An Interview with Judith O'Loughlin

Frazer Smith

Frazer Smith: *Judith, thank you for this interview. To begin, how did you first get into teaching?*

Judith O'Loughlin: Actually, it began in high school. I was thinking of a very safe career and becoming a secretary. I happened to be home, as a sophomore, recovering from some surgery that I needed. One of the teachers came over to the house, talked to my parents and said, "She shouldn't be a secretary. She needs to do something more." So, I decided to become an English teacher and pursued it as an undergraduate and became a high school and middle school English teacher. Along the way, I got married and had two young children. After two years of maternity leave, I couldn't go back to my job because the position had moved to another school, which logistically wasn't going to work. So, after staying home for about three years, I went to visit an evening school for the foreign language students and met the director. He said someone had just quit and asked if I would I consider becoming an ESL teacher in the building. I went home that night and thought my life had flipped 180 degrees. So, long story short, I started somewhere else and ended up here and never regretted it.

You recently completed a book focusing on students with interrupted formal education (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017). Could you tell us a little more about this and some of the causes?

There is a big range of causes. When you watch the news and see what's happening in the United States, you see who will become the future generation of students with interrupted formal educations. There are people who are coming to America or hoping to get into America not only because of poverty, but also because of actual threats to their lives. They've come, just like earlier generations, including my grandparents, for a better life or for economic reasons. My grandmother, for example, never learned to read and write in her native language. She spoke Turkish, and she spoke Latino, a form of Spanish, but never learned to read or write in any language. So, the reasons for new immigrants to leave their countries are varied, but most of them revolve around poverty. They're at the point where they can't feed themselves, and so they're coming to the United States to save their lives. They're coming also with their children who are being threatened by gangs. And so, when you see on TV these caravans, you see mostly mothers and children trying to protect their children, and many of these children have been in and out of school. When they go back to school, there's just such a big gap in what they understand and can learn. I guess that's part of what got me interested in the topic of resilience. Not only for that generation, but for the kids that I taught who had normal, consistent education in their native country and who came here and just sort of gave up on learning English and becoming bilingual. So, it's a wide variety of stories that produce the interrupted formal education issue.

What lead you to write about this topic in the initial stages?

My colleague, Brenda Custodio, with whom I wrote the book, worked in a school in Columbus, Ohio, that brought in many of these students. The school helped them with specialised instruction and support from teachers that had been trained to work with them—not the typical training that I had gotten. I don't think there's any training at a university level right now, and I could be wrong, for students with interrupted formal education. We do learn about newcomers and how to build language, but that traditional way doesn't always work because if they have no number sense, don't know how to calculate, don't understand an alphabet, and don't know how to read their native language, you have to start at a very, very low level. Also, it's kind of a spiral; you move forward and then you move back. Also, neither of us found any intake document that's consistent throughout the United States, for example, there is no complete data on who they are. So, we're kind of working in a blind area, where you work with a student and figure out what his or her needs are. There are some newcomer schools around the country that have been looked at. Marguerite Lukes (Lukes, 2015), in New York City, has written about them. Debbie Short and Beverley Boyson (Boyson & Short, 2004) investigated schools that had not only newcomers but these kids that had limited education in their first language.

Could you tell us more about your approach to building resilience?

The first thing I looked at was something by Edith Grotberg (Grotberg, 2003), who had done some work on building resilience in the nineties and called it the "I Have, I Am" model. We looked at aspects of it. For instance, the learner understanding who he or she is—learners that have an idea of who they are and what they can do—and that was the "I

Am" and "I Have." What a learner can do is partially "Can Do" and "What I Have" as the resources they can turn to when they need them. She did a lot of research on these ideas and wrote this model up. And then bouncing off this, a number of psychologists have worked on the idea of resilience—the idea of having learners know what resources they have within themselves and around them in the world that they can turn to for help. Resilience as a mindset—moving from trauma to being resilient—there's been a lot of writing on it, but nothing that synthesizes it all together. It's in little modules that haven't been brought together. Edutopia (Lucas, 2018), which is a website that George Lucas created, has some things about actually building resilient teachers.

George Lucas?

Yeah, the Star Wars guy! He started this thing called *Edutopia* about five or six years ago. He started a magazine with his money that anyone can subscribe to, and just the other day, there was a whole thing about teachers needing to be resilient, as well.

How do you think such challenges compare to children from minority backgrounds in Japan?

