

The Psychic Rewards of Teaching: An Interview with James E. Alatis



JAMES E. ALATIS
First Executive Director of TESOL

BY WILLIAM P. ANCKER

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James E. Alatis has a distinguished career in Foreign Language teaching and Bilingual Education that spans 50 years. Early in his career he served as a language researcher for the U.S. Departments of Education and State. At Georgetown University in Washington, DC, he has been a professor of linguistics and Modern Greek since 1966 and was dean of the School of Languages and Linguistics from 1973 to 1994. His record of professional service is outstanding; he has served numerous national and international organizations in management and advisory positions. For 21 years, Dr. Alatis was the executive director of the international association Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). During his tenure, TESOL grew from 337 members in its first year (1966) to over 12,000 in 1987. Dr. Alatis has also been chair of the annual Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics. He has published dozens of articles in scholarly journals, written and edited numerous books, and delivered hundreds of presentations at conferences around the world. When TESOL created an annual award to recognize outstanding and extended professional service, it was named the James E. Alatis Award in honor of his years of vision and leadership. TESOL also established the James E. Alatis Plenary Session at its annual convention. This interview was conducted by William P. Ancker at the Intercultural Center at Georgetown University on October 9, 2003.

WPA: *The scope of your professional experience and service is tremendous, and your longevity is remarkable. How did your career begin? Did you have any pivotal job that led to such a long and illustrious professional life?*

JEA: First of all, I'm a bilingual in Greek and English, so I've been interested in languages all along. Both my parents were

Greek immigrants, and they emphasized education. They wanted all their kids to go to school. I learned Greek at home and also at Greek schools in the evening. My interest in languages came that way.

I went to the Ohio State University to study linguistics. I chomped at the bit to teach English as a second language, but my professors wouldn't let me. "You're going to get involved with those classes and students and you're not going to finish your PhD," they warned me, "so you just do English literature and the history of English." Finally, in my last year, I did teach English as a second language, and what the professors predicted would happen did happen.

The real kick-off, however, was when I received a fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies to attend the Summer Institute of Linguistics at the University of Michigan in 1955. I took all the linguistics courses I could. There were three that I registered for, plus I took three additional courses. I made straight A's!¹ I met Robert Lado and Charles C. Fries. I also met Bernard Bloch, of the Linguistic Society of America. As I was leaving, I went to thank Dr. Bloch and he said, "Why don't you apply for a Fulbright grant to go to Greece? You'd be a cinch!" I said, "No one would want me to go. I only have a Master's degree." But I did apply. I went home and told my wife, "Pack up the family belongings, we're going to Greece." How stupid I was at the time, because you know how difficult those scholarship competitions can be.

It turned out that I was sent to Greece where I taught English and English linguistics to Greek students. That was the beginning of my career, really. At that time there was a great deal of turmoil over the Cyprus issue, with demonstrations in the streets and strikes. I didn't get to teach very much; I taught 36 days at the university. I felt very guilty about it.

WPA: *You taught only 36 days during the entire academic year?*

JEA: Yes, the University was closed for demonstrations, strikes, funerals...whatever. So I ended up teaching Greek to my fellow American Fulbright professors and their wives. When there was time, I would go on

field trips to the northern part of Greece and also to the border of Albania with a linguist from the University of Chicago, Dr. Eric Hamp, who was studying Albanian dialects. We also went to Yugoslavia. It was all I could do to keep him from crossing. At that time it was forbidden to cross the border. We did field research. Actually, he did the research. My job was to keep the Greek schoolteacher of the village from saying, "You can't say it that way. That's not correct."

WPA: *Had you been to Greece before?*

JEA: I'd never been before.

WPA: *But you had heard about it from your parents?*

JEA: Oh, yes. It was a romantic, nostalgic view of Greece. Everything was more beautiful, the skies were bluer, and so on. I couldn't believe it most of the time. But when I went there, I found that my parents were right!

