much simpler text than the one used by the rest of the class. This text also had to be transcribed by hand into Braille

as the students worked through it. Unfortunately, on occasion, the VH students were without a text because the transcriber fell behind; unless I monitored their activities closely, the VH students would end up with a great deal of wasted time (an already all-too-common problem for them in other classes).

To handle the one-on-one instruction required, the VH department also transcribed the Braille classwork of the students, so I could evaluate their progress through the ESL text. In my evaluation, I ignored Braille skill problems (like letter reversals—e.g., "th" substituted for "f" in Braille) and concentrated on English usage or comprehension problems. I then discussed these problems with either the students or their teacher.

A major problem involved integrating the VH students into the class routine. Although the students arrived with the rest of the class, they had to leave five minutes early to get to their next class, causing some disruption. In addition, VH instruction was disrupted as the rest of the class did oral work; there was no quiet space for the VH students in the classroom. VH students also lost time during the switchover from one teaching assistant to the other. And since their work was out of sync with that of the other students, they were academically isolated as well. Of all the problems of having the VH students in the class, true integration was the one that remained for the most part unsolved.

Although their integration into the ESL class was far from complete, the VH students did make progress toward mastery of intermediate ESL. And I came a long way towards understanding the challenges of teaching ESL to visually handicapped students.

*Tom Woods teaches at John Marshall Senior High School in Los Angeles.*

**MATSOL CURRENTS**

**NEEDS YOU!**

(see page 21)

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# Read, Read, and Write: Using Reading Journals

Steven Howland

As many ESL teachers have found, personal journals are a wonderful means of allowing students of all levels to utilize their communication abilities in English. Journals are usually advocated as a means of improving and experimenting with writing, but what if they were used to improve reading? I would like to share my experience with what I term "reading journals" by giving some background on the process used, some of the results found, and reflections on what it means to use these reading journals.

## Course objectives

The goals of my community college advanced ESL reading class were to increase the students' reading speed and comprehension to a freshman college level and to improve their ability to respond critically and reflectively. These students were taking a separate writing class where they would focus on creating finished works; therefore, there was no need to spend time working on final drafts in my class. What they needed to do was read voraciously and reflect on what they read. A reading journal fit this need nicely.

The class was basically structured as a conventional reading class. We used *Between the Lines* (Zukowski/Faust, et al; Harcourt Brace) as our reading textbook, but since I wanted the students to read more material than we could possibly cover in class, I selected *Critical Reading and Writing for Advanced ESL Students* (Scull, Prentice Hall Regents) for outside reading. Occasionally we discussed in class the essays and short stories if there was a particular difficulty with a story, or a particular interest that could be expanded upon as a class exercise. Primarily, though, it was the students' individual responsibility to write one journal entry for each reading. In addition, the final two weeks of class were spent exclusively on a short novel for which two journal entries were required. In order to give the students feedback on their journals, I collected them every four to five entries. Since I wanted to encourage each student to write as much and as freely as possible, my comments were made only on content and not on grammar or spelling. I tried to respond with questions which would prompt further thinking on a topic, and I encouraged students to make use of my office hours for discussing their journal entries.

## Student responses

In reviewing the student entries, I found three primary ways in which students responded to essays. The first was a simple summary. This may only have been paraphrasing, rewriting, or copying particular quotes, but it was a good start and provided insight into a student's

abilities. It was also useful for determining what a student found interesting and important in a story.

The second type of response was a personal story relating to the essay read. This showed that the student had not only an understanding of the article but also that the article evoked a personal response. Perhaps the student didn't understand the entire article but nonetheless responded to some important part of the article which struck a chord. Many students progressed through the semester from writing only summaries to summaries plus a related personal story. This showed an increase in relating to what was read and an increase in comfort with the writing process.

The third response was for a student to attempt some level of critical analysis. Regardless of the depth of such a response, it showed that the student was beginning to grasp some of the critical thinking skills necessary for the academic classroom. Not all students were able to spontaneously write in-depth critical responses to the essays, but they did increase the length of their responses and began to experiment with questioning the written word.

One of the strongest points of journals in general is that they allow students to express themselves freely. This freedom, however, can be overwhelming for students and at times intimidating for teachers. Students may have difficulty in choosing topics, or may provide personal information that the teacher might not find appropriate. Writing journals for many students can become a means of psychoanalysis with the student as patient and the teacher as therapist. This clearly goes beyond the role of the ESL teacher. The reading journal, on the other hand, is an excellent way to overcome this difficulty. Students are free to write anything they want, but their writing is in response to a particular stimulus. It is guided yet not controlled.

