

Basic Training and Resource Connections for Novice ESL Teachers

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Abstract

A large number of teachers and tutors of English as a Second Language (ESL) lack professional-level preparation. The Basic Training and Resources for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (BTRTESOL) program is being developed to prepare untrained, novice, volunteer ESL teachers to be more successful. In contrast with previous programs for providing basic training for novice English language teachers, the BTRTESOL program utilizes an instructional approach that is minimalist, connectivist, and problem-based. In other words, it teaches novices “the least they should know” and “where to go to learn more.” In addition, this program employs a hybrid delivery system involving paper and Web-based text materials, video clips, and interactive activities. Trial users are invited to use the existing units (online at www.btrtesol.com) and to provide feedback on them.

Introduction

Throughout the United States and in many other countries around the world, a large number of people without professional-level preparation work as teachers or tutors of English as a Second Language (ESL). They teach refugees, immigrants, international students, business people, or other English language learners in various settings such as adult basic education classes, literacy programs, community programs,

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social service programs, commercial language schools, churches, public libraries, business offices, and private homes. Most of these individuals have never taken teacher-preparation courses in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at the university level. Because of time constraints, limited finances, or geographic distance, they may not be able to do so. In many cases, their only qualification is that they speak English natively. They often find, to their chagrin, that knowing how to speak English is not the same as knowing how to teach it (Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003, p. 341, Snow, 2006, p. v).

Novice teachers without adequate preparation naturally rely on their own instincts and their previous experiences teaching or learning languages. That is not always a good thing. Gilbertson (2000) studied English-teaching volunteers who worked with refugees in the Midwest and concluded that volunteers with good intentions but no training actually provided “more of a disservice than a service” (p. iii). There are many reasons why this is so; here are three: Many volunteers are older individuals who went to school years ago when less effective language teaching methods, which are currently outdated, were common. Gilbertson explains, “How volunteers were taught is probably how they will teach—unless they are provided training. If they believe we learn by mimickery [sic] and grammar translation—the way they learned, then that is the way they teach” (p. 37). Gilbertson also warns of another potential problem—that volunteer English language teachers without proper training often treat adults in their ESL classes like children, which belittles and insults them, impeding their progress (p. 38). Harris and Silva (1993) point out yet another possible problem with untrained teachers, that “without any knowledge of [ESL learners’] cultural preferences” and other such factors, even tutors who are experienced with adult native speakers of English are “not adequately equipped to deal with some additional concerns of non-native speakers of English” (pp. 527, 525).

The Debate and the Reality

Pennycook and Coutand-Marin (2003) describe “the prevalence of untrained teachers” in English language teaching (ELT) around the world as a “problem endemic to ELT” (p. 341). On the electronic discussion board of the Teacher Education Interest Section of the international TESOL organization, members have debated this topic, with some

participants asserting that only people with master's degrees in TESOL should be allowed to teach ESL.

In our world today, however, the reality is that many settings exist where degree-holding, thoroughly prepared TESOL professionals will probably never teach. The reasons for this are many. First, because of the fact that English is now the international language of communication, a huge worldwide demand exists for English language skills, and there are just not enough thoroughly trained teachers to meet the need. Furthermore, volunteers who are willing to teach in poor working conditions for minimal remuneration fill an important gap in the English-teaching system because many immigrants and refugees (who need English skills the most to improve their life circumstances) are often the poorest members of their societies and the least able to afford expensive English language professionals. Further, the intrinsic rewards that come from helping people gain a life skill that will do them so much good and that they so desperately want naturally attract people with good hearts who are willing to help immigrants, refugees, and others by volunteering their time as English teachers or tutors. A final reason for the huge number of untrained English language teachers is that people with international mindsets like to travel the world—not simply as tourists seeing the sights, but mixing with the local people and getting to know them on a personal basis. English language teaching offers these world travelers a means for doing this.

A corresponding reality is that, much as some professionals would like to stop people from “teaching English without a license,” there is really no way to stop the untrained from teaching ESL. They are needed, they enjoy it, and there is no law against it. A final reality to note here is that, despite their lack of professional training, many novice, volunteer teachers do a fairly good job because they possess the right “personal qualities which contribute to...success as a classroom teacher, [and] insure understanding and respect for...students and their cultural setting...” (Alatis, Norris, & Marckwardt, 1995, p. 285). This is not to say, of course, that adding a level of professional preparation in effective classroom procedures and materials, as well as in the teaching and learning principles behind them, will not make these untrained novices even better teachers. That, in fact, is the purpose of the teacher-training program that this article describes.