The kind of Greek that I knew, I had learned up to the fifth grade, in evening school, and at home. At that point, to use Fries' definition of what it means to know a language, I had a complete command of the spoken language, of the phonology, and of the grammar of Greek but within a limited vocabulary. So when I ran out of vocabulary I would borrow from English.

I was in a taxicab one day and trying to make conversation with the driver. I said, "What kind of carro is this? He stopped the car in the middle of the street and said, "This coach? This limousine? This automobile? This is not a carro. That over there is a carro," and pointed to a donkey drawing a cart. I had these experiences all the time. That got me more interested in bilingualism and dialects. I had two marvelous years in Greece (1955–57). I did a double dose of teaching during the second year.

Interestingly enough, when I came back to this country and went back to Ohio State and was continuing my PhD, I had a call from the Department of State. I had been recommended by another Fulbright professor. The Department of State was looking for somebody to be the English language specialist for the other side of the Fulbright program, for the foreign students coming to this country. So, that's the beginning of my

career. The beginning really was my Fulbright experience in Greece.

WPA: *Between those two years in Greece and the present, you've made a tremendous contribution to English language teaching around the world in a variety of ways. What's your secret?*

JEA: The real secret of my success, such as it is, is sheer luck and serendipity. I was in the right place at the right time. There is some kind of destiny up there somewhere.

If you're looking for tangible things, first, I would say that it's good genes from my Greek immigrant parents. Second, complete support from my dear wife Penelope, who herself ended up working in ESL. The third thing is nurturing at enlightened universities, like West Virginia University, the Ohio State University, the Summer Institute of Linguistics at the University of Michigan, and now Georgetown. Those are the things that have kept me going and kept me interested in language as an instrument in cross-cultural understanding and world peace.

WPA: *What advice can you give to teachers?*

JEA: My advice to teachers is, "Be professional. Get a good education. Provide service." If you're a native speaker of English, that doesn't qualify you to teach it. Quality teacher education is still the heart of the matter. What teachers need is linguistic sophistication, pedagogical soundness, and cultural sensitivity. I don't mean linguistics with a capital L; I don't think we all have to become theoretical linguists.

WPA: *So training is crucial?*

JEA: I use the expression education deliberately. Jokingly, I have been known to say, "Training is for dogs; education is for people." We're going to have to have a lot more well-educated English teachers because of what's going on in the world with regards to people wanting to learn the language.

One thing we have failed in doing is we have not really done much about culture. Even though my predecessor here in Georgetown, Robert Lado, wrote a book a long time ago called *Linguistics Across Cultures*, we have not really done very much about it. And that is

the reason people have to write books like this [holds up a copy of *Understanding Arabs: A Guide For Westerners*, by Margaret Nydell], which is in its third edition.

We have to insist that teachers have a good education, and they need to be able to go the extra mile, as the late Harold Allen used to say, to do things socially and extracurricularly and belong to their professional organization.

WPA: *Does that put any kind of burden on the teacher, going beyond their preparation and education to the social aspect and professional service?*

JEA: It does and unfortunately, we as a profession have not been well recognized, in terms of how much money we get. We lose a lot of good people, especially these days, because everybody is going into computers to make money.

But the field of English as a foreign language and teaching other foreign languages is an extremely vibrant and exciting one. If you forget about the actual physical aspects of eating and drinking and living under a roof, there's nothing more rewarding. The psychic rewards from teaching languages are just immeasurable, and people who enter this field are that kind of idealistic people.

WPA: *What do you mean by "psychic rewards"?*

JEA: I'll give you an example. My favorite course to teach is modern Greek. I already told you that my mother was Greek and my father was Greek Cypriot. The Greeks and the Turks had a long period of enmity, which is still manifesting itself today in Cyprus. Because my father was Cypriot, I'm supposed to be anti-Turkish. But I'm the guy who brought Turkish as a foreign language to Georgetown!

I had a student in the MAT program [Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language], Ms. Ülke Bilgen, and she ended up working in the Turkish embassy. We talked, and I said, "We've got to start teaching Turkish at Georgetown." The university received a grant, and that's how we started Turkish here. I never heard the end of it from Greek-Americans all over the country.

