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Valerie Whiteson The Power of Context



1. What is your main ESL or second-language/multicultural activity now? What are your principal projects, and what is on the back burner?

My main interests now are on-line: I tune in to TESL-L and the materials writers group MWIS-L every day. I usually react to teachers who still believe in Grammar/Translation methods. I also have a few books for sale out there and I try to keep up with them. Two of them are mentioned in **the piece** I wrote for this publication.

I'd like to add "[New Ways of Using Drama and Literature in Language Teaching](#)" (Editor) TESOL Publications (USA) 1996.

and "**Cloze The Gap: Exercises in Integrating and Developing Language Skills**" Alta Book Center (California, USA) 1993. These books are still available.

2. How did you start your ESL/SLA/linguistics/multicultural career? Who influenced your decision? What were some important formative experiences in the early stages of your development?

In 1960, my husband and three children and I left South Africa to settle in Israel. We were sent to a Hebrew Ulpan for five months to learn the language. Then we went to live in Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee where there were very few English speakers. A school principal heard about me and she offered me a job teaching English at an elementary school. I was sent to Haifa for a two-week course in Methodology. It was a waste of time and so I simply adapted the Direct Method that we'd been taught at the Ulpan to teaching English.

Because of the discipline problems at school, I soon found that I preferred teaching adults. Eventually an inspector visited my class and told me that I needed a BA in English Literature in order to get a teaching license and I was happy to oblige.

3. What are the four or five language/culture backgrounds with which you are most familiar as a teacher? Which ones are you familiar with from the perspective of a language learner yourself? What insights have you gained in how to meet the needs of learners from these cultures and language backgrounds?

In Israel I taught English at all levels and began to publish textbooks. My first book ENGLISH IN CONTEXT (1975) for high school students was really successful and I meet older teachers today who tell me that it was the first real ESOL textbook used in schools in Israel.

I won a British Council scholarship and the family went to England for two years. My MA is from the University of Essex in Applied Linguistics. During the second year, I became the Coordinator of courses at the Colchester English Study Center which was affiliated with Oxford University Press. The Center was one of the first schools to offer English for special purposes. We had doctors, engineers, nurses, teachers from Europe who came for short courses. I co-authored a book MORE VARIETIES IN SPOKEN ENGLISH for Oxford University Press.

On returning to Bar Ilan University I soon found myself teaching Applied Linguistics courses to future ESOL teachers. Then in 1984, I moved to the US after receiving a PH.D. in English Education from Indiana University. In the US I taught freshman courses in composition etc. at colleges and universities.

4. If you had to give three pieces of advice to a new teacher, what would they be?

Teach about the world in the language you want your pupils to learn. Every aspect of the language must be in context. Make sure that the topics are stimulating. Respect your students and show that you care about them as people and pupils.

5. What do you see as the most important issues facing the ESL/EFL/SLA/linguistics/multicultural profession(s) today?

I see the content of lessons as one of the most important issues. For this reason, my most recent books have been based on literature. I prefer to teach older students who are ready to come to grips with real ideas while they are learning the new language.

Interview by Robb Scott

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