The Audience

It is difficult to determine with any precision how many novices teach ESL/EFL around the world. Organizations and institutions do not normally track or report the numbers of such teachers. All indications, however, are that the total is huge. A 1986 study by the Center for Statistics in Washington, DC “examined the services provided by and the role and training of volunteers in adult literacy programs in the United States.” After checking 2,900 adult education programs (offered through school districts, community colleges, and adult learning centers) and an additional 1,300 local adult literacy programs (sponsored by community-based organizations, private literacy organizations, and libraries), this study concluded that “about half of the adult education programs and nearly all the [local adult literacy programs] used volunteers.” Of these programs, 58% provided English as a Second Language instruction, both oral and written, and an additional one-fourth of the programs provided ESL speaking instruction. “An estimated 107,000 volunteers served in these programs...in the following capacities: one-to-one tutoring, teaching small groups, serving as teacher’s aides, and teaching classes” (Center for Statistics, 1986, p. 1). Of course, these statistics represent only the tip of the iceberg. They refer only to literacy-oriented ABE-ESL programs in the USA, and they are now 25 years old! The large influx of immigrants and refugees to the United States in the last decade or so (US Department of Homeland Security [DHS] 2010) has undoubtedly increased the numbers of English language learners. The number of ESL programs serving this audience is now correspondingly larger, and many of these programs use volunteers. For instance, the 2006-2007 statistical report of ProLiteracy Worldwide (which offers ESL classes at all levels, from low beginning to advanced) boasts that this organization utilized 117,283 volunteers to serve 189,600 students in its 1,200 affiliate programs across the United States (ProLiteracy Worldwide, 2007, p. 1).

Given these large numbers, it is clear that even though trained, experienced professionals may be the best providers of ESL instruction, there simply are not enough of them to satisfy the growing demand. To meet the instructional needs of the increasingly large audience of English language learners, volunteers are a readily available and widely utilized resource. Of course, to be effective, novice, volunteer ESL teachers and tutors need training, which may or may not be provided by the

organization with which they work. Volunteer ESL teachers and tutors can also benefit from becoming connected to additional professional resources. Novice volunteers usually recognize this need for training and information and want such guidance. What they often lack is the means for getting this desired training. That is the purpose of the ESL teacher-training program described below.

The Precedents

Over the years, a variety of local, primarily face-to-face and paper-based programs for providing basic ESL/EFL teacher training have been developed. Beebout (2003), who worked with undergraduate peer-tutors focusing on ESL writing in Ontario, Canada, advocated a practicum-based model. In Washington, Tacoma Community House produced a “Homebound English for [Southeast Asian] Refugee Women,” curriculum for use by volunteer teachers “with little or no formal teacher training” (Reck, 1982). The Philadelphia Center for Literacy (Eno, 1981), “in an effort to improve recruitment and retention of volunteers for programs in tutorial literacy and English as a Second Language,” produced a curriculum to be used in workshops to train new volunteer tutors. The Adult Basic Education Division of Phoenix Union High School District in Arizona produced a volunteer-training handbook titled “Volunteers for Refugee Self-Sufficiency.” The volunteers worked as “home outreach tutors” and provided ESL and social adjustment skills instruction to adult Indochinese refugees in the refugees’ homes (Refugee Link, 1981). Literacy Volunteers of America-Connecticut (1992) produced “Teaching Basic Skills in Life Skills Contexts: An Inservice Training Module for LVA-CT English as a Second Language Tutors.” Guadalupe Educational Programs, in Salt Lake City, Utah, developed “A Reading and Writing Program Using Language-Experience Methodology Among Adult ESL Students in a Basic Education Program” (Cohen, Throneburg, Trathen, & Weiss, 1982) that enabled “community volunteers [to] provide instruction under the direction of a professional ESL staff.” Last but certainly not least, international TESOL published *More Than a Native Speaker: An Introduction to Teaching English Abroad* in 1996. The book was such a success that a revised edition was published ten years later (Snow, 2006).

Nevertheless, these various print manuals and programs have not eliminated the problem of untrained ESL teachers and tutors. Kutner et

al. (1992), in a 30-month “Study of ABE/ESL Instructor Training Approaches,” concluded that efforts to provide training for teachers were handicapped not only by a lack of materials but also by limited financial resources, the predominance of part-time teachers and volunteer instructors, a high rate of teacher turnover, the lack of state certification requirements, and limited inservice training requirements. Likewise, Gilbertson (2000) found that “lack of an effective training program was a deterrent to recruiting and retaining quality volunteer instructors” (p. 19) in the field of adult ESL.

