

Milestones of a Life in Teaching

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I can't remember ever not wanting to be a teacher. My mother likes to tell the story of my last day of kindergarten when I came home crying because I would never see my beloved teacher, Mrs. Van Keuren, again. (It turned out I was right: her husband was transferred to California that summer and they left upstate New York for good.) I came home in tears on the last day of first grade too, because by then I realized that even if my teacher lived in the neighborhood, I would be away from school for two whole months. Most kids loved that but for me, it was torture. I passed the long hot weeks coercing my friends into playing school.

Fast forward to 1978. I graduated from university with degrees in Linguistics and French Literature. My first job was as an Assistante d'anglais at a high school near Bordeaux, where my mission was to give the oh-so-cool lycéens a chance to practice English communication. They were more interested in teaching me French and sneaking out for cigarettes and I had no idea what I was doing. Still, I was a teacher. A teacher! The three important lessons I learned that year: (1) drinking wine with my lunch made me too sleepy to teach afternoon classes; (2) with a little imagination anything—even a gum wrapper or Easter card -- could serve as a visual aid for class; and (3) if I was really going to teach I would need to learn something about the craft.

From Bordeaux I went to Cornell University for graduate work in Linguistics. Because of my time in France I was granted a teaching fellowship for French. That meant that the ridiculously high tuition was waived and (even better) I would be properly trained and supervised as a language teacher. Beyond the degree, my specific goals for grad school were to gain experience and become qualified on paper to teach both French and EFL/ESL. I have never in my life worked as hard, but it was bliss. I took classes in Applied Linguistics and summers, taught in the TESOL Program and volunteered with

Laotian refugees. To fulfill the “exotic language” requirement I took Japanese, which involved three hours per week of lectures and five hours of practice in small groups with no English allowed-- “active learning” at its finest.

A poster for the Mombusho English Fellow (MEF) program, the precursor to JET, led me to becoming one of 35 Americans in the second cohort. I was assigned to Nara Prefecture where I worked for the Board of Education, visiting junior and senior high schools and doing teacher training. I enjoyed working with Japanese English teachers and in many cases being the first foreigner their students had ever met. We were pioneers. That job gave me precious insights into the Japanese educational system.

By the end of my second year I was engaged to a high school English teacher and looking for my next job. Through some serendipitous connections, I was introduced to the president of a nearby women’s college that was looking for a native English speaker. At the interview he mentioned that their French teacher had recently passed away and they hoped to find someone who could teach French as well. That was me! I loved that job and while there, learned the importance of networking with other teachers and publishers and also of identifying clear research areas.

When my contract ended I applied for a tenured position at a four-year Catholic college two hours from home. Except for the long commute, it turned out to be a good match. I remained there in the Department of English Language and Literature for 25 rewarding years, initially teaching English and French classes and later given the opportunity to develop several linguistics courses, including a two-year seminar in sociolinguistics. Because many of the students had limited English proficiency, I spent countless hours creating my own teaching materials. Many commuters nap on the train. I prepared lessons.

Looking back, planning and teaching those courses in my major was the highlight of my career. We worked on dialects, slang, Black English Vernacular and World Englishes with a hands-on approach that required students to collect and analyze data. I received New Year's greeting cards written in IPA and Tok Pisin and a postcard from a student traveling in Italy with examples of the local dialect spoken by her fiance's family. Yoko from my first *zemi* sent regular reports about her children's language acquisition. Second only to an enthusiastic response in the classroom, those are the things sustain a busy teacher.

Sadly, that university lost the demographics race and had to close. I faced sleepless nights wondering what I would do next if I could no longer teach but then had the good fortune to land another tenured position at Nara University, swapping my two-hour commute for a ten-minute drive and my linguistics courses for Oral Communication. I hadn't done conversation courses in decades and was initially disappointed. Some exciting changes had happened over the years, however, like teaching materials with National Geographic and Ted Talk video clips and textbooks with engaging dialogues that keep even very low level students engaged and amused. I also adjusted my teaching style to maximize opportunities to learn from my students, who are majoring in such fascinating areas as archeology and cultural properties. They spend the summer visiting castles, shrines and museums and sparkle when challenged talk about those things. The move to the new school also brought the opportunity to teach intensive three-day courses to "mature" learners of English through the university's correspondence course, sparking my interest in this SIG.

Let me finish with some advice for young teachers. First and foremost, network! New things are happening all the time: new books, new technologies, new methodologies. JALT has saved me time and again. Secondly, if you are not Japanese, learn the language. You don't have to be perfect but if you aspire to a tenured job, you will be expected to pull your weight. You will also be

expected to publish, so carve out your niche and continue to read and write. There are numerous satisfying ways to create a strong link between your research and what you are doing in the classroom. And last but not least, avoid wine at lunchtime.