



# ESL MiniConference

## Life After TESL

### A Special Report from Barbara Matthies of Iowa State University (Retired)

Barbara Matthies worked at Iowa State University from 1968 until her retirement several years ago. She administered the ESL programs there for a number of years.

“Old ESL teachers never die, they just lose their class.” Well maybe, but I’d rather say that, after a 30-year career in TESL, education is still a very important part of my life. The big difference now is that in retirement I’m more often a learner than a teacher. And when I do get a chance to teach, it’s rarely in a formal classroom or for pay. Fortunately, those 30 years earned me an adequate pension and good health insurance to supplement Social Security and Medicare, enabling me to continue traveling the world to learn firsthand about some of the places my students came from.

During my career, I went overseas on Fulbright grants and other exchange projects. I taught at universities in Yugoslavia and Nepal, conducted teacher training in Zimbabwe, and consulted on curriculum development in Egypt. Imagine my delight, then, just a few months after retiring, to find myself teaching English on a short-term project in eastern Poland. This was just the start of the varied activities I have discovered to fill my time and give back something of my experience to the world and my community.

Upon returning home, I was asked by the ESL teacher at a local elementary school to help tutor some newly arrived pupils from Mexico and Sudan. Since my prior experience had been entirely at the university and adult level, it was an interesting challenge to work with wriggly young children with short attention spans. But we soon settled into a routine, and after a few weeks they began to show progress in their reading and speaking, to the delight of their classroom teachers.

Meanwhile, I was also beginning to explore new areas of interest outside of teaching. The county conservation center organizes monthly programs for OWLS—Older, Wiser, and Livelier Seniors—with thought-provoking presentations on wildlife, environmental issues, and related topics. After

Autumn 2006

Profile: Sonia Nieto

Life After TESL

Title tk

Title tk

[/Index/](#)  
[/Letters/](#)  
[/Profiles/](#)  
[/Search/](#)  
[/Podcasts/](#)

*Subscribe for free!*

one of these sessions, I was asked if I would like to volunteer to help at the center, and soon I was painting park signs, serving as host to center visitors, entering data on computers, and keeping two small county parks cleaned up. What a joy to be doing hands-on projects instead of purely mental work!

Another vista opened up at the local hospital, which also offers a series of presentations for retirees through which I learned about aspects of aging that I hadn't given much thought to. One result of this was joining a class in Tai-ch'i for Arthritis that has helped keep me flexible and energized for my other activities.

The variety of opportunities for learning and helping in this fairly small community is always surprising. A retired person could fill up the entire calendar with volunteer activities and classes. There's no excuse for being bored or lonely.

The local office of RSVP—Retired Senior Volunteer Program—has connected me with several agencies that want my services. I deliver Meals on Wheels and record the local newspaper for broadcast to people unable to read it. Using computer skills developed as a teacher and administrator, I enter citations in the records office at the police station and keep the address list current at the United Way office. And I love being told what to do! After many years in administration, I don't want to make any more policy decisions.

If I do feel the pull of intellectual curiosity, the university sponsors a College for Seniors that offers informal classes every semester. Through them I've learned a lot about world affairs, art in the community, economic development, and even document preservation. Before long, I was persuaded to offer a course myself (for free, naturally), which produced an introduction to linguistics and another on the history of American English. Preparing for those classes gave me a reason to re-read some of the books gathering dust on my shelves and to root around in the local library for useful material. And it was exciting to prepare a class for my peers.

Just as much fun was the ESL class I organized at the county jail. A small group of inmates from Mexico needed help communicating with the guards, who, like me, knew little Spanish. So I went twice a week with basic aids and handouts to be locked in a room with half a dozen male inmates for an hour. We had such a good time with the lessons that I never felt uncomfortable, and they seemed grateful for the attention and the break in their dull routine.

If all of this sounds like a lot of activity, there is still plenty of time left for travel and other interests. After all, when you're retired, every day is like Saturday.

I've taken a cruise or guided tour at least once, often twice, a year since retiring. It's pure pleasure to give over all responsibility to a tour guide and crew for handling luggage, planning itineraries, booking rooms, and choosing sights to see. This enables me to enjoy snorkeling with sting rays, riding a cog railway into the Yukon, inching slowly through the Panama Canal, and sipping tea on a hotel veranda overlooking the Nile. And if I feel like dropping out of the day's planned activities to explore on my own or just read a book, I find that people are inclined to respect the wisdom of my graying head and let me be.

So, if anyone asks whether a satisfying career in TESL can be followed by an interesting retirement, I'll definitely answer in the affirmative. Goodness knows I'm not wealthy from my salaried years, yet I am able to travel, take classes, teach, and meet new people by volunteering my services to the community. There is indeed a rich life after TESL!

By Barbara Matthies  
Iowa State University (Retired)

2006 ESL MiniConference Online



PDF conversion by [PDF Online](#)