The most interesting part of this is that, at the beginning, the people who studied Turkish at Georgetown were Greeks and Cypriots. They came up to me and said, “Hey, Dr. Alatis, you know, we have lots of things in common with these people.” I said, “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you guys.”

WPA: *Is English teaching a profession?*

JE: There’s a lot of debate about that. There are some people who have argued that it is not a profession. I have always believed that it is a profession, and I think it has, both in theory and in practice, everything that a profession needs. It has all the outside trappings of a profession, such as professional organizations, research journals, and a basic theoretical background. But it has a way to go yet in terms of recognition. What’s going on in developing standards, which are being developed for all other subjects, is also going on in English teaching. We will achieve a level of professionalism in terms of guidelines for teacher preparation and in terms of certification.

From the beginning, the thing that distinguished TESOL from any other kind of language association was it was based on linguistics. It combines linguistics and language teaching, which is the most important function of applied linguistics. I think the best linguistics being done today is interdisciplinary: anthropological linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and educational linguistics.

My infamous LAPSE acronym says that a good teacher, as well as a good learner, of any language needs to know L for linguistics, that is, sound, form, and meaning. L is also for the language of the students and the literature. A is for anthropology, knowing about culture and the social aspects of language and teaching. P is for psycholinguistics. (My joke about that is a psycholinguist is not necessarily a deranged polyglot, but a few of them are!) Finally, S is for sociolinguistics and E is for educational linguistics.

The most interesting issue in psycholinguistics is the concept of language acquisition, L1 and L2 acquisition. Language acquisition has become the centerpiece for what we all do. For a long time, with behaviorism and the audio-lingual method, the native language was some-

thing that we avoided in every way. But now researchers have realized that the learning of a foreign or second language is quite similar to learning a native language.

WPA: *Many readers of English Teaching Forum are familiar with the international association*

TESOL and/or its affiliates. What readers might not know is that you are often called “the father of TESOL” and that you served as Executive Director for 21 years. Could you tell us about some of the challenges you faced establishing the association in the 1960s?

JE: How much time do you have? [laughter]

First, you should know that there was no TESOL profession then. There was none. There was the Hyman Kaplan kind of thing² that was going on in New York and some of the larger cities, but there was no recognized profession. We realized that when Harold Allen did his interesting survey of teaching English to non-English speakers in this country, under the sponsorship of the Department of Education. What were the results? The results were: there was no such thing. There were no statistics. In this country, there was no ESL, and certainly, there were no trained teachers.

As a result of that survey, among other things, in 1964 through the combined efforts of the Center for Applied Linguistics, the Modern Language Association, the (then) Speech Association of America, and the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors, three ad hoc conferences were held: one in 1964 in Tucson, Arizona; one in 1965 in San Diego, California; and one in 1966 in New York. People realized that there was such a thing going on, and they began to keep records. At the end of the conference in 1966 in New York, they had established a constitution and a slate of officers and TESOL was begun in 1966. Harold Allen was the first president, Robert Lado was the first vice president, and they needed an executive secretary.

Along about that time, Dr. Lado brought me to Georgetown University, and an agreement was made that I would work two-thirds time for Georgetown and one-third of my time as executive secretary of TESOL. That’s how it began.

WPA: *That sounds pretty quick, only three ad hoc conferences and then an executive secretary and a convention.*

JE: At the time, the profession of teaching English was very much involved in bilingual education, which was considered a transitional program. In TESOL, we felt that all along what we were doing was teaching English to non-English speakers as a transition. Of course we also felt that all languages are good and are worthy of study in their own right, and we also believed that a teacher should know something about the students' language. We were not imperialistic and culturally aggressive at all, and we never have been as a profession. Some people have argued that what we were interested in doing was "English only," but that's never been the case. Later, bilingual education seemed to develop an emphasis primarily on Spanish and became more political. In fact, it still is a big controversy these days.

