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## Lessons Learned from a Career in TESOL

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### *Editor's note*

*This article is an adaptation of the 11<sup>th</sup> annual Alice Pack lecture delivered by Dr. Neil J Anderson at Brigham Young University Hawaii on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021. In this article Dr. Anderson reflects on 41 years of experience of teaching English language learners and English teachers and shares three major lessons with TESOL professionals. Professor Anderson is a recipient of the prestigious TESOL International Association James Alatis Service Award (2014), and was recognized by TESOL International Association in 2016 as one of the 50 individuals who has made a significant contribution to the profession of teaching English to speakers of other languages.*

### Introduction

I am now within weeks of retiring from my position as a university professor. The past 41 years have provided rich and rewarding opportunities to engage in teaching English to speakers of other languages and to train teachers entering the profession. I have had the opportunity to teach at three universities in the United States and I have had extended periods of time outside of the US working and teaching in refugee language programs in Southeast Asia, and with language learners and teachers in Costa Rica and Guatemala. I have also had the opportunity of interacting with teachers in over 50 countries as part of speaking invitations to teacher conferences, training programs through the U.S. Department of State English Language Programs, and publisher workshop for books I have published.

Before I retire, I want to step back from 41 years as a TESOL professional and reflect on lessons learned. There is one overarching concept that ties together the major lessons that I have learned over my career. That concept is relationships. In his 2019 book *The second mountain: The quest for a moral life*, David Brooks emphasizes the vital role that relationships play in our lives. “As adults, we measure our lives by the quality of our relationships and the quality of our service

to those relationships. Life is a qualitative endeavor, not a quantitative one. It's not how many, but how thick and how deep. Defining what a quality relationship looks like is a central task of any moral ecology" (pp. 300-301).

The relationships I have built with colleagues and students have made all the difference in what I have learned. Without these relationships, I know that I would not have lasted 41 years as a TESOL professional.

I can summarize hundreds of relationship experiences into three major lessons: first, expect the unexpected; second, foster a culture of collaboration; and third, connect your scholarship to your teaching and your teaching to your scholarship. Each of these three relationship lessons has resulted in forming and building lasting friendships with others that have molded me into a very different person today than I was 41 years ago. I am confident that the lessons I have learned can benefit other TESOL professionals, regardless of the stage at which you are currently at within the profession.

### **Expect the Unexpected**

For some reason, we often believe that we are in complete control of the events that occur in our lives. We believe that the private decisions we make day-by-day shape us into the person we see ourselves becoming. I have come to understand that we must expect the unexpected. Many of the good things that have occurred in my professional life have come unexpectedly. These unexpected experiences have often come as challenges that have caused me to rely on key relationships to overcome them.

One way that I have come to look at the idea of expecting the unexpected is through the phrase *question all assumptions*. Quinn (2012) introduced the concept of "challenging your normal assumptions" (p. 5). His work led me to the creation of a phrase that has guided me in most activities and decisions in the past seven years: *question all assumptions*. Quinn asserts that deep change is a fundamentally different process because it requires people to develop new expectations. As people experience deep change, they move from their old assumptions to a new set of assumptions. They start to see, feel, and think differently. (p. 9)

I have not always questioned my assumptions. This is a lesson that emerged later in my career but is one that I wish I had understood early in my career. In retrospect, this lesson has provided me with opportunities to grow and develop as a TESOL professional.

Allow me to provide an example from my career. I completed my MA degree in December 1980. My first full-time teaching position was at the newly organized English Language Center (ELC) at BYU Provo. The program designated a limited number of three-year non-renewable teaching positions for newly graduated students from the MA program. The rationale for these positions was to provide full-time employment that could serve as a stepping stone to further employment and education.

Within the first few weeks of my full-time employment, I knew that I wanted to earn a PhD degree in order to train future TESOL professionals. I set my sights on the PhD program at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). I was so focused on earning my PhD from UCLA that it never occurred to me that I might be rejected. In April 1984 I received the long-awaited letter from the admissions office at UCLA. I was devastated when I read that I had not been accepted. My world suddenly fell apart. I had no backup plan. It took a few weeks for me to sort through what I should do. Through very careful guidance from mentors, individuals with whom I had built relationships, I applied for the PhD program at the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) and I applied for a position with the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) at the Refugee Service Center based in Manila, Philippines. I was accepted to the PhD program at UT Austin and I was offered a position with CAL as the Program Associate for Measurement and Evaluation. Although I did not fully understand at the time, I was learning to expect the unexpected.

