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Series Editor's Preface

In September 2008, *The Guardian* newspaper in England described David Foster Wallace as “the most brilliant writer of his generation.” In its tribute to him, following his death by suicide at the age of 46, *The Guardian* presented a now well-known story that Wallace told at the beginning of his commencement speech to a graduating class at Kenyon College in Ohio:

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys, how’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?” (para. 1)

That water is what this *ELT In Context* series is about. As Wallace’s story illustrates so eloquently and so succinctly, when we are immersed in our context all the time, we stop noticing what we are surrounded by. Or if we were aware of it at some point in the past, we stopped noticing it some time ago. Wallace went on to explain that “the immediate point of the fish story is that the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about” (para. 2).

The writers in this series were asked to step back from the English language teaching (ELT) and learning contexts that they are most familiar with and look at those contexts with fresh eyes. But why do this? There are many reasons for reflecting on, exploring, and writing about our contexts, one of the most important of which relates to what we do every day as TESOL professionals and how we do it. As Diane Larsen-Freeman (2000) puts it,

a method is decontextualized. How a method is implemented in the classroom is going to be affected not only by who the teacher is, but also who the students are, the students’ and their teacher’s expectations of appropriate social roles, the institutional constraints and demands, and factors connected to the wider sociocultural context in which the instruction takes place. (p. x)

It is that wider context that we are exploring in this series.

To enable them to step back from contexts they are so familiar with, each writer was asked to follow a template, starting with the notion that individuals are a context in and of themselves. Therefore, in Chapter 1, the writers introduce themselves to the readers and explain how they came to be where they are now, doing what they do as, as TESOL professionals. This also helps address the notions of objectivity and subjectivity, as we cannot be objective about ourselves or those things we care about, have an opinion on, know well, and so on. All we can do is to be as objective as we can be about our own subjectivities, which is another function of the first chapter.

In Chapter 2, the authors summarize English language teaching and learning at the national level in their country, with a focus on the level of learners they are working with (e.g., students at the college or university level). Chapter 3 looks at ELT at the local level in each country, and Chapter 4 describes the particular language teaching and learning organization (LTO) where the authors work. To help our readers get as deep an understanding of the context as possible, the Chapters 5 and 6 present “A Day in the Life of a Teacher” and “A Day in the Life of a Learner” at the authors’ LTOs. We realize, of course, that there is no “typical” teacher or learner, as everyone is unique. So a composite of a number of teachers and learners is presented in each of those chapters, to help readers walk in the shoes of those in the LTO and to give readers a strong sense of the day-to-day realities of life inside and outside the LTO, which are often not written about, published, or presented.

In terms of context, having moved from the national and local levels to the institutional and individual levels, the authors were asked to go back to *The Big Picture*, using the focus question: What could readers from other LTOs, that are like yours but that are in another context or country, learn that would help them in their daily work in their own context or country? For example, if the book is about working with adult learners in one part of the Arabic-speaking world, what could TESOL professionals working with adults in other Arabic-speaking parts of the world learn from reading the book that would help them in their particular context? Or what could readers working with adult Arabic-speaking students outside the Arabic-speaking world (e.g., in the United States) learn that would help them? In the final chapter, the authors were asked to give a brief reflective account of what they learned from writing the book, about their own context and about the contexts of others.

These books are also aimed at TESOL professionals who are considering working in LTOs in the contexts and countries described in the series and who need a clear, concise, and up-to-date account of what it is like to live and work there. One of the challenges of doing that is the fact that teaching and learning contexts are changing all the time, some more quickly and more dramatically than others. However, taking that constraint into account, our goal has been

to create a series of books that remind us of the importance of the professional waters in which we swim every day, and to help prepare those who may wish to join us in these particular English language teaching and learning contexts.

Andy Curtis, PhD

President, TESOL International Association (2015–2016)

Introduction

As this is the ninth and final book in this ELT In Context series, and in the spirit of us being reflective practitioners, I will take a small step back and briefly summarize where we are now, how we got here, and where we are headed. In July 2013, a call went out from TESOL Press for proposals for a new book series, titled ELT In Context. We received more than 60 initial proposals from dozens of countries. However, we received very few or none from some parts of the world, such as India and China, which was unfortunate, as those are the two most populous countries, with some of the largest English language teaching and learning populations on the planet. Of those initial 60-plus proposals, 20 were followed up with requests for more detailed proposals, and from those 20, a dozen were selected. And here we are, four years later, in 2017, with nine of those 12 having made it to the finish line. Those numbers are important because they show the growing interest in what I have referred to as the centrality of context (Curtis, 2017) and because the fact that three of the initial 12 manuscripts did not reach completion is a reflection of the writing challenges involved, even with these relatively short books, of around 20,000 words each.

