



Torrin Shimono & James Nobis

TLT Interviews brings you direct insights from leaders in the field of language learning, teaching, and education—and you are invited to be an interviewer! If you have a pertinent issue you would like to explore and have access to an expert or specialist, please make a submission of 2,000 words or less.

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Welcome to the November/December edition of TLT Interviews! For this issue, we bring you an in-depth and enlightening interview with Professor Rebecca Oxford. Professor Oxford is currently an adjunct professor for the Graduate Degree Program for Teaching English as a Second Language at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and previously was the Professor of Language Education and Research at Air University in Montgomery, Alabama. She was also named Professor Emerita and Distinguished Scholar-Teacher at the University of Maryland and has directed language programs at the University of Maryland, the University of Alabama, Columbia University, and Pennsylvania State University. She has written books on language learning strategies, the language of peace, cultures of peace, and transforming higher education. She has published more than 160 articles and book chapters on language learners, learning technologies, culture, and teaching methods along with editing and authoring many books on teaching ESL, foreign languages, and culture and served as a series editor of a multivolume ESL/EFL program, *Tapestry*, used around the world. She has presented keynotes and workshops at conferences in more than 40 countries and earned the Lifetime Achievement Award from Heinle/Thomson, which states, "Rebecca Oxford's research has changed the way the world teaches languages." After her plenary speech at the JALT2020 International Conference, she was interviewed by Richard Derrah, an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Applied Sociology at Kindai University. He holds a Ph.D. in Education from Temple University, an M.A. degree in East Asian Studies from Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, and a M.Ed. from Boston College. He has attended teacher high school licensing courses in the United States, Japan, and Thailand. His research focuses on secondary education and teacher licensing in Japan as well as the wider area of East Asia.

Without further ado, to the interview!



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An Interview with Professor Rebecca Oxford

Richard H. Derrah

Kindai University

How do you define or explain teaching about peace?

First of all, we have to think about what peace is, and then we have to think about how we can bring it into language classrooms. To me, peace is very simple. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of my great heroes, and he said that peace is harmony that grows when you are working well, working positively, productively with different points of view. It takes effort, listening, and communicating. It takes some compassion too, especially if you're arguing about something and you want your way and I want my way. People can get very invested in the conflict, but peacebuilding asks us to turn down the temperature and to really listen and communicate. The main thing is that a conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. A conflict can be just differences of opinion or desires. In my country, it's political parties. So a conflict can be just a little thing, or it can magnify into something bigger. The point is really starting to listen, really starting to recognize the other points of view that exist, and we want to build cultures of peace within our classroom. The classroom is its own little culture within larger and larger cultures. We want our culture in the classroom to be one of peace, understanding, compassion, and caring. Have you ever heard of Earl Stevick? His idea was that the classroom is a sacramental place, it's a sacred place. Not in a religious sense, but in the sense of serious soul growth. That we're not just there with a bunch of students, we are in a sacred place where everything that happens is really important in the lives of students and the teacher.

What inspired you to start this line of research?

I have always been very interested in how people live in different cultures and also, how people live

in my family. There was a lot of struggle and a lot of yelling, but not hitting, not that kind of violent stuff in my family. Somebody was always mad at someone else, and I wanted to know why that was. Isn't there a different way of living? My interest is in helping both myself to be a more calm and peaceful person and my students to know that they can learn techniques for getting along with people, their friends, acquaintances, family, even strangers—total strangers—and even people who don't like them. How can I have a feeling of caring for everyone? Now, I'm not talking about a silly thing. This is very serious to me. There's inner peace, interpersonal peace with people that we know, inter-group peace, peace with different racial groups, and peace with people from different political parties. It's about honoring each other instead of fighting all the time, so we can work toward an international and intercultural peace. This is what most people think about when they think about peace, you know, international. Are we going to bomb that person or country? Are we going to say this about another country or another culture? That's what most people think peace is at that level. But it's really all these other things, too. My favorite one is ecological peace that means peace with Mother Nature, while caring about the environment, and actually doing something to protect it. Do you know Greta Thunberg, that teenage girl? She came across from Sweden to the United States, went to the United Nations, and told the heads of state, these big wigs that they were not doing enough. And in fact, some we're doing absolutely nothing about climate change, about all these environmental aspects that are bringing down humankind. It's not helping us as a human race to have this much pollution. We don't have to drive all these cars all the time with a pandemic going on. And with people staying at home more, the environment is getting better. Of all things, the environment is getting better just because we're forced to slow down and stop running around so much.

