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## The Individual as Context

### Isabela Villas Boas

Teaching English was not on my career list. In fact, ever since I was a small child, I had wanted to be a journalist because I liked reading and writing. I became an English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher in Brazil by accident, or—some might say—by destiny.

In 1974, when I was only 8 years old, my family moved to the United States for my father to pursue a master's degree and a doctorate. I had never learned English and was enrolled in the third grade of an elementary school in a suburb of Houston, Texas, where I learned English in a full immersion situation. The 3-year experience in the United States shaped who I am in ways that I came to understand only many years later.

Upon arriving back in Brazil in 1978, as my parents did not want me to forget the English I had learned so well, they enrolled me in a traditional English language teaching (ELT) institute in Brasília, Casa Thomas Jefferson (CTJ), a Brazil-U.S. binational center. I was only 11, so though I was quite proficient, but I was not mature enough to take an advanced course, so I was placed in the intermediate level. I went through the whole program at CTJ and took several post-advanced courses there before I was 18 and able to enroll in the teacher training course (TTC), the only one in the institution that I hadn't taken. My goal in taking the TTC was to advance my studies in English, not be a teacher.

The same year I started TTC, 1985, I also entered college to study translation, but soon transferred to journalism. On a Sunday night a year and a half later, I received a call from my first TTC teacher, Katy Cox, inviting me to teach at Casa Thomas Jefferson. At that time the institution was much smaller and hired inexperienced teachers like me. I loved CTJ and decided to give it a try, at least while I was still in college.

In 1990, I graduated from college and got a part-time job at a local newspaper. My goal was to finish the year at CTJ and then resign to pursue a career as a journalist. However, at the end of the year, Katy invited me to be a course

supervisor, which I happily accepted. I had hated the experience at the local newspaper and had found the work environment terrible, compared to the wonderful environment at CTJ.

The next few years were dedicated to becoming a true professional in the ELT field. That was when I started attending conferences, including my first TESOL Convention in Long Beach, 1995, and also began teaching methodology in TTC, which I prepared for by way of self-study, reading the major reference books in ELT methodology available at that time.

In 1998, after 6 years as a course supervisor and 1 as a pedagogical counselor, I decided to invest in my EFL career and pursue a master's degree. My husband, who had been my student at CTJ, had always wanted to live in the United States, so I applied to three universities there, received a Graduate Tuition Scholarship from Arizona State University, and thus moved to Tempe, Arizona, with my husband and two small children, who were 2 and 6 years of age. During my studies in the United States, I always had CTJ in mind. All of my end-of-term papers were written with my local audience in mind and published in the *CTJ Journal*. For my applied project, I managed to reconcile my interest in writing with my career as an ELT professional, and I wrote about implementing a portfolio system in our writing courses.

Back to CTJ in 2000, I soon became a consultant to the general academic coordinator, Katy Cox, and was appointed the general supervisor, responsible for providing methodological orientation to all course supervisors. I continued investing in my ongoing professional development by attending and presenting at local, national, and international conferences, especially the TESOL Convention.

In 2005 I decided to take a further step and pursue a doctorate in education, as there isn't an applied linguistics program at the local university (Universidade de Brasília) and my family situation did not favor another major relocation. However, since there was a literacy strand in the program and my advisor had been a professor in the Linguistics Department for 25 years, I was able to continue focusing on second language writing.

In 2007, Katy decided to step down from her position as general academic coordinator and appointed me as her successor. She became a consultant for CTJ and was responsible for the mentoring of newly hired teachers, together with two other senior colleagues. More important than that, she became and still is my mentor. Two years ago the title of my position was changed to academic superintendent, but the job didn't change. I oversee CTJ's academic program, comprising over 17,000 students and 260 teachers.