I think possibly the issue is different, but it also has similarities. Different in the sense that they've had more consistent education than SIF (students with interrupted formal education) students in the United States. Their difference is the "Who I Am" in the sense of "I don't fit. I don't fit the typical Japanese culture, but I'm a conglomerate or a mixture of multiple cultures." So, it puts a real burden and also a challenge and responsibility on the teacher to understand what they bring to this and how their diversity is an asset, not a detriment. It's difficult in a culture that has a lot of uniformity. You know, an interesting story, and I'll tell it really quickly. I had a little girl named Akiko in the United States, and she had red hair naturally, like a chestnut mare. We had a number of Japanese students at my school in New Jersey in the nineties, and Akiko kept coming up to me saying, "I don't fit with the other Japanese, and I don't fit in America." And I said, "But you're just wonderful, you're a good student and you're beautiful and you work hard and people like you." She responded, "But I'm not really Japanese, I have red hair." And I think that characterizes the challenge of it. You know, she didn't fit and how does she get to fit? I think that I worked really hard at it, but I think that she had a really hard time. Her parents told her she was beautiful, she was special because of her chestnut hair, she was smart, and she worked hard, but it's a big challenge, definitely. I don't know how it can be overcome, and listening to Diane [Larsen-Freeman], too. The idea that diversity is an asset and understanding the importance of diversity. In the United States particularly, we're really fighting this battle as teachers against this mindset that only looks at things in one way. There has been a battle against bias in certain legislative pieces that is trying to fight against a narrow view, a narrow perspective of culture.

Could you tell us a little about the "My Name, My Identity" campaign?

This started at the Santa Clara Office of Education, in California, by the director there, Ms. Yi Wan. She started it as a small project to respect students based on their names and not changing their names in the classroom, because your name is your identity, and learning to pronounce the names of the students is important. There is a website in which there are four modules, teaching about My Name, My Identity and children's literature and other activities to respect the diversity of names. And, if you go to the website (Santa Clara County Office of Education, 2018), there are places all over the United States, and I think outside as well in which people have taken the pledge that they will respect students' names and identities. So, the first module is focusing on what your name means and ties into everything else I've been doing, in the sense that your name gives you your cultural identity, it has a story of your family history, it has a story of you. And so, to change your name, means to lose your identity.

Finally, would you like to comment on the conference theme of Diversity and Inclusion?

Yeah, it's hard to look at that from one's own lens. For instance, my own lens has always been from the time I was a child. My father's parents came from Russia and my mother's family came from Turkey, and they were both Jews but different Jews. And so, I lived with diversity and different languages all my life. So, diversity and acceptance, and interest in different people and different cultures were strong parts of my life, and it seems that my country has taken a move in the other direction: "If you're not like me, you're scary and suspect." I'm seriously concerned about it. You see a lot of it on the news, and you don't know how much of it is just the isolated cases being blown out of proportion or, whether it is racial or ethnic identities emerging where there are only good guys and bad guys. That's the scariest piece for me. So, the pendulum swings back and forth. Particularly, the world is looking at the United States and what it's going to do, and the hope is

that somewhere along the line, people will find that we're all part of a human race and the commonalities of being humans, who have good days and bad days, are similar. You know, our experience may be different, but in the end, we're more similar than different.

References

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[JALT PRAXIS] MY SHARE


Steven Asquith & Lorraine Kipling

We welcome submissions for the My Share column. Submissions should be up to 600 words describing a successful technique or lesson plan you have used that can be replicated by readers, and should conform to the My Share format (see the guidelines on our website below).

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Hi, readers, and welcome to the latest edition of My Share. Lorraine and I hope that for many of you, summer has provided a moment to take a deep breath, unwind a little, and get a touch of clarity as to how you will approach the coming months. Personally, I really enjoy the planning process, especially figuring out how my existing courses might be updated with new ideas. On many occasions the ideas provided by the My Share authors have proven useful to my planning. The contributions in this issue are once again outstanding, so we are sure that they will provide you with considerable inspiration for the coming autumn term.

First off, James Taylor introduces a collaborative public speaking activity entitled Vote for Us in which students prepare and give a campaign speech for a mock election on global issues. This activity not only focusses upon improving students' presentation skills, but also encourages them to look deeply into an issue in a realistic way. In the second contribution, Ryan Lege explains a really simple and effective method of having students review vocabulary with a focus upon accurate production. This idea is especially practical as it could be adapted to almost any level or context, and would provide ideal scaffolding for multiple classroom activities. I am really looking forward to using this in many of my classes. In the third article Steve Hampshire invites us to picture his interpretation of a creative description game, in which students must guess who is describing a genuine image, and who is bluffing. This sounds like an awful lot of fun as learners delight in trying to fool their classmates. And finally, Phillip Olson describes a great, zero-prep vocabulary review quiz, which would enliven any class period. We are sure that there is something for everyone in this month's selection and we hope that the coming term is both rewarding and productive for you all.

—Steven Asquith

Vote for Us!

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Quick Guide

- Keywords: *Global issues, elections, pair work, public speaking skills*
- Learner English level: *Intermediate and above*
- Learner maturity: *High school or university*
- Preparation time: *30 minutes*
- Activity time: *Three 90-minute lessons (varies depending on learners and institution)*
- Materials: *Computer with Internet connection, projector, worksheets, ballot box*

This activity requires students to prepare and give a convincing campaign speech for a mock election. In a discussion or global issues course, this