

The Pendulum Swing in Evaluating Students' Grammar



Dennis Bricault
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It's a dilemma that faces those of us who teach grammar: how do we evaluate our students' command of structure? I'll be the first to admit that I've been hanging on to that pendulum as it swings from unit tests to no in-class testing at all. I've been teaching an academic ESL course entitled "Advanced Structure" for many years at North Park University in Chicago. The primary objective of this course is to help students improve their command of written English, with particular attention to complex sentence structure (coordination and subordination) and verb tenses. While the core objectives have not varied much over the years, my approach in guiding the students along certainly has. I'd like to share some war stories as well as my latest approach to dealing with this thorny issue.

Early years

Faced with the task of designing a grammar course from scratch, I went with the tried-and-true unit test approach: at the end of every unit in the textbook (Azar's Understanding and Using English Grammar), I gave students a one-hour closed book exam. After all, that's what I went through when I was a language student and later a graduate teaching assistant, so who was I to argue with a "proven formula"? These early tests were comprised of a collection of short exercises: irregular verb charts, transformation activities ("rewrite the sentences in the passive voice"), cloze exercises, short answers, and the like. While I found nothing wrong with such evaluative techniques, I had the nagging feeling that something was missing. I wanted to help the students improve the overall accuracy of their written language, but unit tests just didn't seem to provide me, or them, with the best gauge of their progress. The students dutifully learned the material, studied for the tests, and generally performed well, but they seemed to forget old material as quickly as they picked up on new topics.

Trying something different

After running some ideas by the ESL faculty and some former ESL students at North Park, I decided to move the course in a very different direction. I searched for this new

tack by critically thinking about what might best accomplish the goals of the course and finally settled on more outside writing assignments in lieu of in-class exams. I have since tried several variations on this theme, with some promising results. The first iteration was assigning several short reflective essays: students were required to write papers (with multiple drafts) on cross-cultural themes. I felt it would motivate students more, and I could respond to individual needs in a more effective manner. I developed rubrics that accounted for the progression of grammar topics covered during the semester; that is, in the first essay, I wanted students to proofread for subject-verb agreement, singular/plural forms, and adjective clauses, whereas in a later paper I would add to that list noun clauses and coordinating and subordinating connectors. Many students seemed to prefer the essays to in-class exams, though some struggled with such open-ended assignments. Furthermore, there was also a fair amount of overlap with the concurrent writing course, so I chose once again to refocus the basis for course assessment.

In a fit of ambition, I decided to take the class through the steps of writing a research project. Over the course of the semester, students assembled the components of a short research paper, with each part counting toward a small part of the overall grade: thesis statement, outline, body, citations, and abstract. They selected a topic that related to an overall theme – education or relationships – and engaged in some basic research on the cultural differences between their home country and the United States. At the end of the semester, students presented their findings to the class in a five-minute talk. I was

(continued on page 3)

In This Issue

- 1,3 The Pendulum Swing in Evaluating Students' Grammar
- 2 Board Roster About the Newsletter
- 4 The Ticker
- 7 Professional Planner
- 8 In Memory of Elliot Judd
- 9 Convention Report
- 10 Trinity Christian College Ad
- 11 ELF and Oxford Univ. Press Ads
- 12 Membership Application



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The newsletter is a publication of Illinois Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages • Bilingual Education, a non-profit professional organization, founded in 1970, which disseminates information, provides a forum, and serves as an advocate for students, educators and administrators in the field. Illinois TESOL • BE is an affiliate of TESOL, an international organization.

Membership in Illinois TESOL • BE is open to all interested individuals. To join, please use the form in this issue of the *Newsletter*; for further information about membership, call (312) 409-4770 or visit our web site at www.itbe.org.

Submission Information

Illinois TESOL • BE welcomes letters and contributions to the *Newsletter*. The *Newsletter* is published four times per year with the following copy deadlines:

July 15 • October 15 • January 15 • April 15

Articles and other items for consideration should be submitted as Microsoft Word attachments to email and sent to: news@itbe.org

Alternatively, Microsoft Word documents on disk, with hard copy enclosed, can be submitted. (For those without access to computers, hard copy only is acceptable.)