From this experience I also learned that in life we want options. I should never have assumed that I would be accepted at UCLA. I should never have applied to a single program. Because I applied to grad school at UT Austin and the position at CAL and received positive results from each, I was then in a position to make an informed decision. I accepted the position with CAL and I petitioned UT Austin to delay my acceptance for two years. That allowed me to have extremely positive

experiences working at refugee programs in the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. I was in a much stronger position to enter the PhD program at UT Austin and successfully complete the course work and dissertation within three years.

My rejection from UCLA provided two professional options that I never expected. Working for CAL provided an opportunity for our family to live in the Philippines. I was able to travel multiple times to refugee programs in the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia followed by studying in a PhD program that ultimately was a better fit for me and my family. I built collaborative associations with colleagues at CAL and at UT Austin that served me well years later. These were completely unexpected events for me and my family. Expect the unexpected!

### **Foster a Culture of Collaboration**

As a language teaching professional, I have had many opportunities to collaborate with others. Most of the collaborative opportunities came to me unexpectedly. Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) point out the value of building a culture of collaboration in the language classroom. I see it equally beneficial to build a culture of collaboration for your academic career.

One principle that I learned as a student in the MA program at BYU was to be actively engaged in professional associations. I joined TESOL International Association while still a graduate student and I joined Intermountain TESOL (I-TESOL), the affiliate of TESOL for professionals living in Utah and Idaho. Early in my membership in I-TESOL I met MaryAnn Christison (MAC), then a faculty member at Snow College in Ephraim, Utah. When MAC was President of I-TESOL she invited me to serve as the treasurer of the association. This invitation resulted in a friendship and collaboration that has lasted for years.

Early in my service opportunity with I-TESOL I met Darlene Larson who was serving as the 17th President of TESOL International Association (1982-1983). As a result of meeting her, she appointed me to serve on the first TESOL Awards Committee. This professional service opportunity allowed me to meet other professionals and to review the award applications. I started to learn what constitutes a strong application for an award and how to evaluate award applications.

JoAnn (Jodi) Crandall served as the Chair of this committee. Jodi was also the Vice President of CAL. She traveled to the Philippines shortly after I started my employment and I was able to strengthen my collaboration with her as I learned how to serve within TESOL and as an employee of CAL.

In 1993 MAC had been elected to the TESOL International Association Board of Directors as the convention program chair for the 1995 convention that was to be held in Long Beach, California, USA. She invited me to serve as her Associate Program Chair. My collaboration with MAC provided me with an opportunity to meet many more TESOL professionals from around the world that I otherwise would not have met. Serving as MAC's Associate Convention Chair also introduced me to the workings of the TESOL Board of Directors and I knew that I wanted to put my name forward for leadership opportunities within TESOL. I was elected by the membership of TESOL to serve as the Convention Program Chair for the 1998 convention that was held in Seattle, Washington, USA. After serving in that role from 1997-1999, I was elected by the membership to serve as TESOL President. That opportunity allowed me to serve as President-Elect (2000-2001), President (2001-2002) and then as Past President (2002-2004).

During the years of service on the TESOL Boards of Directors I had the opportunity of building collaborative associations with women and men who served in the role as TESOL President. Donald Freeman, Joy Reid, Denise Murray, MaryAnn Christison, Kathi Bailey, David Nunan, and Barb Schwarte have become dear friends, not just professional colleagues.

Another collaboration that was fruitful was getting to know G. Richard Tucker. Dick was the President of CAL during my employment in the refugee program. Later Dick and I served on Board of Directors for The International Research Foundation (TIRF). Dick played a significant role, along with Donald Freeman, in convincing me to serve as the Chair of TIRF (2004-2006).

Through my employment at CAL, I met Rebecca Oxford. Rebecca was employed at the Washington D.C. CAL office. She was one of my primary contacts in DC for analyzing the language placement and progress data we gathered at the refugee camps. Rebecca and I co-authored a scholarly publication on the impact of learning styles of second language learners (Oxford & Anderson, 1995). We

were able to host Rebecca at BYU Hawaii a few years ago when she came to speak at Hawaii TESOL.