## Conclusions

The journals proved to be very effective for my students. Though the length of the responses varied tremendously, with some students writing only a half page each time and others writing three or four, the students' personalities clearly showed in their writing. It was always interesting to see which essays prompted personal stories rather than just summaries and which prompted attempts at critical reflection. It was a good means of monitoring each student's individual progress. By the end of the semester, students had read and responded to a great deal of reading; many of

*Continued on the next page*

## Using Reading Journals *Continued from page 15*

their journal entries could easily have been revised and edited into appropriate papers for a college literature class.

What I concluded from this class was that reading journals are an effective way to get students more involved in what they are reading by providing a way for students to independently process what they read and to retain

more of the material. Students can reflect on an essay or short story and then write about it in a meaningful way. It also provides a way for teachers to continue to evaluate a student's thinking process in a natural way.

*Steve Howland teaches at Greenfield Community College.*

### Student Comments on Keeping Reading Journals

- ❧ "I think it is a kind of method to learn the essays and to see what we understand from the story and it also give the teacher way to see what we think and how we understand it."
- ❧ "I like to read story and write journal."
  - help me know other culture and existence different
  - help me know how to live in another country and in the United States
  - help me remember my alive before and I like my alive now."
- ❧ "It has helped me writing my essays better and understanding about the writing ways of America."
- ❧ "If I write a journal, I have to read very carefully and have to understand. So I think, journal is good."



### Calendar of Events

#### MLA

Dates: Dec. 27-30, 1994  
Place: New York, NY  
Contact: MLA  
(212) 614-6370

#### NCTE/CCCC

Date: Jan. 5-7, 1995  
Place: Clearwater Beach, FL  
Contact: NCTE

#### Georgetown University Round Table

Date: March 8-11, 1995  
Place: Georgetown University  
Contact: James Alatis  
(202) 687-5726

#### AAAL

Dates: March 25-28, 1995  
Place: Long Beach, CA  
Contact: AAAL  
(612) 953-0805

#### TESOL

Dates: March 28-April 1, 1995  
Place: Long Beach, CA  
Contact: TESOL  
(703) 836-0074

#### NNETSOL

Date: April 8, 1995  
Place: Portland, ME  
Contact: Bart Weyand  
(207) 780-4419

#### TESOL Institute

Dates: July 2-28, 1995  
Place: St. Michael's College  
Colchester, VT  
Contact: TESOL  
(703) 836-0074

#### NNETESOL Conference on Public Education

Dates: July 14-16, 1995  
Place: St. Michael's College  
Contact: Bart Weyand  
(207) 780-4419



## Put on a Play

*Stephen Sadow*



There are times when everybody has to get in the act. Fortunately, there is a type of student production that can be produced in a matter of hours and performed in class or even for a larger audience. Prepared scripts appropriate for ESL classes certainly exist. However, when students write their own material, they employ, intensively and continuously, their conversational, negotiating, listening, and writing skills. Besides, student-written skits are highly-motivating and especially satisfying to all involved. The trick is to find a format that most, if not all, students can agree upon. Soap operas, talk shows, game shows, variety shows, radio hours, elegant dinner parties, television ads (lengthy or in a series), stories with happy endings, stories with sad endings, stories with morals, and cliffhangers can all be used as frames upon which to hang a play. The class should settle on one format—doing more than one becomes confusing and makes comparison difficult.

After the entire class decides on the type of play, groups of four to eight students are formed. Each group sets out to do the same assignment, but does it in its own way. Ground rules are set. First, each student is to have an equal amount of "stage time"; that is, each must speak approximately the same amount. Two to three minutes per person is usually sufficient. Second, no student may dominate the presentation. Third, students must watch on television or in person or listen on the radio to examples of the type of show they are about to concoct. They should make note of aspects of the shows and scenes which they find unique or typical of American culture.

The students have a fixed amount of time to prepare their skits. Two to three hours, whether in class or at arranged times

outside of class, is usually sufficient. The students are instructed to: 1) decide on the characters they will play; 2) create a plot if one is called for; 3) write dialogue; and 4) rehearse. The memorizing of lines is desirable but not absolutely necessary; however, students should not be allowed to read their material aloud. The students are reminded that things go faster during a performance than they do during rehearsals. Costumes, props, makeup, and scenery are encouraged, but not required.

