



# ESL MiniConference

Winter 08-09

Thanksgiving  
Reflections

The Night  
After  
Christmas

Teach Where  
You Are

Nick Ellis  
and LEA

---

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

---

*Subscribe  
for free!*

## Teach Where You Are Nourishing the Spirit in Any Circumstance

Since beginning my ESL career at Kansas University's Applied English Center as a graduate teaching assistant, I have worked in a variety of programs and under a number of different administrative and program models. I have always felt fortunate that my first several years of experience were at the AEC in the system that Elizabeth Soppelsa, then the director, was in the early stages of developing there.

Skill/levels had coordinators who were very much interested in seeing new teachers find their own styles. I remember Karen Pearson was the coordinator for beginning level writing, my first teaching assignment. I called her every evening during the first week, and she patiently listened as I recounted every detail of what had happened in class that day, hearing my interpretations of classroom events and responding with encouragement to the natural questions a new teacher has.

One aspect of the AEC environment that I only fully appreciated in later years was the way in which teachers were allowed to make their own decisions about activities and objectives within a very general curriculum framework. The curriculum was actually a communication system that kept teachers discussing with each other their latest ideas and experiences; we turned in weekly accounts of objectives and activities, kind of like Hansel and Gretel left crumbs of bread in the forest so that they could find their way back.

While I have worked at some great programs over the years, I have never found a curriculum or communication system like that first one--and I wouldn't be surprised to find it no longer exists at the AEC in the same form either. But I have heard similar models being described, yearned for involvement in such an exciting teaching and learning experience, and come very close on several occasions in my 25-year career.

When Christopher Candlin, in 1991, called for "a dialectic between an institution's curriculum guidelines and individual teachers' ... retrospective analyses of what occurs in class," he was acknowledging that the relationship between administration and teachers is ideally the same as the one between teachers and students.

I've known a handful of ESL administrators who were able to engage teachers in this kind of activity--leaders willing to learn and grow through these interactions-- and usually only for short periods of time. There are several important constraints on those who would like to generate an ideal learning and growth dynamic for teaching staff. First, an ESL program is almost always part of a larger educational organization which operates on a budget and functions within an institutional history and culture.

In my own first foray into ESL administration, I was hired to revive a program in Quito, Ecuador, and within three months enrollment was up more than 200 percent, we had an enthusiastic teaching staff, new communicative textbooks, and the start of a teachers' resource library and teachers' lounge. The owners insisted that the library and lounge revert back to use as classrooms, and that we go back to the original grammar-translation era textbooks required by the Swiss company that provided the diplomas awarded to program graduates.

At another program, in Japan, I encountered for the first time a curriculum which was simply the table of contents of a textbook series, and teachers were supposed to move together, lockstep, through the books, lesson by lesson, page by page, day by day. Interestingly, that became one of the two or three longest lasting American branch campus programs there.

I was also part of a ten-teacher team hired at another branch campus program (the Japanese partners were from the resort and golf course industry) where our first month was spent collaborating on the development of the ESL curriculum. That program self-destructed in less than a year, amidst in-fighting over teaching philosophies.

A second limit on the development of a healthy learning dynamic on an ESL teaching staff is that some teachers--and administrators--were never trained to participate in an ongoing process of building a curriculum. ESL/EFL is a global business, and the image many people inside and outside of our profession have is that teachers are interchangeable technicians whose main function is to move through a textbook with learners, using the answer guide and native speaker intuition to exert authority and evaluate performance. In this model, administrators function primarily to control the staff, limit complexity, and keep everyone on task.

"The dumbing down of the profession," to quote Michael M.T. Henderson, has divorced ESL from linguistics and today often the

teachers on a staff will opt for simpler, curricula because they have no other experience to compare to. These teachers will perceive as unrealistic and time-consuming David Nunan's vision of the ESL "teacher-researcher [who] continually reflects upon classroom experiences....rather than blaming them on a method, a text or the students themselves."

A third obstacle to inspired ESL administration is a lack of attention to the establishment, maintenance, and growth of a vibrant system of communication for their teachers. Again, this effort is made more challenging because of the larger institutional context in which administrators function, with an emphasis on hierarchy, accountability, and reporting deadlines; there is a temptation to simplify management of communication systems by reducing the flow of communication. In these stark situations, you might hear someone in administration say, "Democracy is too complicated."

Teachers who are already used to a narrow perspective on their roles as ESL professionals will also tend to accept or not even recognize the lack of a more communicative work environment with multiple flows of information. Conversations in such settings typically include laughing about recent performance errors made by students or finding new ways to blame them for their lack of progress.

Teachers who are working in a program under the direction of enlightened leadership will enjoy greater job satisfaction and personal growth, and experience better, more effective teaching and learning relationships with their students. Even if this period of ideal program administration only lasts a few months or years, it means that these lucky teachers and students will always know what the standard ought to be in our profession. That will carry us through the inevitable periods of working in less than ideal conditions and the associated cynicism of fellow laborers that might otherwise get a person down.

Or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it:

There is no teaching until the pupil is brought into the same state or principle in which you are; a transfusion takes place; he [or she] is you and you are he [or she]. Then is a teaching, and by no unfriendly chance or bad company can he ever quite lose the benefit.

Finally, an experienced ESL/EFL teacher should never forget that in any environment he or she is apt to encounter other individuals--sometimes new teachers, sometimes seasoned professionals-- who are also finding and searching for ways to develop and grow beyond whatever standard

is in place there. That teacher needs to be sensitive and open to every opportunity to encourage these kindred spirits. Sometimes this will mean giving advice; other times, listening to personal accounts and providing reinforcement.

By Robb Scott  
Editor, ESL MiniConference Online  
[Robb@eslminiconf.net](mailto:Robb@eslminiconf.net)

2008-2009 ESL MiniConference Online



PDF conversion by [PDF Online](#)