Since the first of the ELT In Context books were published in 2015, hundreds of teachers in dozens of countries have bought, and we hope read and found useful, books in this series, which followed up on the success of TESOL's popular English Language Teacher Development series, edited by Tom Farrell. That series was launched at the beginning of 2015, and there are now more than 20 books in it, each of which gives a clear and concise, roughly 10,000-word overview and summary of a key area, including Language Teacher Professional Development (Farrell, 2015), Language Classroom Assessment (Cheng, 2015), and Managing the Language Classroom (Quirke, 2015). Also, the ELT In Context series follows a new TESOL series titled TESOL Voices: Insider Accounts of Classroom Life, which expands on the ideas of "A Day in the Life of a Teacher" and "A Day in the Life of a Student" in this series. Each book in the TESOL Voices series will be around 50,000 words, showing the progression, from 10,000, to 20,000, to 50,000, as the

TESOL Press expands its range of books for language teachers who are already in classrooms and for those who want to understand the classrooms of other teachers at a deeper level.

This book focuses on working with Chinese-speaking students at U.S. colleges, using as the context the Borough of Manhattan Community College, which is part of the City University of New York. As the authors, Ke Xu and Linglan Cao, report, "According to U.S. Census Bureau (2015), the Chinese American community is the largest and oldest ethnic group of Asian Americans in the United States. In fact, it makes up 23% of the Asian American population. In 2015, there were 3.8 million Chinese living in the United States" (p. 16). This raises the important issue of timeliness. Although the tagline for this series (on the back cover of all the books) is "Context is everything," for many of those who work in the world of publishing, their tagline is "Timing is everything."

For various reasons, this book by Xu and Cao took the longest to complete. But because of that, I happen to be writing this last series editor's introduction as the first 100 days of the new U.S. presidential administration is coming to an end (late April 2017), after an election marked by some of the most anti-immigration, and specifically anti-Chinese, comments made by a U.S. presidential candidate (Stracqualursi, 2017). The strength of anti-immigrant sentiment was first seen on January 27, 2017, just seven days after the new president took office, when he issued an executive order implementing a 90-day entry ban for people traveling to the United States from seven majority-Muslim countries: Syria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia.

The order also put in place a 120-day suspension of all refugee programs in the United States and an indefinite ban on the entry of all Syrian refugees specifically. In response, the TESOL International Association, and many other such organizations, have been communicating with their members and issuing public statements reacting and responding to this executive order. For example, the association published a statement on its website, which describes the order as

the latest manifestation of the heated and xenophobic rhetoric that has undermined the fabric of the United States. This contentious act fails to satisfy its intentions to make the United States a safer nation. The exclusion of travelers, immigrants, and refugees from these Middle Eastern and North African countries only serves to make the United States more vulnerable, unfairly targets immigrants and refugees, and stands in stark contrast to the ideals that the United States was built on. (Cutler, 2017, para. 1)

One of the hallmarks of the new U.S. administration in its first 100 days in office has been a constant "flip-flopping," in which a position is taken and official statements supporting that position are made, only to be followed by a partial or complete reversal. This has been the case, for example, on its position on U.S.-China relations, which is now being described as "a very good relationship" (Wolf, 2017). Given these constant volte-face reversals, which seem set to

continue, no one can predict with any accuracy what the future of U.S.-China relations holds. But whatever that relationship becomes, it will affect, directly and indirectly, students from China who are studying in the United States.

According to one recent report,

Over one million international students attended American colleges and universities in the 2015–2016 school year—accounting for more than 5% of all higher education students in the US. Nearly 330,000 of these students are Chinese. In just the last decade, the total number of international students doubled and the number of Chinese students increased fivefold. (Kopf, 2016, para. 2)

Such figures make this book by Xu and Cao an especially timely text, to help the teachers who will, for now at least, be working with those hundreds of thousands of students from China in the United States.

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