There were about 300 members at the beginning of TESOL, and hundreds were coming to the conventions. Here is something that one has to remember with regard to any organization or group. People ask, "What am I paying my money for?" Ten dollars a year was the cost of membership at that time. We had an office, a convention, a newsletter, and a quarterly journal. Those were the services that you paid your ten dollars for.

But members wanted more, so we began to create additional services. They asked, "How can I be trained in this field?" They wanted to know what kinds of teaching materials and tests were available. We ended up being a clearinghouse for information on teacher education and employment opportunities. Then people would say, "I don't teach ESL the way you guys do at the universities. I do it for adults in evening schools." Others would say, "But I teach it in the elementary schools." So, we began to have interest sections, in adult education, elementary and secondary education, applied linguistics, and other areas.

In addition to the interest groups, we created affiliates, but that was not until the TESOL convention in San Francisco in 1970. David Harris was the president then, and he said in his presidential speech that year, "I see no reason why we can't have five affiliates by this time next year." And I got them! In those days, I

think I was on the road 52 out of the 52 weeks of the year. I went to talk at local conferences and tell teachers what was needed for them to get started. We had to provide services. We would subsidize the new affiliates that didn't have enough membership at first. Then we would subsidize speakers for those affiliates.

WPA: *Were those affiliates primarily in the United States?*

JE: Originally, they were all in the United States, for example in California and New Mexico. Then people began to get interested in Mexico, Venezuela, and other countries. If you had a group of teachers already, then we tried to get you to join TESOL. And how did we do it? By giving the same kind of support that we gave to the American affiliates. I think I did a terrible thing in the eyes of the British Council because I helped start a Scottish affiliate of TESOL, encroaching on their domain. [laughter]

WPA: *What advice can you give Forum readers who volunteer as leaders of their professional associations?*

JE: You have to show that you're doing something. The secret, of course, is to attract members and to keep them. How do you keep them? By providing services and treating them the way they deserve to be treated.

WPA: *The name "TESOL" is interesting because it encompasses the distinction between foreign language instruction and second language instruction, which is an important technical difference in our field. How did the name come about?*

JE: The British made that distinction a long time ago. I think it was Charles Ferguson, the first director of the Center for Applied Linguistics, who decided TEFL + TESL = TESOL. Now it refers not only to the professional organization TESOL, but also to the whole field of teaching English as a foreign or second language.

WPA: *Let me shift from TESOL the association to TESOL the field of teaching languages. Anyone who's been around awhile has seen changes and trends in methodology. During your career, how has the use of the first language in the classroom changed?*

JEA: In both the audio-lingual method and the direct method, there was no use, or very little use, of the students' native language. Then came the concept that the teacher can use the native language of the students to make grammatical explanations. It goes faster, it's clearer, and you don't have to waste time. You can do it in minutes, and the rest of the class you can use for communicative purposes. It is more acceptable now than it used to be. I do it in my Greek classes.

WPA: *Do you think that being bilingual helps your students more than if you were monolingual?*

JEA: Absolutely.

WPA: *Keeping in mind examples of how theory and practice have changed, almost like a pendulum swinging, would you say that as an academic discipline, we're too faddish?*

JEA: I think there's always that temptation. Certainly, as reflected in the non-conventional approaches, we were being really faddish. There was audiolingualism, and it was considered the only way to teach foreign languages. It was supported by people like me in the Department of Education when we gave grants and contracts. At that time, we could not find many people who knew about research design, such as controlling variables, to come up with good research projects. However, as time went on, we realized that audiolingualism was not the last word, that it wasn't necessarily the best way.

So we dropped the whole idea of audiolingualism and went searching for other ways: Total Physical Response, the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, the Dartmouth Approach, the Natural Approach, and so forth. In that regard, we were being kind of faddish. But I think that we have pretty clearly come to the conclusion now, that there is no royal road. My joke is, "What's the best method? My method!" Every teacher says that about himself. But it has to be what authors have called a principled eclectic approach. It depends on the students in your particular class. Everybody has their own particular learning style.