In February 2001 I was invited to participate in a US Department of State English Language Program opportunity as a Specialist to work with the Faculty of Education at Suez Canal University in Suez, Egypt. The focus on the training was on designing self-assessment tasks for EFL students at Suez Canal University. The training was in two parts. I met with the teachers in February and then I returned to the US allowing them to design and develop some self-assessment tasks. I was to return in September. My flight was schedule for September 13, 2001. Now pause and think. What was happening in the world in September 2001? Because of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York and other locations on September 11, all flights in the US were grounded. I do not remember the exact date, but as soon as flights reopened, I was on a plane to Egypt to meet with my colleagues at Suez Canal University. Many people were concerned about me traveling to the Middle East at such a point in time. I arrived in Suez and entered the training room. As I entered with my hosts, my Egyptian colleagues stood and applauded. I was overcome with emotion. I asked why they were applauding. One teacher stepped forward and said that they were sure that I would not return to complete the training with them. They were sure that the media reports and the terrorist attacks in the US would discourage me from returning to meet with them. I shared with them that many people were concerned about my return, but that I was not. To those that were concerned I said, "I know my Muslim sisters and brothers will protect me from any danger while I am in Egypt." That brought another round of applause and emotional embraces that I will always remember.

I have also been fortunate enough to have two Fulbright teaching and researching fellowships: Costa Rica (2002-2003) and Guatemala (2008-2009). I was interested in going to Costa Rica for multiple reasons. One, both my wife Kathy and I speak Spanish and I wanted an opportunity to live in Central America and be surrounded by Spanish. Second, while I was on the faculty at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio I taught several students from Costa Rica. Because of those students, in 1993 I was invited to as an English Language Specialist to conduct two weeks of training for teachers. That first visit to Costa Rica resulted in multiple returned visits. Two of my former students at Ohio University,

Evelyn and Hellen Aguilar Murrillo are twins. They hosted me on most of those visits. Another former student Maria Eugenia Flores, was the Academic Director at the Centro Cultural Costarricense Norteamericano (CCCN) and her Associate Academic Director was another former student Alexandra Esquivel. I knew that spending a year in Costa Rica would provide powerful collaborations.

It was at a faculty research meeting at the University of Costa Rica that the concepts of developing depth in the development of teaching the language skills was conceived. I have continued to refine my thinking about how to appropriately integrate the language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and at the same time develop depth in each of the skills. I have a recent publication in the TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching (Anderson, 2019) on how to develop depth in the development of reading while integrating the other language skills.

I served as a missionary in Guatemala and El Salvador in the mid-1970s and returning to Guatemala as a Fulbrighter was particularly rewarding for me. I was able to work with teachers at the Centro de Aprendizaje de Lenguas Universidad de San Carlos (CALUSAC). The term motivational moments was conceived while working with and training teachers in Guatemala. We met weekly to discuss how to make motivation a more explicit component within language classrooms. The teachers became overwhelmed with all of the theories and activities related to motivation. One day one of the teachers stop our discussion and said, “Neil, we cannot possibly do all of this. We have to teach the language.” I started to panic because I could see that the focus and purpose of my being in Guatemala as a Fulbrighter was slipping away. This is one time that I know I was inspired as to how to respond. I paused, looked the teachers in the eyes, and said that we needed to shift our thinking about the theories and activities related to building motivation as opportunities to weave in motivational moments into our lesson planning. On the spot I told the teachers that a motivational moment should last no more than one minute. With this explanation the entire attitude of the teachers changed. They unanimously agreed that they could easily weave four motivational moments into each lesson plan. We then started practicing the delivery of those motivational moments in order to “create the basic motivational conditions, generate initial motivation, maintain and protect motivation, and encourage positive

retrospective self-evaluation (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 29). My experience in Guatemala ended with strong collaborative associations and teachers that learned how to weave motivational moments into their teaching.

While on the faculty at BYU Provo I had the opportunity to interact with extremely motivated and talented students. It was in that context that I first met Rob McCollum, Rebecca Roberts, Nancy Tarawhiti, and Mark Wolfersberger. Today I actually do not think of Mark, Becky, and Nancy as “former graduate students” but rather as colleagues.

Mark initiated the discussion with me about teaching here at BYU–Hawaii. In 2014 I shared with Mark that I was questioning the assumption that I would remain at BYU until retirement. I wanted to do something different for the final years of my academic career. I had applied for two positions. He asked if I would consider applying for a position at BYU–Hawaii. That invitation provided a rich and interesting discussion with him and with the then Academic Vice President, Max Checketts. After lengthy discussions with both Mark and Max, I submitted my application. Kathy and I were flying home from one job interview when we received the call that we were invited to come to Hawaii for an interview. I resigned from my position on the faculty at BYU Provo and we moved to Laie in 2014.