For people who want to know more about this topic, what book or books would you recommend that they read?

Well, I don't want to plug my book. OK, let me show it to you anyway. (*Peacebuilding in Language Education*, 2021). This is one way to start because it's directly written for language teachers and language teacher educators who want to think about peace, help their students be more peaceful, and create a better world. This book is directly for them. There are well over fifty peace activities that would be, I think, very useful. There's also research in

here. There's very practical ideas about non-verbal communication and how to use that in a positive way. There is a chapter that looks at whether peace can be taught in government language institutes, like defense language institutes that are meant to help people get ready to fight a war. So, it questions whether peace can be actually brought into a place like this? There's a whole chapter from people who are in that world and how they try to include ideas from peace studies. There are a lot of activities in the book.

Could you give me an example of an activity that teachers might find useful, especially in the Japanese context?

Some people think some activities about ecological peace are better done outside, but they could be done in the classroom, too. Actually, one thing that comes to mind is one of my Japanese students who was studying to become an English teacher. She was at Penn State University, her first job, first real job after she graduated. I'll tell you one of her activities—it was to write down what you think love is. Write down anything that you think about love and give examples from your own life. Her students were English language learners, international students who had come over to the United States, trying to improve their English, and they were going to stay and continue their undergraduate university studies. That was the plan for that whole group. There was one person in the class who never said anything and just sat in a corner. She didn't want to be talked to or looked at, and this activity gave her a chance to express herself. When she had to write down what is love and then share it a little bit, she volunteered. It turned out that her mother and father had just gotten a divorce, and she was upset about it. She was upset and she was having trouble believing in love anymore from what she was seeing. She took a really courageous jump to talk about anything personal. She really didn't have to. And here, she did something that just brought her right out of her shell and people started being open to her when she started being open to them. It was a transformation for her.

The activity could be about something else rather than tell us about what love means to you. It could be, "Tell us about a wonderful person in your life, tell us about somebody who has influenced you for the good." It could be many, many different subjects of positivity. When people get a sense that you're serious about their lives, that you really care about their lives, and that it's a safe place in the classroom—"Oh my! It's a safe place. Yes, I'm in!"—the walls start falling away in people's minds, and it's

a whole new culture, it's a culture of peace that is happening in the classroom. Another activity that I remember well and have used many times requires students to go outside and see a plant, tree, a rock, or something or for the student to bring something into the class. You can do something new and talk to that object or let it talk to you. It's got something to say. I like to think about the tree. The tree, it has these circles inside, you know, those concentric circles. As the tree gets older and more mature it grows more. I like to hear from trees about the way they feel about getting older and older and wiser and wiser and that they want people to be good to them and to not have terrible chemicals around. Flowers have something different to say. Bees have something different to say too. The students have always loved that activity. Another activity that I think is exceptional, that goes across all the dimensions of peace, is something called "the three good things activity". What the student does or what the teacher does is to everyday write down three good things that happened either to the student or out in the world. Three good things. But some people might say, "Oh, right, there's nothing like that in my life. I don't have three things going on every day." But when they start doing this activity, they are able to think of more and more positive events. They write down as many as they want, but it has to be at least three. Then they can jot down why this makes me feel so good. What about this is good for peace, for making them feel like a better person, and making the world a better place? Why does this thing really help me or the world, and why am I grateful for it? Just three good things—they don't have to necessarily write down why—but three good things. And then at the end of the week, looking back to see what has been going on and being extremely grateful for the good things. I think we need that, especially now in this pandemic, because sometimes it's a little hard to see the really wonderful things going on, but there are some. JALT is a wonderful thing for me.

Could you offer some suggestions on how teachers with beginning students or lower proficiency students approach this topic?

We can treat peace as a content area just like travel or any other topic, such as baseball. What is it that people need for any topic? What they need is a sense of what it's about and words. Vocabulary to talk about this thing and grammar to the extent that it is needed. If you get them to talk about something in the past, they need to understand the past tense. This means using topics about peace with beginners, and it helps to have pictures. It helps to teach

them basic vocabulary like about feelings. Teach about good and bad, but also other feelings like anxious, scared, happy, and joyful. And let students ask you what they need to know as they go along. To me, it's the topic that connects to peace, a big life topic.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many classes around the world are online. How would you approach teaching about peace using online learning?

