

# Interview: Talking with Scott Thornbury about blogging, writing, and the academic voice

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**Scott Thornbury** is a teacher and teacher educator, with over 30 years' experience in English language teaching, and an MA from the University of Reading. He is Associate Professor of English Language Studies at the New School in New York. He has written several award-winning books for teachers on language and methodology. His most recent book is *Big Questions in ELT*, published by The Round. He is also the Academic Director of the International Teacher Development Institute and a frequent visitor to Japan.



**Ted O'Neill (TON):** Your first blog, *An A to Z of ELT* <[scottthornbury.wordpress.com](http://scottthornbury.wordpress.com)>, ran for a long time and you built quite a commenting community. What drew you into blogging?

**Scott Thornbury (ST):** It was not wanting to be left out. It was also a kind of curiosity, and I could see how this could be a useful tool. So,

I started just to see how it would feel. Bear in mind also that I teach on an online masters program, so it's online all the time. I am responding to discussions constantly, posting video, and giving feedback on assignments, so I'm kind of trained into the medium, certainly the interactivity of it, which I enjoy. When I started getting all these comments, I was responding to them as if they were my students in a sense, with the same rigor. I was calling it my "small university," which I ran on Monday mornings when all the comments were coming in.

Some of the best blogs are the ones which throw out an idea, ask a few questions, and then wait. People come in and then off it goes. That's my take on it, other people use it differently, are more anecdotal, or more like diaries. But, really innovative people are doing these blogs for many purposes. Like Mark Kulek in Gifu who teaches kids and puts up a photo of his whiteboard towards the end of the lesson, and talks you through how he got there, which is a very lovely idea.

I like the ones that are very, very focused. For example, John Wells' pronunciation blog where he's got a huge following and he gets lots of questions. Similarly David Crystal gets questions from his followers, but also if something is happening in the news the BBC would phone him up and say "What do you think about that?" And that would generate a blog post. That kind of interesting informal scholarship is what blogs are ideal for! It's also the topicality of it too. Something comes up and you can blog about it

straight away, whereas normally you'd have to wait. You don't have to! You can do it while it's still happening and while people are still thinking about it.

When I stopped doing it for six months to write the book, I missed it. Although it was a lot of work, I missed the "crack," as they say. I missed the interaction, and more than that, I missed the opportunity to rap about things that just interested me, that didn't involve having to take an idea and put it together as a talk, or to turn it into an article for scholarly journal.

And even better than an article or better than a conference presentation, you get the opportunity to interact. An article or a scholarly journal never elicits any response, or if it does it's six months later. But the instant interactivity of blogging is just amazing! That's where the actual thinking takes place! That's where the learning takes place for me, in terms of discussions and feedback. It satisfies a need that I have to articulate my own ideas, because only by articulating them do I find out what exactly I think. So, it is an exercise in thinking apart from anything else.

But restricting a blog post to 800 words, maximum a thousand, also requires a kind of discipline. But then I've got all this other material that, I know I'll be able to use in the responses and comments. That's the beauty of it, you don't have to put everything in the post, you can keep some stuff in reserve because you know a particular issue will come up. So, that's the interesting thing about the medium—its constraints but also its affordances

**TON:** Well then let's talk about the book, *Big Questions in ELT*. How did that come about?

**ST:** The book wasn't my idea initially. It was Lindsay and Luke who had set up this online publishing idea, The Round, which I liked the sound of, and I like them, I liked the idea of working with them. So the natural thing was maybe we could do something with the blog.

It became a very interesting kind of crafting exercise, whereby I tidied up the original posts. Then, I went to the comments, and used my responses. I incorporate some of the matter that came up without actually ever quoting anybody else. I was able to retrieve the issues that came up in the conversations, so in the end, the articles in the book are actually quite different.

**TON:** So blogging led you to a very different book, different in content, different approach,

and also a very different scale. It is very approachable.

**ST:** At over 20,000 words, it is like a small book.

**TON:** An ELT novella.

**ST:** Exactly.

**TON:** Also when I read a blog, there is a feeling of immediacy—I am meant to respond right away. *Big Questions* has several smaller questions for the reader at the end of each topic, but because I was just sitting alone with it, I didn't feel that urge: there was much more mental space to let it sit and to think for a while.

**ST:** Yeah, the questions. It might be useful in the context of an in-service course or short development program. I like the idea that you can get a good discussion going with a relatively short text which doesn't require too much.

**TON:** So, your imagined audience was an overworked, busy teacher.

**ST:** With a low attention span, yeah.

**TON:** Well, that's the way people are! There is a place for reaching people with a limited amount of attention, but who still want to get something.

**ST:** That's what I've discovered with the blogging, to come back to that. With just 800 words max, you could get a huge conversation going, you know! So why write an article when you could get a conversation going with a page! There is this number of us blogging regularly who are asking questions, challenging orthodoxies. That, I think, is what underlies most of my blogging: I write to problematize ideas. Problematizing issues that we don't sort of stop to think about, like reading for gist: it's taken for granted. Or, translation is taken for granted as kind of a bad thing. Maybe we need to revisit that? And that's where you get the arguments; this is where you get the discussions because you are raising these questions.