Fostering a culture of collaboration has provided many rich and rewarding relationships.

### **Connect your Scholarship to your Teaching and Your Teaching to your Scholarship**

Early in my career I became interested in the skill area of reading. I decided that this was the skill area that I wanted to explore and develop expertise in so that I could improve my teaching of reading fluency and reading strategies. My desire came as a result of seeing students in my ESL classrooms struggle with slow reading and lacking strategic reading skills. I decided early in my career that I would connect scholarship to challenges I saw in my teaching. My dissertation examined the reading strategies that L2 readers use while engaged in reading comprehension tests versus reading academic textbook material (Anderson, 1989).



In 1984 TESOL International Association held its annual convention in Houston Texas. I attended the annual Reading Research Colloquium. That was my first formal introduction to David Eskey, Patricia Carrell, Andrew Cohen, and Bill Grabe. As the colloquium drew to a close, I took the initiative to approach the organizers and share with them my developing interest in reading fluency. They invited me to join them for dinner that evening. That dinner initiated friendships with these colleagues that continue today. Andrew ended up serving as an external committee member for my dissertation work at UT Austin.

I presented my dissertation research at the 11th annual Language Testing Research Colloquium in San Antonio, TX, USA in 1989. Andrew was in the audience. After the presentation, Lyle Backman and Kyle Perkins approached us and asked detailed questions about my data. The editor of *Language Testing* also approached us during that conversation. The conversation and collaboration resulted in a joint presentation the next year at the 12th annual Language Testing Research Colloquium in San Francisco, CA, USA and in a 1991 publication in *Language Testing* (Anderson, Bachman, Perkins, & Cohen, 1991). By connecting my scholarship to my teaching and my teaching to my scholarship I also had the opportunity of making meaningful relationships with other professionals.

In 2000, I was invited to deliver a plenary address at the Millennium Malaysia International Conference on English Language Teaching in Malacca, Malaysia. I spoke on developing metacognitive skills in second language learners. I have found that a conference presentation is the perfect starting point for developing a publication to submit for a peer reviewed publication. While at this conference I was able to reconnect with a former student I had taught while at Ohio University, Josephine Ratnam-Wee. The relationships established with students during their time in my classes have led to multiple opportunities to keep those relationships alive.

While at the conference I was able to interact with David Nunan, who at that time was serving as the president of TESOL International Association. I had accepted an invitation from him to contribute a chapter to a book that he was in the early stages of editing *Practical English Language Teaching*. I had shared with David an initial abstract for my chapter which presented a framework for teaching

reading. The ACTIVE skills for reading framework is one that I had developed as a way to approach my teaching of reading in the classroom. At the conference David introduced me to Ian Martin, an editor with Heinle & Heinle Publisher, now National Geographic Learning. While Ian, David, and I were relaxing that evening after the conference David asked me to share with Ian my framework. David then told Ian that he should get a contract with me to publish a textbook series by this title. Within six months I had a contract to write four textbooks: ACTIVE Skills for Reading, Books 1-4 (Anderson, 2002/2003). When the series went into its second edition for publication in 2007/2008 (Anderson, 2007/2008), we added an Introduction level book. In 2013/2014, the series then went on to a third edition (Anderson 2013/2014). When I first developed the framework at the ELC in 1981, I had no idea that my thinking would result in multiple conference presentations and three editions of a textbook series. Notice with this example that it was my relationship with David Nunan that provided the introduction to Ian Martin which led to my scholarship resulting in a textbook series.

My scholarship has always emerged from issues that I have faced in language classrooms. Explicitly connecting my scholarship with my teaching and my teaching to my scholarship has resulted in eight books, 29 book chapters, 27 journal articles, and three textbook series.

### **Conclusions**

Relationships are core to our lives. Those relationships need to be rich, purposeful, and meaningful. We do not know how we ultimately might be influenced by others or how we might influence them. The relationships I have developed over the past 41 years have prepared me to expect the unexpected, foster a culture of collaboration, and connect my scholarship to my teaching and my teaching to my scholarship.

I am confident that other TESOL professionals can benefit from these same principles. Then when you reach the point that you have spent 40 years in the profession, I hope you can reflect back on the relationships you have established and retire knowing that you have accomplished good.

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### **About the Author**

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