The presentations take place in class or on a handy stage. Students may arrive ahead of time to set up. The audience of classmates may laugh at a comedy routine or listen to the latest news from Hollywood. Or, it may lean forward to hear whether Louise chooses the smooth-talking Horace or the hard-working Clyde.

Making an audiotape can be helpful for identifying errors or for use while grading. Videotape can be used if students feel comfortable with it, and if it is convenient. The teacher watches the performances, listens for language quality, and takes notes. Grading, if attempted, is quite subjective; individual and group grades can be assigned. Obviously, students should know whether their work counts toward their grade.

After all groups have had a chance to perform, there are several rounds of applause and a short discussion of grammatical and pronunciation errors that occurred during the plays. Then, a boisterous cast party with toasts made to all participants completes the experience.

*Stephen Sadow teaches at Northeastern University.  
e-mail: sasadow@lynx.neu.edu*

## The Beginner

*Stephanie Goldstein*

What kind of story can I tell them? I hold up a book.  
"Someone like you,  
someone new to America  
wrote this book. You can write,"  
I tell them. I tell them  
a story to get them to think,

I think. I tell them  
a story to get them to speak,  
I think. They have to know  
English to write, I tell them.  
Am I talking too much?  
Am I listening enough?

*Stephanie Goldstein teaches at Roxbury Community College.*

## Getting Started

Jean Chandler

*MATSOL Currents* introduces a new forum for issues related to teacher research. Contact the column editor, Jean Chandler, at (617) 492-8153 if you would like to contribute.

**D**o you wonder whether to assign groups or let students choose their partners? If you assign them, should it be on the basis of language ability or personality? If it is on language ability, should you put students of similar or different levels together? If it is on the basis of personality, should you pair shy ones or put shy ones with talkative ones? These are just a few examples of questions you might have about teaching ESL.

All you really need in order to do research in your own classroom is an answerable question. The question has to be narrow and focused enough to be possible to answer. If you need help focusing, come to the MATSOL Teacher Research Group. Then of course, you have to figure out how you can find the answer to your question. The Teacher Research Group can help with a research design, too (see Update, page 4).

The nice thing about teacher research is that you don't have to answer the question for all students in all situations, but only for your students in their particular situation. As long as your research provides an answer to your satisfaction, it is successful.

I am constantly engaged in numerous research projects because there are lots of things about my own students and teaching that I still don't know even though I have been teaching basically the same population in the same setting for ten years.

Over those years, I have done more, rather than less, research because one question just leads to another. For example, I wanted to know what language learning strategies my students were using. First, I read several books and articles about what language learning strategies had been found to be effective for second language learners. Then, I devised a questionnaire which was not obviously value-laden, that is, had no obviously right and wrong answers. I administered this questionnaire to 101 students, coded the answers and entered the data into my computer (with the help of a student assistant).

Then I wanted to know if student strategies varied according to their level of language ability, so I looked up their TOEFL scores and entered them in the computer. To answer my question, I correlated student responses to the questionnaire with their TOEFL scores, using a statistical package on my computer. Of course, that still does not tell me which comes first—use of strategies or better English. (As we say in the trade, correlation is not causation!)

Then I wondered if and how students' responses might change if they had received ESL instruction in our institution, so I noted whether they were new or returning students,

entered that in the computer, and compared the responses of the two groups to see if and how they were significantly different.

Another research question arose when I noticed that my students didn't have many strategies for learning vocabulary, even though they regarded that as an important issue in learning English. I decided to teach one class various methods of increasing memory for words, and I wanted to determine which method was most effective. To do that, I first had to find a list of words that none of them knew. Then I divided this list into seven lists of 20 words each. For each list, I tried something different: for one I acted out the meanings kinesthetically; for one I showed students pictures; for one I helped them think of mnemonic devices, usually auditory similarities, such as "it's great to be grateful"; for one I had them divide the words into three categories according to the meanings; for one I had them make up a story using all the words; for one I had pairs of students test each other; and for one I explained roots or several meanings of the same word or gave several contexts in which the word could be used. Each day after 25 minutes of "instruction" and study of those 20 words, we had a quiz to see how many the students could define. At the end of the seven sessions, we had a quiz on all 140 words. Of course, it would probably depend on what order the words were taught in; it might be easier to remember the ones which had been taught last. To be sure, I would have to teach these seven methods to seven classes in seven different orders. You can see how one question can lead to seven years of research!