**TON:** Several of those really jumped out of me in the book. Particularly, translation, rote learning, learning styles, all of these things that taken as commonplace truths.

**ST:** Yes exactly, and you think you would run out of them, I mean, you think after 130, 140 posts I'd run out of things that are worth problematizing, but it's amazing how many things there

are to talk about. There are still a lot of topics I haven't touched on. One of my favorite books is a little Penguin book that Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill edited, called *Language Myths* (1998). Each chapter is just about a myth, like English has no grammar, or some languages can't express sophisticated ideas. We find these common myths about language teaching, almost on a daily basis, in newspapers and things. They never go away, these doubtful ideas.

**TON:** One of the other things I appreciate in the book and the blog is the way you keep some figures connected in your work such Wilga Rivers or Earl Stevick in particular. I'm sometimes surprised when teachers do not know about them. I've noticed a couple of more names in the book, Keith Johnson, Marie Wilson Nelson.

**ST:** That's very interesting actually, I mean that Nelson reference is to a book she wrote called *At the Point of Need* which is about teaching academic writing, published in 1990. Actually, Tim Murphy mentioned it to me on my first trip to Japan—the JALT conference in Shizuoka. I remembered this much later, forgot that Tim had mentioned her, found a copy, read it, loved it, and blogged about it. That made the connection back to Tim. He is in touch with Marie Nelson, he let her know, and she read the blog. She was delighted and got in touch with me by email.

**TON:** I wonder if people entering ELT now are disconnected from that earlier development. I see you try to keep that connection alive.

**ST:** There is a tradition—a narrative even that people aren't aware of that is worth rehabilitating! Absolutely, and I think there are a lot of people around who said fantastic things—S. Pit Corder for example, in the 1960s and 70s who invented error analysis and interlanguage. He said some fantastic things about methodology, but that have kind of become lost to us.

**TON:** So, one of your missions is to rehabilitate them.

**ST:** Exactly, absolutely! ABSOLUTELY!

**TON:** One other idea came out of reading the book and particularly out of being here in Barcelona now. I think I—and many people in Japan—have almost been distracted by the E in ELT! How can I actually become multilingual? And help students to avoid the binary construct of monolingual or bilingual in English. It is just

not really discussed much in Japan. Setting up that binary choice sets up some to choose “no.”

**ST:** It isn't discussed much in the EFL context. The nearest thing is the big movement towards English as a Lingua Franca. There has been a major shift in thinking in terms of models and varieties, but the notion of multilingualism or multilingual competence hasn't penetrated into the EFL sector at all!

I read a fantastic new book by Suresh Canagarajah, *Translingual Practice* (2013), with a very interesting chapter about standards of academic writing. People will accept that people can mix-and-match and hop in and out of languages. There is this whole cultural tradition in all parts of the world where they do this naturally anyway. But people draw the line at academic writing and say no. Academic writing has to be rigid, to meet extremely exact native-speaker driven standards. Canagarajah is challenging that. He's got samples of academic writings from other disciplines where people have subverted that model. He himself as former editor of *TESOL Quarterly* knows that you play with, or you take liberties with those standards anyway.

It helps, but we still have not gotten anywhere near a degree of tolerance that would accept writing where people could code-switch and play around and drop registers. This is where we come back to blogging, because it allows you more freedom in that respect. Maybe blogging will impact on academic writing and maybe not?

I feel pressure as an academic myself, kind of a small “A,” to set myself a fairly high standard in terms of referencing and stuff like that, much more than most people who blog would bother to do, with citations and references. I remember reading somebody who said they would never read blogs which have academic citations. This is just anti-intellectualism: they see blogging as a medium for freeing of the spirit. They say “If you want to write like that, write for *TESOL Quarterly*.” But we do need to respect referencing and attributing as terribly important. Nothing that I say is that original. Or, I wouldn't want it to be misconstrued that way.

**TON:** But you can still have a less formal or more personalized voice.

**ST:** A more personalized voice, and I think that is kind of true, even in *TESOL Quarterly*. There's a new kind of auto-ethno-methodology where you write about yourself as your own case-study. And Aneta Pavlenko (2007) has written in

*Applied Linguistics* about case-studies of language learners which are not academic. There are books written for the general public, like Eva Hoffman's book *Lost in Translation* (1989) about being a Polish immigrant to the United States, and now people are saying this is valid data for looking at language learning or cultural factors. So this is very interesting. So there is a move away I think from those very strict kinds of norms that we had to live by for so long. The social turn in academic writing if you like, or the narrative turn.

**TON:** So, you've stopped the A-Z blog. But I understand you have a new blog in the works. Care to give us an overview?

**ST:** In keeping with the narrative turn I just mentioned, *The (De-)fossilization Diaries* <scottthornburyblog.com> are a kind of autobiographical case study, charting my own attempt to jump-start my fossilized Spanish. This will involve re-visiting a number of the issues I dealt with in my A to Z blog, such as identity, motivation, practice—at least I imagine it will! The process is just beginning, so more than that I cannot say!

**TON:** That sounds perfectly relevant for me and to the somewhat petrified state of my Japanese! Thank you very much for sharing your time and your thoughts.

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