WPA: *With principled eclecticism, a teacher can do different things and should be able to articulately explain the reasons why, which puts a burden on the teacher.*

JEA: That's right. That's why I'm a little more skeptical of the contributions of theoretical linguistics to our field than I used to be. A teacher needs to know sound, form, and meaning. Before, it was just sound and form because those are aspects of language that you can research and analyze with your tape recorder or your phonetic transcription. They are measurable and quantifiable; you could sink your teeth into the sounds and grammar of English. I think in their attempts to be more like the natural sciences, the early linguists ignored meaning. Can you imagine? It was crazy! You cannot teach a language by ignoring meaning.

Now meaning is important, and we have courses in semantics all over the place. The early linguists did not go beyond the sentence. Now we have discourse analysis, which goes beyond the sentence. And so, discourse analysis and meaning are now coming together as the most recent things we're doing. I don't think that's a fad. I think it's a matter of the logical evolution of what is going on in this vibrant field, which I consider to be linguistics and language teaching.

WPA: *Speaking of the evolution of our field, care to make a prediction about what will be next?*

JEA: Three things that I see for TESOL as a field are, first, there will be a lot more technology involved, more audiovisual material and more online material. That's clear, and there's no question about it. Second, all teachers of all subjects are going to have to be ESL teachers, too. The immigration is such that every classroom in this country is going to be composed eventually of a majority of nonnative speakers, or what are now called students of Limited English Proficiency (LEP). Third, there is going to have to be a lot more concern for the cultures of other countries. Not only teachers, but all of us. We are going to have to know about other people's languages and other people's cultures.

This ties in to what I mentioned earlier about paying more attention to the cultural aspect. We've been remiss in this, and I think we need to pay a little more attention to culture, even if it goes against that dictum of not doing anything in the native language. For example, in my classes of modern Greek, I would not mind if my students learned about Greek culture in English and then

went on to learn the language. Now we have wonderful materials that are much more authentic than they ever used to be. Professor John Rassias at Dartmouth University, who also teaches Greek, wrote a textbook that has a lot more poetry and songs and other realistic things, such as menus, than any of the old basic courses. [reading from the introduction in the book] “The Greek alphabet is much simpler than you might think. You will learn to read it with ease....”

WPA: *That also sounds like a concern for the affective state of the learners.*

JEA: That’s another thing we have been remiss about and didn’t pay too much attention to. The professor was always the master and the holder of information—“Just do it my way” —and the students were supposed to be lackeys. Fortunately, that sort of situation has ended.

My argument is the best language teachers have to be competent in what I said earlier, the sound, form, and meaning of the target language, plus know something about the native language of the students. Competent teachers with non-discouraging personalities using non-defensive methods and techniques, who cherish their students and hold them in unconditional positive regard, are the best teachers. If you don’t like people, don’t become a teacher. You have to cherish your students and think well of them as well as their own cultures.

WPA: *If you were given the time and resources to conduct a research project, what would you investigate?*

JEA: We have to teach the world two things. First, speaking and writing are two different uses of languages, and second, language changes and it’s a natural progression. Language changes all around us every day. People worry about language deteriorating, but you can’t stop nature. It’s not a bad thing, and it gives us better ways of communicating with one another. That applies to the various Englishes that are being used about the world and to the use of English in this country.

I also think we should have a national study of the social, regional, and functional dialects in this coun-

try. Such a study of dialect geography should go on in other countries, too, for example, a study of the social, regional, and functional dialects of Greek.

WPA: *You wrote an article in 1987 called “A Bare-Bones Bibliography and a Bit More” about essential reading in our field. If you were to rewrite that article today, what would you include?*

JEA: It would have to include readings on English as an international language, for example the work of Braj Kachru, David Crystal’s *English as a Global Language*, and Tom MacArthur’s *The English Languages*. Revised editions of H. Douglas Brown’s and Marianne Celce-Murcia’s books should also be included.