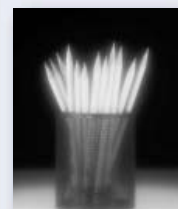
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(Continued from page 1)

generally pleased with the results, but after a few years, I decided to once again reshape the core writing assignments for two pragmatic reasons: first, many of our students were studying in our program for one semester only (and did not need to know how to write a research paper), and second, some students encountered difficulties when looking for outside sources (e.g., marriage customs in Armenia; teaching and learning styles in Togo).

Current flavor of the month

Despite the drawbacks – not to mention the time involved in providing meaningful feedback – I felt these outside writing assignments were far more effective than in-class unit exams. However, I continued my search for that magical formula which draws on all language skills in an engaging and challenging series of assignments. My current approach, one which I have used for the past several years, is to assign a series of movie reviews (described in the Summer 2006 ITBE Newsletter). Students watch movies on various themes (e.g., education, ethics, migration, social issues), write a short synopsis, and add content that parallels grammatical topics being covered in class. For example, they may need to describe one character in detail (using adjective clauses) or include two quotes from an outside source (using direct or reported speech). They also engage in some basic research, which allows us to examine the important issues of plagiarism, reliable sources, and making correct citations. I feel the movie reviews get us closer to the multi-skills approach I desire for my students: they listen to the movies as they watch; they write, proofread, and write some more; they talk in class about the movies they watch; and they read outside reviews and sources.

Getting back to basics

Although I have shifted away from in-class exams to more holistic forms of assessment, I also realize the importance of giving students regular practice in the “grunt work” of grammar: choosing correct verb forms, changing active sentences into passive voice, supplying definite or indefinite articles, and so on. All along, I have required students to complete a series of internet-based exercises to reinforce grammatical concepts covered in class. We also do several in-class writing assignments to check that they have been watching the movies with some care. I found that a few students watched the movie of their choice, oh, maybe five years ago (sometimes in their native language), and they were relying on their fuzzy memory to churn out a couple of pages to make the teacher happy. These in-class writing activities have proven useful in providing that necessary check-and-balance. Finally, starting this

semester, I have come full-circle to some extent by having students do daily in-class grammar quizzes, but with a twist: these activities, which I call “Take Five” because they are designed to be done in five minutes, focus on a few very specific grammar points (irregular verbs, verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, combining short sentences using adjective clauses, etc.). These exercises are open-book, open-note, and open dictionary, because I want the students to become self-sufficient in using their grammar book (Azar’s Chartbook) as a reference tool. It takes the pressure off them by not asking them to memorize. Furthermore, long after the course ends, they are better prepared to find the answers by becoming familiar with the content of the book. The jury is still out on the effectiveness of these “Take Five” exercises, but they appear to share the advantages of in-class tests without the stress. Best of all, they are also much easier and less time-consuming for me to correct!

To test or not to test?

We teachers need to make many choices so our classes run smoothly and our students make progress in their language abilities. Sometimes we are limited by externalities – in-class testing mandated by the program, the school, or the state – but if we do have a choice, it’s always beneficial to look critically at where we want to take our students and how we assess their progress. In-class testing may in fact be the most effective and efficient choice for a class. However, as you have seen, I have made several major adjustments to the evaluation techniques in my grammar class, and these have helped keep the course fresh, challenging, and meaningful for students and teacher alike.

References

- Azar, B. (1989). Understanding and Using English Grammar. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Azar, B. (2000). Chartbook: A Reference Grammar. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Bricault, D. (2006, Summer). “Movie Reviews: A Multi-Skills Approach to Redesigning a Grammar Course,” ITBE Newsletter, Vol. 34, No. 2.

Debbie Sternecky

Brooks Middle School and National-Louis University

**Break a Line**

You're creating bulleted or numbered lists in Microsoft Word, and you want to add some extra space between lines.

If you hit the "enter" key twice, the bullets/numbering turns off, forcing you to reactivate the bullets/numbering. Well, there's an easier way to add space between bulleted or number lines.

Whenever you press the "Enter" key, Word inserts a Paragraph Mark (you can see the non-printing paragraph mark by pressing "Ctrl" + "Shift" + "8"). But when you press the "Shift" key with the "Enter" key, Word inserts a Line Break. This feature forces the line to end, but it doesn't turn off the bullets or numbers. You can insert the Line Break more than once to add extra space. When you are ready to go to the next bullet or number, you simply press the regular "enter" key.