**B**ut that's not all: What difference would it make if the quiz were simply in a matching format or if the students had to generate synonyms? To find out, of course, I had to give both kinds. I also gave a mini-questionnaire about which method the students enjoyed the most, found the most helpful for learning those words, and could apply the most easily to other words in their own experience. We read *Death of a Salesman* together in class, the play from which all of the words had come. I tried to observe whether the class could recognize the words in context and remember their meaning. I then administered the original questionnaire on learning strategies again at the end of the semester to see if student responses in the area of vocabulary learning had changed.

If computers and statistics scare you, then look carefully at just a few students and ask them questions or write down in a journal your observations of students' reactions to

*Continued on page 22*

## REVIEWS

# Video in Second Language Teaching

Reviewed by Carol Houser Piñeiro



*Video in Second Language Teaching*. Edited by Susan Stempleski and Paul Arcario. TESOL, 1992. 183 pages. ISBN 0-939791-41-2.

A recent survey conducted by the Video Interest Group showed that a large percentage of TESOL members use video in their classrooms, indicating that as a teaching tool, video is well entrenched in ESL methodology. This fact makes the volume *Video in Second Language Teaching* a necessary addition to the bookshelves of novices and experts alike because it satisfies the needs of a wide range of users.

Susan Stempleski, founder of the Video Interest Group, author of numerous video materials, and worldwide lecturer on the use of video in language teaching, and Paul Arcario, producer of educational videos and ESL/EFL teacher trainer, have assembled 10 informative articles written by professionals on various aspects of video. They are divided into three sections titled 1) Using Video, 2) Selecting Video, and 3) Producing Video.

In the first section, Stempleski herself writes about using video for communicative activities in the classroom. Other articles include video as a component of thematic units (Stoller), teaching children with video (Tomalin), business

and intercultural communication through video (Ladau-Harjulin), drama and videotaping students (Forrest), and evaluation of students through videotaping (Loneragan).

In the second section, Arcario presents criteria for selecting video materials, and Thomas, Brodkey and Passentino give an overview of ESL/EFL video materials currently available. In the third section, advice on producing videos is presented (Glass) and factors affecting the production of ELT videos are discussed (Hambrook).

The articles are well-written, serious pieces, full of ideas, advice and information on all aspects of video. For neophytes, teaching ideas are presented in a clear and straightforward fashion, making it simple to choose a film and use it with students based on suggestions given. For experienced video users, production tips, references to available materials, and other helpful advice and information are included. *Video in Second Language Teaching* is a useful reference book that individuals and language programs will find valuable for years to come.

Carol Houser Piñeiro teaches at Boston University and is Past Chair of TESOL's Video Interest Section.  
e-mail: [chp@bu.acs.edu](mailto:chp@bu.acs.edu)

# American Picture Show: A Cultural Reader

Reviewed by Pamela Couch and Margo Downey

*American Picture Show: A Cultural Reader*, by Elizabeth A. Meijia, Maida Kennedy Xiao, & Lucyna Pasternak. Prentice Hall Regents, 1992. 220 pages. ISBN 0-13-029687-2.

Understanding American movies can be a daunting task for ESL students unfamiliar with U.S. culture. *American Picture Show* is an advanced-level reading textbook designed to give university-bound ESL students sufficient background to comprehend seven critically acclaimed American films. It provides authentic reading material and vocabulary development exercises to help students improve their reading skills while they increase their understanding of the cultural and social issues raised in these movies.

After an introductory chapter, the book presents seven chapters based on the following films: *Witness*, *Children of a Lesser God*, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *Stand and Deliver*,

*Dim Sum*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and *Coal Miner's Daughter*. Each chapter contains readings taken from a variety of sources, including university-level textbooks, newspapers, and magazines. The book also includes vocabulary in context and dictionary exercises based on the readings, brief movie summaries, movie reviews, and post-viewing discussion and writing topics. In addition, two chapters present very short sections on intonation and thought group divisions.

*American Picture Show* is a useful tool for ESL teachers in that it provides a wide selection of interesting readings that familiarize students with different aspects of American culture presented in popular films. By helping students build their background knowledge before seeing a film, the book allows them to understand more of what they watch and thus facilitates a more enjoyable viewing experience. The use of movie reviews challenges students to examine their own reac-

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## Maybe This Time . . .