WPA: *Your latest major project is the TESOL International Research Foundation. In fact, we published an announcement about it in the April 2001 issue of the Forum. What is the mission of TIRF?*

JEA: TIRF is unique because its sole purpose is to generate new knowledge about the teaching and learning of English through research. No other organization, private or public, is uniquely concerned with this topic of investigation and its outcomes. The purpose of TIRF-supported research is to inform educational policy, improve classroom practices, and, ultimately, expand educational, occupational, and social opportunities for individuals in our global society.

The nonprofit foundation has launched a coordinated effort among authors, publishers, philanthropic foundations, and government agencies to develop a unified program to collect and disseminate research findings. TIRF works to strengthen the link between theory and practice by clarifying research priorities to the academic and funding communities; raising funds from philanthropic, corporate, and government sources; commissioning research studies; and consolidating and interpreting findings.

The first research topic that TIRF has looked into, because it is related to educational policy, is starting EFL instruction at the elementary level. More and more countries are doing it, but has anybody proven that it is good to start teaching English early? I mean,

we feel it is a good thing, but how do you make national educational policy on the basis of gut feeling? In its first phase, in 2002, TIRF funded a graduate student completing research for a doctoral dissertation and a collaborative team of Canadian and Spanish researchers. Both research projects examine the age of introduction of English in relation to student proficiency. For 2003, TIRF commissioned research to examine the relationship between teacher proficiency in English and student achievement.³

WPA: *Let's talk politics for a moment, the politics of language. You have spent a considerable part of your career researching and teaching bilingual education. Many citizens are opposed to bilingual education and want English to become the official language of the United States. How do you feel about attempts to legislate language use, as seen by the lobbying groups U.S. English and English First?*

JEA: Something many people are not aware of is we don't have a national language policy in the United States. Nobody has ever said that English is the official language here. There are groups trying to get an amendment to the Constitution that says English is the official language. English is the de facto official language, but not the de jure language. These groups are trying to make it de jure.⁴ They believe that if English is not made the official language, then it keeps people down socially and economically.

I teach a bilingual education class now, and I have the director of U.S. English come and speak to the class in a debate about bilingual education. He is against it, although he himself is bilingual. You know, his wife is a professor of Spanish here at Georgetown University. So they like to say, "We are not against foreign languages." What they don't understand is if you dictate this and make it official, it will have some very denigrating effects on other languages. It will have the effect of saying, "No other language is important." What we are saying is, instead of using your money to try to get an amendment passed, use this money to prepare teachers and to teach English.

WPA: *What is your personal vision of the future of our profession?*

JEA: People may wonder, "What is it about English?" In the profession of English teaching, we have never been linguistically imperialistic or culturally aggressive. It is simply a historical fact that English is now a lingua franca; it is now a language widely used for communication. It doesn't belong to the United States or Great Britain or Australia or any other country. It belongs to all of us who use it to communicate with one another, whether we teach it, learn it, or use it for practical reasons.

I believe that linguistics and language teaching will save the world. What I have dedicated my life to, and a lot of us have, are the concepts of cross-cultural communication, international education, and linguistic diversity—pluralism in general, including languages—all in the interest of cross-cultural understanding and meaningful living, and eventually world peace. Those unifying concepts, plus the notion of psychic rewards of teaching languages, are why we do what we're doing. Now, we may all be naive in assuming this, but that's what drives us. I think there is great hope for unity through this lingua franca, which has become neutral in terms of its nationality and has become much more acceptable as a language that belongs to everybody.

WPA: *I feel privileged to have done this interview with you. On behalf of the readers of English Teaching Forum, thank you very much, Dr. Alatis!*

Notes:

1. "Straight As" means the highest possible marks.
2. *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*, by Leo C. Rosten, published in 1937, is a humorous and poignant novel about an immigrant's attempts to learn English in evening classes for adults.
3. More information about TIRF is available online at <http://www.tirfonline.org/>.
4. From Latin, de facto: in reality, in fact; de jure: according to law.