**Email forwarding**

We've all received emails that have been forwarded numerous times before reaching our inbox. Some of these

emails are worth forwarding to others. But have you noticed that many of them have annoying symbols in them? If you'd like to clean up an email you've received before forwarding it, read on.

If there is symbol such as ">" repeated in an email, there is a quick way to delete those symbols before forwarding it on through Microsoft Word.

With the email open, click and drag the text to select it with your mouse. Then click "Ctrl+c" to copy the text into the computer's clipboard. Open Word and paste the text by clicking "Ctrl + v." Once the text is in Word, open the Replace window by clicking "Ctrl + h."

In "Find what" box, enter the symbol you wish to delete. Don't put anything in the "Replace with" box. Click "Replace All." This will delete all of the repetitive marks. While you're at it, delete all of the other email addresses in the body of the email.

You can then select the cleaned-up text and copy it, using the steps above. After you've pasted it in the new email, you can forward to your heart's content.

When sending email to a group of people who don't know each other (such as your entire address book), it's courteous to put the recipients' names in the "BCC" (which stands for "blind carbon copy," a throwback to the days of typing with carbon paper) section of the email. This will keep the recipients from seeing each other's email address and it minimizes the chances of people using those addresses to send SPAM in the future.

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Member Snapshot

Kathy was interviewed for ITBE by Sherry Rasmussen.



Kathy Speers
Chicago Public Schools

When did you know that you wanted to be an ESL teacher?

Before I got into teaching ESL, I had worked in social services. After several years, I felt that I wasn't cut out for dealing with people's crises on a daily basis. Because I was interested in travel and in improving my second language (Spanish), when I came across some information about teaching English as a Second Language, it piqued my interest. I saw it as a way that I could live and teach abroad and/or to teach in the United States, where I could still contribute to my community as I had in social services, but in a different way.

Right after getting your M.A. in TESOL, you went to Nicaragua to teach English. What are some challenges you had to meet while teaching there?

I went to Nicaragua as an English Teaching Fellow in 1991. This was soon after the Sandinista government had left power, and the U.S. government was interested in re-establishing ties, so I was supposed to be a kind of "cultural ambassador", I guess. It was fascinating to be there during that transition time. I wasn't sure how the Nicaraguans would respond to me after so many years of U.S. involvement in the war there, and I certainly had no intentions of going there waving an American flag. But I found that the country was very divided in its feelings towards the U.S. and towards the Sandinistas. Also, many people had ties to the United States. So I encountered a spectrum of opinions and experiences, but I never felt that anyone disrespected me because I was an American.

I had nothing but positive experiences with my students, who were a mix of university students, doctors, government workers, and other professionals. They were generally pleased to have me as a teacher because all of the rest of the teachers at the school at that time were Nicaraguans. I was the only native speaker, except for a handful of Nicaraguans who were from the Atlantic Coast and spoke "Bluefields English" (named for the city). Students told me they didn't want to learn that dialect; they wanted to learn American English.

One challenge was that since I was an English Teaching Fellow with a degree in TESOL I was often viewed as an "expert", yet I was a new teacher at the time and didn't always feel like an expert! I was still learning, but I had that energy and enthusiasm that new teachers typically have, and that carried me a long way.

When you came back to Chicago, you taught many types of ESL to adults. Who were some of the populations you taught, and what types of ESL were you teaching?

When I returned to Chicago I originally took whatever teaching jobs I could find. This is part of the reason why I've had such a variety of jobs! But because of this variety I've had the opportunity to meet and work with so many wonderful teachers and students, which I would not otherwise have had. I've taught academic English to international students, workplace English in factories, as well as ESL to immigrant students in a community-based program.

Now you're teaching ESL to kids. What have you been learning as a result of teaching children?

The idea of teaching English to kids is something that had interested me for a long time. But I had my reservations, knowing that it would be a different ball of wax. I am currently teaching pull-out ESL to 3rd-5th graders in a nearly 100% Latino school in Chicago. A big difference in teaching ESL to elementary-aged students is that they need to be learning academic content and not just isolated skills or conversational English. So I am expected to teach English through this academic content. And although many of the students study in their native Spanish in the primary grades, 3rd-5th grades are the transition years, and it is difficult for many of them.