Tom Griffith

Time marches on, and so does English. That is, the English language keeps evolving, stretching, mutating, all in an effort to fit the thoughts and values of its users. We who teach the bloody language might wish that it would hold still and attain a finished form like Euclidean geometry. Then we could declare rules with certainty. We could teach “who” versus “whom,” and “lie” versus “lay,” and ignore the fact that almost nobody talks that way anymore.

But it won't hold still. It changes, and not only in ways confusing to native speakers. English in its dynamism tosses up words and phrases that defy translation. Some are idioms, which I used to define for my students as the coinages of idiots; the terms are in fact etymologically related, from the Greek root *idios*, meaning “private, peculiar, separate.”

Others are not so much idioms as slogans. These differ as being verbal vessels for cultural ideals. They are coined deliberately by professional wordmongers in journalism or academe. And for ESL students at higher levels, it's just such phrases that we're called upon to explain.

This being a political season, I thought it would be fun to look at both particular phrases and larger trends whereby American values shape American language. The *Boston Globe* (August 1994) ran a fascinating article about the UN Conference on Population in Cairo. The UN has six official languages, so documents hammered out in one of them have to be translated into five others.

It appears that English was causing most of the trouble. For many phrases familiar to us, there were simply no equivalents in Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, Russian or French. Such as:

- *Sex education*. Agree with it or not, we at least get the idea. Yet in Arabic, “virtually any word derived from the word ‘sex’ is deeply offensive, so ‘sex education’ and ‘sexual health’ sound nearly like four-letter words.”

- *Single-parent household*. Not in Arabic, “because it includes homes where a woman who never married is raising a child, something that is taboo in Arab society.”

- *Reproductive health*. In Spanish, “it is being translated directly as *salud reproductiva*, which, [the translator] said, sounds like health that reproduces itself.”

- *Sensitivity*. A virtue, right? “In Chinese, ‘sensitivity’ is a negative concept, as in: He is very sensitive to the heat.”

- *Empowerment of women*. This poses “enormous problems” for the French. “So for the moment they have chosen the long and clumsy *renforcement du pouvoir d'action des femmes* (reinforcement of the power of women

to act).” Try chanting that at a rally. But French problems were nothing compared to those of the Chinese. “Impossible . . .” said Tsen Thunglu. “In Chinese, ‘power’ means control and dominance over others. But ‘empowerment’ as it is being used here means control over one’s life and circumstances.”

Tsen put his finger on the source of the conflict: “In Chinese, we tend to look at things from the collective perspective on the outside . . . ‘Sensitivity’ comes from the perspective of the individual, which is a Western concept.” There it is—individualism, the supreme American value, stealing in linguistically, compelling other cultures to stretch their mother tongues and extend a hesitant embrace.

And whence such sonorous phrases? Tsen concludes: “This is a text with much modern American social terminology.” Yet clunky as they sound (have you ever been “*involved in a relationship with a significant other*”?), these phrases reverberate with meaning. They bear within themselves centuries of social evolution that most of us rather appreciate. And they also demonstrate other trends in language change.

Take that nemesis of the UN translators, *empowerment*. Both noun and verb form are quite recent, deriving from the good old noun *power*. It's very American to turn nouns into verbs because it suggests dynamism, a prime cultural value. No flies on us—we're moving too fast. Our spaceships are *powered* by rocket fuel, our electrical plants by coal or plutonium.

Happily, English can draw on Latinate prefixes to modify its verbs. Thus, we once *empowered* attorneys to act for us, transferring our rights to another individual. But in these egalitarian days—another American value—we want not only to transfer but diffuse rights, to level out the pyramid of status. So we *empower* women, or minorities, or children, or whomever. Or, truer to the modern spirit, they *empower* themselves.

Another example may cause some teeth to grind. Remember about fifteen years ago when *impact* made the leap from noun to verb? How did it *impact* you? I confess to resisting it, indeed, reviling it for quite a while. A barbarous neologism! Why not just say, How did it *affect* you?