## **Katy Cox**

All through my elementary, high school, and undergraduate years of schooling, most of which took place in California, I adored school. I enjoyed vacation periods but was always more than ready to get back into the rhythm and the

social energy generated by being in classes, being with friends, coping with the goals implicit in carrying out assignments, studying for tests, and so on. My parents were unrepentant roamers, always moving from place to place in various states and cities, and the one predictable dimension in my life, no matter where we were, was school. However, the one thing I never wanted to be—professionally—was a teacher. I had such a tendency to admire my teachers that their shoes seemed impossible to fill. I thought it would be safer to be *anything* else.

In my undergraduate studies, my greatest love—in spite of the fact that I began my studies majoring in journalism—was literature (British, Russian, European; plays, novels, poetry) and the subject I most abhorred was Spanish (a requirement for all college students in California at the time). A lover of language, I hated the feeling of linguistic incapacity inherent in all that “foreignness,” the sensation of being an infant in adult clothing. My area of maximum confidence was in the teacher-avoidance strategies I had perfected throughout semesters of foreign language “study.” This peculiar talent and my awareness of how foreign language study can affect a reasonably intelligent and normally enthusiastic student would stand me in good stead much later on, as you will see.

Time passed, and in my last semesters of study, in connection with the literature dimension, I was called on to tutor some Korean students whose efforts to pass their required Shakespeare course were leading them to nearly suicidal levels of failure. My reputation as a helper (not a teacher, mind you) was definitely boosted by the ultimate success of my “students,” and through some fairly circuitous circumstances, I followed up college graduation by becoming the director of the San Jose campus Foreign Student Association and its conglomeration of volunteers. Within a year, I was persuaded to enter the TEFL/TESL master’s program in San Francisco State University. One year into that study, in 1968, I was invited to teach in the American Language Institute, which was operational for foreign students attempting to study at the university level in the United States. I was also in charge of volunteer ESL teachers at the city’s International Center, struggling to give them orientation with regard to use of materials and constructive teaching attitudes.

The master’s program also included teaching classes in the city’s Italian district and to migrant workers employed in the city’s surrounding agricultural areas. The combination of all these engagements—coupled with the theoretical study focuses which were regular course requirements—provided a dynamically dense foundation of techniques and attitudes, which would connect me effectively to a kaleidoscope of nationalities and needs in the large collective of students for whom I felt at least partially responsible.

With an MA to my credit, in 1968, I found employment at the San Francisco Alemany Adult School and spent 3 years greatly enjoying helping foreigners from many nationalities and backgrounds integrate (linguistically at least) into surroundings very far from their original homes. I was not inclined to leave

this gratifying situation, but a good friend and former MA colleague thought we should put our skills to use overseas, even if only for the time it took to get the sense of other teaching dimensions. The result of a good deal of insistent persuasion was that I applied for a 1-year stint as a United States Information Service Fellow in one of the Latin American countries wishing to participate in this program. In 1971 I was sent a take-it-or-leave-it contract to teach at the (then) small binational center in Brasilia, Brazil.

On July 25 of that year, I landed on the high, dry plateau of a fledgling capitol city and began—unbeknownst to me—the rest of my life there. In the more than 40 years since, I have taught nearly all levels and held the position of assistant coordinator with four different general academic coordinators, twice refusing directorial invitations to assume the coordinator's position because I didn't feel I had acquired the managerial maturity to capably meet its demands. I finally took the plunge and held the position of general academic coordinator (now known as academic superintendent) for 17 years. For the last 7 years, I have been part of an academic consultancy firm that assists in training incoming CTJ teachers and conducts observations of more senior teachers as part of an ongoing performance assessment for teachers across the board.

In all of these situations, I have participated in a wide variety of projects—story adaptation, basic sentences illustration, test writing, conception and refinement of observation and evaluation instruments, to mention a few. I have participated in training programs related to book adoption on behalf of more than one textbook publisher, and in several other binational centers in other Brazilian states. And I have given academic presentations in numerous EFL centers and in international TESOL conferences. I can say—going back to my insecurities as a language student—that my empathy with “foreign-ness,” my willingness to be pushed by unexpected winds into various ports of discovery, my gratitude for good friends and finally finding a real home all have made it possible to make a positive contribution to my institute and to the profession from which I still derive profound pleasure.