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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 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 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.

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References