

Preface

When the theme for TESOL 2012 in Philadelphia was announced as “A Declaration of Excellence,” I was inspired by the Declaration of Independence to propose a session titled “Are These Classroom Management Truths Self-Evident?” To my delight, this session was accepted. In my proposal, I wrote:

While the Declaration of Independence claims that some truths are held to be self-evident, can we say the same for the truths of classroom management? Is the truth about classroom management evident to novice teachers? What bits of wisdom can veteran teachers impart to new teachers? The presenter celebrates her 35th anniversary as a classroom teacher by sharing twenty truths about teaching adult ESL students. A lighthearted approach addresses many serious issues, from dealing with late arrivals to individualizing instruction, and from answering questions to eliminating cheating. The presentation offers new teachers a chance to learn some tricks and veteran teachers a chance to share their favorite techniques.

My presentation was well received, and overall I was struck by how the participants were eager to weigh in with their challenges and solutions.

Some of the twenty “truths” from my own presentation are listed here.

- Your students will arrive late.
- You will repeat answers and explanations that you already gave.
- Students can write on the board too.
- Your place in the room matters.
- If you sit down with a small group of students, they are more likely to talk to you.

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- ❑ You can stop students from cheating on quizzes.
- ❑ Your students work at vastly different paces.
- ❑ You are not in control of the learning that takes place in your classroom.

As I mentioned, the participants in my TESOL session were very eager to share what they do well and what challenges them in their classrooms. This led to a question that has culminated with the writing of this book: How can I share what I have learned over nearly four decades in a variety of ESL contexts, and how can I include the perspectives of many of my colleagues?

An idea then emerged—why not use a survey to cast a wide net, capitalize on the experiences of my colleagues, weave those responses together with my experiences, and write a book? In 21st-century speak, why not “crowd-source” a book on classroom management? This way, we would have a resource that shares not what someone *believes should* happen in a classroom, but what veteran practitioners *actually do*. Teacher-training programs do a good job of teaching theories like Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development and techniques like think-pair-share or peer review. Teachers know they have to use task-based communicative activities and teach students to use before, during, and after strategies when reading. The challenge is how to keep all of these theories and strategies in play as we manage a group of students from a variety of educational and cultural backgrounds. I hoped that the use of a survey, presentation feedback, and conversations with colleagues would allow me to show a range of classroom management techniques from seasoned professionals. Everyone wants a glimpse into how other teachers conduct their classes, and this project gives that opportunity.

The only problem with my idea was finding the time to do such a project. Fast forward a few months to the fall of 2012 when I learned that a President’s Sabbatical from my institution, Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), could give me the time and support that I needed for such a project. In November of 2012 I submitted a proposal that began with this paragraph:

As I anticipate the celebration of my 20th year of teaching ESL at NOVA and my 37th year in ESL classrooms, I am eager for a period of renewal. The President’s Sabbatical offers an incomparable

opportunity for faculty members to reflect on the challenges and rewards of our profession, broaden our experience, and enrich our pedagogical skills. If I am fortunate enough to be selected for a President's Sabbatical Award, I would like to undertake a project to explore best practices in the student-centered classroom, culminating with the publication of a book on ESL classroom management. This project will give me the opportunity to reflect on nearly four decades of professional development, connect and reconnect with current and former colleagues, and share what I learn with a broad audience.

My proposal outlined a three-stage process. In the first stage, I wrote the survey that appears in Appendix 2 of this book. While the survey was being prepared by NOVA's Office of Institutional Research using Qualtrics, I conducted several presentations and workshops, allowing me to have "real time" discussions with dozens of ESL professionals and volunteer teachers. At WATESOL in the fall of 2013 I presented "ESL Classroom Management: Best Practices for Student-Centered Learning," which I structured around six questions such as "What can I do on the first day of class to create a sense of community?" "How can I use modeling effectively?" and "How can kinesthetic activities help my students learn?" Then, on my campus at NOVA, I presented "Moving Toward Learner-Centered Classrooms" in two sessions to teachers in our academic ESL program, our IEP, and our community/adult education program. This presentation examined what it means to move from teacher-centered to student-centered classroom management, from both the teacher's and the students' perspectives. It was exciting to have teachers from all three programs together, sharing in one room.