Well, *affect* was more precise, but too bland for American tastes. It was too removed from physical imagery, whereas *impact* brought to mind something vivid,

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## Lots of Stuff

Robert Saitz



How deep are the differences between cultures? To what extent does language function as a mediator? Does it merely reflect the culture or does it determine it? Ever since the studies of Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir were popularized, such questions have been discussed in anthropology, linguistics, foreign language, TESOL courses and, I am sure, elsewhere. We'll probably never get a definitive answer and recent linguists tend to waffle somewhat in response:

... we are conditioned to some degree by the language we speak, and our language does teach us habitual ways of looking at the world. But on the other hand, human adaptability enables us to transcend the limitations of a language to learn to see the world in new ways and voice new concepts when we must. While it is probably true that some ideas are easier to communicate in one language than another, both languages and speakers can change to meet new needs. The grip language has on us is firm, but it does not strangle; we make language more than it makes us. (*Famous Last Words: The American Language Crisis Reconsidered*, Harvey A. Daniels)

Of course, that firm grip of the native language and the need to master the new words that convey new concepts in the second language are what concern us in ESOL. And as teachers of English as a second language who use up-to-date materials, we are very aware of the language-making going on. If we look at everyday words for everyday things, we may get a glimpse of the brave new world greeting our students. For example, George Carlin has noted that "we've

got a lot of stuff." Of more relevance to us is that if we have a lot of stuff, we need other stuff to hold stuff and to put stuff in.

Thus, in *Word By Word*, a picture dictionary by Steven Molinsky and Bill Bliss, we'll find a *toilet paper holder*, a *toothbrush holder*, a *paper towel holder*, a *pot holder*, a *memo holder*, a *spice rack*, a *towel rack*, etc., to say nothing of baskets, bags and boxes. A society with an inordinate concern for receptacles? What's life like in the Molinsky-Bliss bathroom? For one thing, we have to know what to step on; we have a *bath mat*, a *bath rug*, and a *rubber mat*. If we happen to get wet, we may choose among a *bath towel*, a *hand towel*, a *washcloth* and a *facecloth*. Life in an apartment seems downright hazardous: an *intercom*, a *buzzer*, a *smoke detector*, a *peephole*, a *door chain*, a *dead-bolt lock*, a *fire alarm*. If you decide to rent a house, you may find yourself in a blizzard of bills: a *gas bill*, an *electric bill*, a *telephone bill*, a *water bill*, a *heating bill*, a *cable TV bill*, a *parking fee*, and of course, a *pest control bill*. If you thought going to the beach was simple, here, in addition to the usual *bathing suit* or *swimsuit* or *trunks* or *bikini* et al., you may need a *beach umbrella*, a *beach chair*, a *beach towel*, a *bathing cap*, an *air mattress*, a *kickboard*, a *surfboard*, a *tube*, a *beach blanket*, a *sun hat*, *sunglasses*, *suntan lotion*, and naturally, the *cooler*.

Life seems rather complicated in our English-speaking world. Maybe what we English speakers need to do is learn a language that doesn't have so many words for so many things; the absence of the words can then cleanse us of the need for so much stuff. Cheaper, less to carry, and shorter dictionaries!

Robert Saitz teaches at Boston University.

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## Getting Started *Continued from page 18*

things you try. Qualitative research can be just as valuable as quantitative, or better yet, use both together. But in any case, you must have a clear and focused question and a plan for finding the answer.

Teacher research can be used simply to help you reflect on and improve your teaching. Or you can write up the results to share with your colleagues at a MATSOL conference and/or in *MATSOL Currents*. Again, the Teacher Research Group would be glad to help, and you could take advantage of the expertise of the editorial board

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*Jean Chandler teaches at the New England Conservatory of Music.*

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tions to the films, as well as the reactions of others. Another positive feature of each chapter is the variety and depth of the writing topics, which encourage students to respond to the film on both intellectual and personal levels.

While *American Picture Show* succeeds in providing cultural information that helps students understand the central conflicts in the movies, it is less successful in sustaining student interest over a semester. The vocabulary in context exercises lack variety and become tedious after a few chapters. Another weakness of the vocabulary exercises is that they are limited to the reading passages. Although each chapter contains a brief list of vocabulary used in the film, most ESL students need more language support to comprehend a feature-length film.

The biggest drawback of *American Picture Show* is the choice of the films on which the book is based. Many of these films center around the theme of America as a rather turbulent melting pot. As ESL teachers, we were naturally very interested in this theme. Unfortunately, ESL

teachers and students do not always share the same interests; we were surprised to learn that many of our students found the issue of cultural conflict to be overly repetitive in the films. They also complained about the use of non-English languages (Spanish in two films, German in one, and Chinese in one) and non-standard English dialects, which they found confusing and counterproductive to their comprehension of the movies.