Program Features

The remainder of this article describes a basic ESL teacher-training program that is currently under development titled *Basic Training and Resources for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages: The Least You Should Know and Where to Go to Learn More* (abbreviated BTRTESOL, pronounced “Better TESOL”). It differs substantially from previous publications and programs. In brief, the BTRTESOL program employs a minimalist, connectivist, and problem-based approach to prepare untrained, novice, volunteer teachers to become more effective, professional, and successful. In addition, it utilizes a hybrid instructional delivery system that gives users both high-tech and low-tech options and allows users to get the training they need when they need it.

Instructional Approach

BTRTESOL takes a minimalist, connectivist, problem-based approach to preparing ESL/EFL teachers and tutors. Very simply, *minimalist* means that each unit in the program merely introduces teachers to the most important concepts and procedures (“the least you should know”). To facilitate its use, each BTRTESOL unit is only a few pages long. Consequently, these units cannot provide great breadth and depth. Nevertheless, this minimalist approach is just what the intended audience wants and needs. In line with the principles of Situational Leadership (Hersey & Blanchard 1982, Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi 1985), the minimalist approach recognizes that the preparation needs of teachers vary depending on their levels of both competence and commitment. Novice, volunteer teachers—in contrast with the more committed, career-oriented teachers found in many university TESOL

teacher education programs—typically have only a short-term commitment to teaching ESL/EFL and work only in one particular program. Therefore, volunteer teachers need and want simple, directive instruction of a “teacher training” sort. Additionally, the BTRTESOL program is *connectivist* in nature because, after providing minimal, introductory instruction, it then connects users with other sources of information (“where to go to learn more”). These additional resources can be accessed and studied in as much depth as users’ time, needs, resources, and motivation dictate. Finally, *problem-based* means that every BTRTESOL unit begins with a short, problem-oriented case study or classroom scenario situated in an English as a Second or Foreign language setting. Besides illustrating the challenges teachers face in the real world, these scenarios immediately confront users with authentic instructional challenges and engage them in analytical, problem-solving tasks.

Instructional Delivery System

Reaching the teachers and tutors who constitute the intended audience of BTRTESOL is a challenge because they are not enrolled in traditional campus-based teacher education programs. Consequently, this program utilizes a hybrid delivery system that provides the flexibility to permit learners to study BTRTESOL units in a manner and at a time that are most convenient and productive for them. Thus, units may be used for individualized self-study or class instruction, in face-to-face instruction or distance learning.

This hybrid delivery system utilizes (1) traditional paper and/or Web-based text materials, (2) digital video, and (3) interactive online activities. Core instruction is provided by means of either a paper-based textbook or online text, depending on the users’ technological preferences or possibilities. Digital video clips are made available through Web-based streaming video or on a DVD. They show English language teachers in classroom situations (in the United States and abroad) related to the focus of each unit. Videos not only help participants envision real-world instructional settings but also provide the basis for reflection later. As participants go through each unit, they check their comprehension by engaging in interactive question and answer activities, and they participate in reflection exercises.

Overview of the Program’s ESL/EFL Teacher-Training Topics

The nearly 50 planned units in BTRTESOL cover a broad range of teacher-preparation topics. These topics or units are organized into 10 major areas (as listed below), but they can be studied in any order, depending on users’ interests and needs.

1. *Introduction: Basic Concepts*

- A. “The Least You Should Know” (the purposes and delimitations of the BTRTESOL program and suggestions for follow-up TESOL courses, resources, and professional organizations)
- B. Differences between teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL)
- C. Tutoring vs. teaching: How they are different
- D. Dealing with cultural differences and culture shock (in your students and in yourself)
- E. Working successfully within foreign educational and administrative systems

2. *Designing Language-teaching Programs, Courses, and Lessons*

- A. Setting up and operating successful courses for adult English language learners (i.e., administrative concerns)
- B. Planning a curriculum that fits your students and meets their needs.
- C. Designing effective lessons for language learning and teaching (i.e., curriculum and lesson planning)
- D. Assessing your students’ language proficiency (for course design purposes and for determining student placement)