In January of 2014, I had two more opportunities to present, repeating "ESL Classroom Management: Best Practices for Student-Centered Learning" at a college-wide conference of all six campuses of NOVA and then conducting a two-hour training on "Learner-Centered Instruction in ESL Classrooms" for 50 volunteer teachers at an adult education center in Washington, DC. These opportunities gave me a chance not only to reflect on my own principles but to receive valuable input from teachers at various stages in their careers and who teach in various contexts. Thus, this book is a synthesis of all of these: responses to the survey that appear in Appendix 2, feedback from several presentations, and conversations—in-person or via email—with several colleagues.

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Throughout December of 2013 and January of 2014, the survey was “live.” I was pleased that so many of my colleagues and friends of colleagues took the time to thoughtfully complete a very long survey. The names of the respondents are listed in the Acknowledgments section of this book, and many of the respondents are quoted throughout the chapters.

After the survey was complete and I had time to consider those responses along with the feedback from my presentations, I continued my information-gathering in emails and conversations with colleagues. In this way I was able to explore some issues that I discovered were not addressed fully in my survey. In addition, I attended TESOL 2014, keeping my ears open for anything related to classroom management and lesson planning. Once back from TESOL, it was time to synthesize my survey responses and conversations, reflect on the style that I have developed over nearly four decades in various classroom contexts, and complete the manuscript.

It should be noted that this is not a book about language teaching techniques or approaches, but rather a way to make techniques work in a classroom of twenty or more individuals. Of course, every teaching situation is a unique crossroads where student backgrounds, needs, and purposes meet a teacher who is ostensibly in control of what happens over a period of weeks or months. And, yes, even in a student-centered environment the teacher is most likely in control. I believe that teacher-centered versus student-centered is a false dichotomy. In a student-centered classroom, the teacher must make important decisions on how to balance teacher-led instruction with pair and group work and whole-class interaction. Classes must contain some amount of instruction, but the skilled teacher knows what students can discover or be responsible for on their own and what needs to be presented in a teacher-centered fashion. This book is intended to allow teachers to develop or hone a style that works in their unique situations.

It should also be noted that this book is more or less a snapshot in time. If I had written this book at the beginning of my career, classroom management might have included ways to structure choral drills, techniques for using “backward buildup” to memorize a dialogue, and hints on getting the most from dittoed grammar exercises! A little later in my career, I might have had to convince teachers to allow students to work in pairs and groups, shifting the focus from linguistic form to communicative competence. In fact, the title of a session I presented at TESOL

1986 was “Communication with Accuracy.” I most likely was encouraging teachers to consider using communicative activities and assuring them that they did not have to give up a focus on linguistic form once they gave up their drills! Then the following year, at TESOL 1987, I presented “Developing Student-Centered Activities.” This no doubt was a collection of information-gap exercises and “find someone who” activities. A book written in this era may also have urged teachers to consider moving away from fill-in-the-blank, context-free grammar teaching, as evidenced by the title of my 1989 TESOL presentation: “The ESL Grammar Class: Contextualized Exercises, Communicative Activities,” and my 1992 TESOL presentation: “The ESL Grammar Class: Introducing Content.” A book written at the end of the 1990s might have had large portions devoted to learning styles, considering that my TESOL 1999 presentation was titled “Addressing Multiple Intelligences with Novels” and might also have had a discussion of bringing technology into the classroom, a topic of a 1996 presentation at WATESOL: “No-tech, Lo-tech, Hi-tech: Adapting for Technology.”

Now, as a profession, we seem to be comfortably settled into a communicative approach to language teaching, in which the ability to communicate in a variety of modes and using a variety of technologies is seen as the primary focus of our instruction. With that in mind, I asked these questions at the beginning of this project.

- ❑ How can we create a participatory, student-centered classroom environment that fosters the development of language skills?
- ❑ How can we not only craft lesson plans that maximize student engagement but also put those plans into practice?
- ❑ How can we structure interaction between and among students and teachers to individualize instruction and give prompt feedback? How can we maximize time on task while allowing students to work at a comfortable pace?
- ❑ How can we encourage active learning and vary activities to keep classes fresh and interesting without confusing students, or worse, focusing on the activity at hand rather than on the learning that is to be taking place?

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My sabbatical was everything I'd hoped for—a time for renewal and a time to reflect on the challenges and rewards of our profession. Eighty colleagues gave hours of their valuable time to complete my survey. Reading their responses and weaving them together into this book has been a great privilege for me; I learn something each and every time I reread what they wrote. I truly hope others enjoy this crowd-sourced work as much as I have.