*American Picture Show* takes a step in the right direction by providing authentic reading passages to help students understand the social and cultural background of feature films. We hope that future editions include chapters based on a wider variety of current films that will be of greater interest to ESL students, not just ESL teachers.

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violent, like a car hitting a tree. After having three generations brought up on movies (the quintessential Americanism, derived from *move*), that's how we see the world—as a brisk, brightly-colored, kaleidoscopic drama, in which each individual plays a starring role. Thus, events don't just *affect* me, they *impact* me.

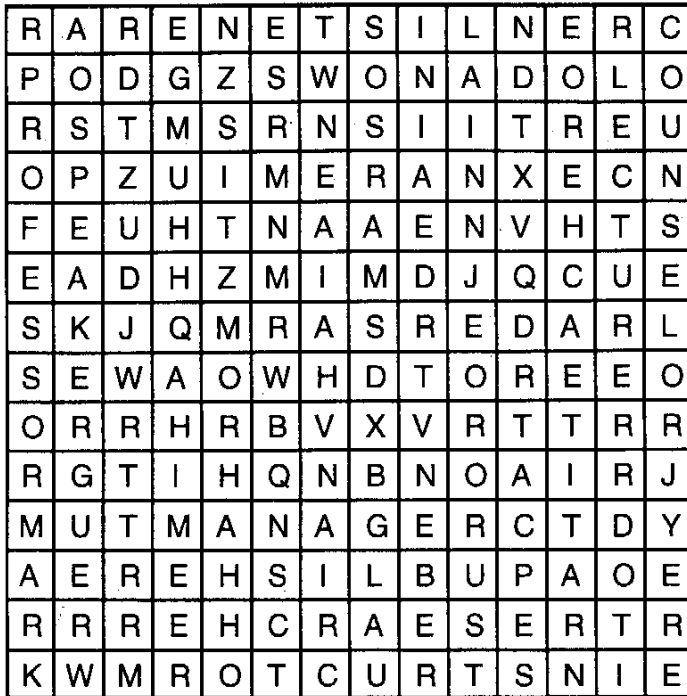
We show the taste for vivid action in slang idioms: That kid is *off the wall!* (In the mind's eye, he bounces around like a cartoon character.) Or in prepositions-turned-verb: He was *outed* by a journalist. (We see him yanked from a closet of denial.) Or in reversing usage of verbs from passive to active. For a long time, politicians promised that in their term of office, the economy would grow. President Clinton did one better, promising to "grow the economy." That was new. Why alter the grammar? Because it suggested to voters, however unconsciously, that he would be more in charge,

more assertive, more "pro-active," than his lackadaisical predecessor. It suited his Kennedyesque image of youthful vigour.

It remains to be seen whether that particular phrase survives. Oddly, now that the economy *is* growing, we don't hear it anymore. But the trend will certainly continue. Values—dynamism, individualism, egalitarianism—will shape the language, not just in new vocabulary items but in the very syntax. And language will shape the values. Words have formidable power to set the terms of reality. Like Adam naming the animals, we gain dominion and control of the world by asserting verbal authority. And as English grows and changes, its territorial hold on the global imagination will probably increase.

*Tom Griffith teaches at Showa Institute.*

## ALL IN A DAY'S WORK



## WORD PLAY




*Suzanne M. Koons*

### FIND AND CIRCLE THESE WORDS IN THE PUZZLE

Words can be found horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, and forward or backward.


ADMINISTRATOR	MANAGER
ADVOCATE	MENTOR
AIDE	PROFESSOR
AUTHOR	PUBLISHER
COUNSELOR	READER
EDITOR	RESEARCHER
GRAMMARIAN	SPEAKER
INSTRUCTOR	TEACHER
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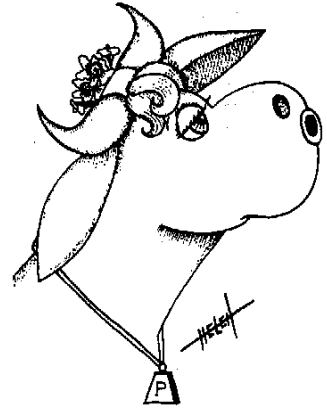
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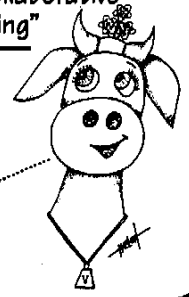
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