

Summer
2006

Review of
Azar CD-
ROM

Profile:
Valerie
Whiteson

Profile: Sonia
Nieto

Profile:
Virginia
LoCastro

Remembering
LIOJ

Why I Write
Lesson Plans

The Role of
Textbooks in
the ESOL
Classroom

Title tk

Title tk

Semantic,
Lexical, and
Thematic
Sets

Summer
Vacation
Essay

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

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Virginia LoCastro Walking the Talk



1. What is your main ESL or second-language/multicultural activity now?

I teach courses in second language acquisition, discourse analysis, and TESL methods at the University of Florida. I do not teach language any more. I am constantly working with students and faculty for whom English is not their first language

What are your principal projects?

I am carrying out a project on International Teaching Assistants and their identity construction in the US academic community.

What is on the back burner?

A sociolinguistics study of the languages of Florida

2. How did you start your ESL related career?

I moved to Quebec City and had to teach English to speakers of French.

Who influenced your decision?

No one person. It was circumstances, including my having grown up with a non native speaker of English father in an area of New Jersey which was multicultural even though that word was not used at the time. I majored in

French and had been studying it since high school. I spent my junior year in college abroad in Paris. Being in multicultural contexts was much more interesting to me than being in an entirely, solely "white American" environment. Still is!

What were some important formative experiences in the early stages of your development?

It was working with Dr. John Fanselow at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York. And then going to Japan for what was only going to be two years and turned into 15 non-consecutive years.

3. What are some of the language/culture backgrounds with which you are most familiar as a teacher?

Quebecois, Japanese, general Asian, Mexican, Slavic

Which ones are you familiar with from the perspective of a language learner yourself?

French, Quebecois, Japanese, Latin American Spanish

What insights have you gained in how to meet the needs of learners from these cultures and language backgrounds?

A whole book could be written on this subject. The most important point, I guess for general consumption, is that as an ESL teacher, one must walk one's talk, i.e. learn ANY one language well, really well. Otherwise, one cannot understand nor does one have face validity with the learners in the ESL/EFL classes.

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

1. Learn the language and the culture (popular culture as well as the literature, the music, the cuisine) of the students one is teaching.
2. Become professional. Don't just see it as a temporary job.
3. Be creative. Know the methods, etc., but go beyond what is in the methods books.

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

The lack of full time, proper jobs, with decent pay and benefits and the unwillingness of most administrators to hire trained teachers. These are two

parts of the same coin, in my view.

Interview by Robb Scott

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