3. *Developing Fundamental Teaching Skills*

- A. Developing a successful teaching personality
- B. Adjusting your spoken English to make it comprehensible and helpful to English language learners at various levels of proficiency.
- C. Managing classes of English language learners (encouraging participation, maintaining discipline, building a supportive sense of community, avoiding demeaning or negative behavior, setting up groups, dealing with multiple levels of proficiency in the same class)
- D. Correcting language learners’ errors productively, and developing their self-monitoring skills

4. *Understanding Key Principles Behind Successful Language Teaching*
 - A. Understanding basic principles of second language acquisition
 - B. Creating and using exercises for mechanical, meaningful, and communicative practice
 - C. Using communicative language teaching principles and information gap exercises
 - D. Encouraging cooperative and collaborative learning to increase student interaction
 - E. Creating activities that provide imitative, rehearsed, and extemporaneous practice
 - F. Developing an awareness of teaching styles and cross-cultural style differences
5. *Knowing Your Students: Learner Types, Styles, and Strategies*
 - A. Understanding, respecting, and appreciating adult ESL learners
 - B. Working successfully with young English language learners
 - C. Understanding your students' language learning styles—including cross-cultural differences in learning styles—and then teaching them accordingly
 - D. Recognizing multiple intelligences and their implications for language teaching
 - E. Teaching your students to use language-learning strategies commonly employed by successful language learners
6. *Developing Language Skills*
 - A. Developing English language learners' listening skills
 - B. Developing English language learners' speaking skills
 - C. Developing English language learners' reading skills
 - D. Developing English language learners' writing skills
 - E. Integrating multiple language skills in one class
 - F. Teaching content-based language classes
7. *Teaching English Language Components*
 - A. The least you should know about English grammar and how to teach it
 - B. The least you should know about English pronunciation and how to teach it
 - C. Planned and unplanned vocabulary teaching
 - D. Vocabulary teaching and learning strategies that work well
 - E. Understanding and teaching about culture

8. *Making Language Teaching and Learning Enjoyable and Memorable*
 - A. Conducting effective and enjoyable conversation classes
 - B. Using songs and chants to increase participation, recall, and enjoyment
 - C. Using games, and other fun yet effective activities for English language teaching
 - D. Using computers and Internet resources for English language teaching
 - E. Using video for teaching English
9. *Testing English Language Skills*
 - A. Widely used general proficiency tests (e.g., TOEFL, BEST, CET)
 - B. Developing valid and reliable local measures of student achievement
10. *Choosing, Creating, and Adapting Language Teaching Materials*
 - A. Locating, evaluating, and selecting authentic, effective print/electronic teaching materials for language learners
 - B. Collecting and creating your own language-teaching materials.
 - C. Successfully adapting existing materials for greater teaching enjoyment and success

Structure of BTRTESOL Units

All units in the BTRTESOL program follow the same instructional pattern. Each unit begins with an engaging, authentic, problem-oriented scenario in which a teaching situation and related problem are described. For instance, at the start of the unit on teaching English conversation classes, the story is told of an American physics professor in Japan on an academic exchange. Some Japanese acquaintances approach him and ask him to teach them conversational English. He knows a lot about physics but has no idea how to teach an English conversation class. After the story and before the explanation of how to conduct successful English conversation classes, questions such as “What would you do in this situation?” are posed. Then, the unit’s objectives are stated, and carefully selected points related to these objectives are briefly explained in an easily readable, expository manner. For the unit on conducting conversation classes, there are five key points: topic selection, class atmosphere, speaking in English, class management, and responding to

mistakes. As participants read, their comprehension is checked periodically. Occasionally, participants are referred to other, related BTRTESOL units. After finishing the expository text, users view a short (two- to three-minute), authentic (non-staged) video clip that shows a teacher or tutor dealing with the instructional issue presented in the opening scenario. After viewing this video, participants are invited to reflect on it. This reflection is guided by questions such as “What did the teacher do right?” “What could the teacher have done differently?” “Why might that be better/worse?” and “What would you do in this situation?” After typing in their responses online, users can view what previous users have written in response to these questions and learn from others’ perspectives. Each BTRTESOL unit ends with a “Where to go to learn more” section that provides brief descriptions of (as well as live links or publisher and/or contact information for) selected books, Websites, and other resources that will provide users with much more in-depth information on the unit’s topic.

Conclusion

At the present time, the various units of Basic Training and Resources for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages: The Least You Should Know and Where to Go to Learn More are at different stages of development. Some are almost finished, while others are still being created. A number are ready to be piloted online (see figure 1). Potential pilot users are invited to visit the site at www.btrtesol.com, work through the units, benefit from their content, and provide feedback to the author.

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