Compared to my adult students, I feel that these younger students have much more pressure to learn quickly. Some of my adult immigrant students learned quite slowly, but I didn't worry too much about them. For many of the students, learning basic communication was enough. But our young students need to be prepared, in a relatively short time, to read, write and understand English well enough to learn the content of their academic subjects. I need to use my knowledge of second language acquisition together with my less-practiced knowledge of teaching elementary language arts, social studies, science and math.

Why did you decide to join ITBE?

I like being a member of ITBE because I want to be a part of my professional group. It's a way for me to keep up on what's happening in the field, and I enjoy seeing old familiar faces and friends at the conferences.



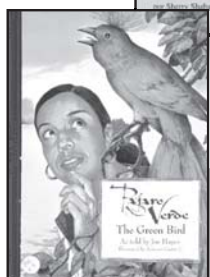
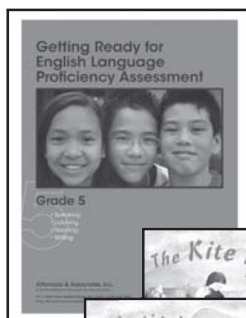
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Illinois TESOL•BE wants you!

ITBE wants members for leadership roles in our professional organization. We are currently seeking members who would be interested in the following positions:

- Newsletter Editor (Russell Clark is *guest editing* the next two issues, Vol. 37, Spring and Summer 2009.)
- Newsletter Staff
- Members to stand for election as members-at-large on the Executive Board
- Committee Members and Chairs

There are also many opportunities for newcomers to the profession, and new ITBE members, to get involved in a range of other volunteer capacities, especially at our Annual Convention, Spring and Fall Workshops. If you would like to nominate yourself, to work on the Convention or Workshops, or to have a conversation about ITBE's various roles, please call Russell Clark at 312-362-8106. Thank you!

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ITBE Executive Board Meeting following
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ITBE Executive Board Meeting
Harper College, 1 p.m.
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May 24-29

NAFSA Annual Conference
Los Angeles, CA
Contact: www.nafsa.org/annual_conference

In Memory of Elliot Judd

**TESOL Journal
Editor 1990-1995**



TESOL and Illinois TESOL-BE lost one of our greatest and most respected leaders with the passing of Elliot L. Judd, in December 2008. Elliot was a teacher, a role model, and a good friend to many of us — as individuals and to these organizations as a whole.

As Elliot made clear in his remarks at the TESOL Convention while serving as President, 2005-06, he was a strong supporter of Illinois TESOL•BE, his home affiliate. He saw the relationship between TESOL and the 100 plus affiliates as “a crucial partnership”. He had during his career been active not only at the national and international levels, but as a proud member and supporter of both Ohio and New York State TESOL, before his arrival in Illinois. Elliot is remembered fondly by his colleagues in ITBE, and generations of students at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

The Executive Board of ITBE wishes to extend our deepest condolences to Elliot’s wife Kathy and their entire family.

At the request of Elliot’s family, donations in his memory may be made to TESOL, where they will be earmarked for support of TESOL’s global education program and services. Please send checks payable to TESOL, or credit card information, to: TESOL, 700 S. Washington, Ste. 200, Alexandria, VA 22314.

Jill Blair, from Heartland Community College, speaks on our behalf in this brief reminiscence of Elliot as a teacher:

“Teaching ESL is a political act.” I remember Elliot Judd making this statement in a TESOL Methods class at UIC. At first, I was a little taken aback. I didn’t think many ESL teachers began their careers in TESOL for political reasons. I also realized, however, that there were political implications and consequences involved in teaching ESL. What political and cultural capital do our students gain by learning English? Is cultural “assimilation” the end goal of English language instruction? In teaching language and culture, is it possible and/or desirable to be politically neutral?

Elliot Judd challenged his students with these kinds of questions on a regular basis. And while he showed respect for differing viewpoints, he never kept his own political beliefs a secret. He also expected and desired healthy, respectful debate with his students and colleagues.

Elliot Judd taught me that teaching ESL — perhaps teaching of any subject — *IS* a political act. He also taught me to face this fact head on. Language, culture and politics are intertwined and inseparable from one another. Better to acknowledge this fact and discuss it openly than to pretend that anything we do in the classroom is politically neutral.

Thanks to Elliot for this lesson and countless others. He will be sorely missed.

**“Let us continue to help each other
grow and prosper together!”**

35th Annual Convention Report

With over 500 attendees, over 70 presentations, 100 presenters, 30 exhibitors, and one surprise appearance of the fire brigade, ITBE celebrated its 35th Annual Convention, “Teaching from the Heart”, at the Holiday Inn Select, Naperville, February 13-14, directed by this year’s Convention Chair **Britt Johnson**. And a “heartful” occasion it was! As **Betsy Kubota**, President for 2008-09, said in her welcoming remarks, picking up on the Valentine’s Day theme, ESOL-BE teachers do so much more than create and deliver classroom lessons, “they give of themselves – from the heart”.

Among our distinguished plenary and featured speakers at the convention this year were: **Jodi Crandall**, director of the Language, Literacy & Culture Ph.D. program at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County; **Jim Stack**, former director of achievement assessments for the San Francisco Unified School District, and this year’s TESOL-sponsored speaker; **Dorothy E. Zemach**, an ESL writer, editor, and teacher trainer from Eugene, Oregon; **John Fleishman**, assistant superintendent of technology services at the Sacramento County Office of Education, California; and **Lydia Stack**, former director of professional development, elementary and secondary ESL programs and world languages for the San Francisco School District.

In her Friday morning plenary session, **Jodi Crandall** chose to focus on transitions in the lives of our students: where they go after they leave our classes; and the role of the ESL teacher in fostering these transitions. Jodi further explored in her breakout session the significant role writing of all types can play in strengthening these life transitions. On Friday afternoon, **Jim Stack** reviewed for us the key components of the No Child Left Behind Act which pertain to ELL’s, highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of NCLB

requirements. In Jim’s breakout session, he also explored issues around the development and implementation of TESOL’s PreK-12 English Language Proficiency Standards.

Our Saturday morning audiences enjoyed a humorous plenary session – but one with a distinct point – conducted by **Dorothy Zemach**. Dorothy presented amusing extracts from textbooks published between the late 1800’s and today, challenging us to judge our own and published materials in the context of our shared values and beliefs. She continued in the same tone in her breakout session on the use of games in writing classes aimed at various ages and skill levels. **John Fleishman**, our Friday afternoon plenary speaker, focused on the use of technology as a new literacy for both teachers and students, and asked us to consider the impact of technological change on our educational programs. In two other breakout sessions during the convention, John spoke on digital native tools, and free and open software.

As an innovation this year we were fortunate to be able to welcome **Lydia Stack**, along with her husband Jim, as a featured speaker over both days. In one of her sessions, Lydia explained a writer’s workshop concept she has developed, in which teachers are provided with tools to meet the individual writing needs of ELL’s. And in the other, she reported on recent research on academic language and demonstrated three interactive strategies that help secondary ELL’s develop this language.

ITBE is extremely grateful to **Pearson Longman** for once again providing our Friday attendees with a cocktail reception at the end of the day, and thanks the many volunteers and exhibitors that make this great annual event possible.



Please join us for ITBE's Spring Workshop

North Park University, Chicago
April 18, 2009

where the theme will be
“**Employment in ESL and Bilingual Education**”.

8:30 – 9:00	On-site Registration	\$10 ITBE members
9:00 – 10:15	Panel Discussion	\$15 Non-members
10:15 – 11:00	Presentation II	\$5 Students
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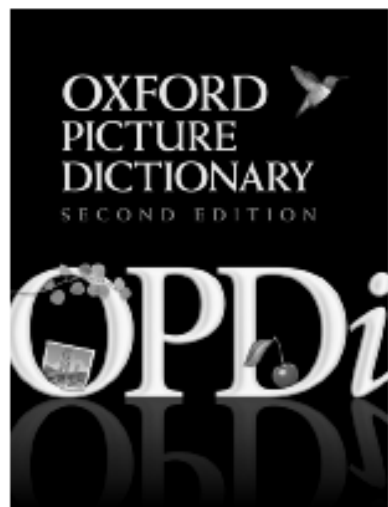
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