The big thing with learning online is engagement, having people emotionally engaged. In the United States, some people are just dozing. They haven't connected for one reason or another, they're just out to lunch, as we say. They need some reason to think they're important to pay attention to. I have a fascination with my students. It's kind of a love affair, and I always want to find out more about them. What do they like? Where do they come from? Why in the world are they here? What is this about? And I find that students are just amazingly happy when somebody pays attention to them. What I try to do online or in person is to open doors for communication about who they are, what they like, and what problems do they have. I'm trying to give them the tools, the vocabulary and grammar, where it is absolutely needed for communication, so that they can talk about anything that brings them greater inner peace. This also helps them to think about their relationships with other people and with the environment.

In some contexts, in Japan, for example, junior high school and high school students may be focused on exams, and there might be classes of 40 or more students. Do you have any strategies or suggestions on how teachers could approach this topic in that context?

OK, you hit a nerve because I had classes like that. For several years, I was teaching psychology. There are many issues related to peace in psychology. So anyway, I did my usual thing of trying to get to know people. There were about 80 people in this huge room, and it was like a big auditorium. We had seats going up and up and up. At first, I thought, "No, no, this will never work," but then I realized that in a class like that, I needed to know their names because when I was in college, I had classes like that where nobody knew my name. You know, they probably wouldn't recognize me at all. So, the first thing was trying to know their names more every week. Trying to have them write me notes, keep a little journal, and that would go back and forth between us. Have them tell me what's going on. The big thing was having them pick out movies. I had a lot of movies about psychology. In language classes,

it really helps to have a whole bunch of movies. A student would pick out one and find the most engaging scene, the most hard-hitting scene, and that student would be required to show that to the rest of the class and talk about it. It was powerful. The students got to pick what they wanted to talk about, got to choose their movie, and they got to address each other without me being in the way. And there was psychology learning and language communication going on then, and it was really amazing. That activity goes very well with movies, but it could be magazines or other things. The students were in charge within parameters. They had to follow my rules, but at the same time they had a lot of autonomy to complete this activity. The students were thrilled, and these were people who didn't want to be there. They had to take this class because it was mandatory, just like a lot of people have to take foreign language classes because they are mandatory. I found many other things that were truly useful to get people engaged. In a developmental psychology class on how people develop over stages of their lives, I had members of my family come in with their kids who were in different stages of life. My mother, who was 93, came in and then people could ask her questions about that time in her life or any other thing. That broke down walls. Things like that can be done in the classroom for English as a foreign language.

OK, what I feel is that even if they have to use a certain textbook, teachers can do all kinds of things that bring peace into the classroom. What I mean is that a textbook is a jumping off point. Many good things can happen around it, so if teachers in China, in Japan, or in other countries in this region have a little flexibility, then bringing peace building into language classes is almost a piece of cake. I was just talking in the plenary about how teachers of language and culture are already peacebuilders because they are helping students to learn to communicate across boundaries. Teachers are already doing things like that, so why not improve our ability to spread peace by looking within ourselves and understand more deeply what inner peace is. What is peace in relation to my family or to my friends? And then what is ecological peace? If you're already doing something that's working then just do a little bit more. I don't mean that everything has to be about peace, but if you look at it, just about everything, all activities relate to ourselves, other people around us, groups, nations, culture, and our environment.

It seems that using this approach could possibly be beneficial to not just students, but also for the teacher as a person and also relations with co-workers. What are your thoughts on that?

When the teacher is working with students on any peace language activity or communication activity, the teacher is growing at the same time the students are growing. If any teacher or any student wants to feel himself or herself more engaged in life as a whole, feel better, and contribute more to the world, they would like it because they can feel that they are feeling better. That will include teachers, it will include students, and it has a rubbing off effect on their spouses and other people in the family and beyond. I just heard from a student of mine who is from India. He knew English very well when he came to me in my graduate teacher education class. He was going to become a language teacher and, in fact, he did. He became an English language teacher to international students. When he was with me in my class, he brought this wonderful photo from his home country that including three little girls. Two of them were very, very dark-skinned Indian people from across the middle part of India and one of them was extremely light skinned. My student brought that in to show us what's going on with his family, and he explained that this is all about discrimination and prejudice. That the two darker girls were not supposed to be intermingling at all with a lighter skinned girl. It's terrible because those girls are in the caste below the human caste called "untouchables." I imagine that the girl was probably told all her life she was not supposed to interact with these people. Anyway, so here they are sitting on a bench outside my student's house in India and my student was telling a story about these kids and how wonderful it was that they were now able to sit together, play together, and talk, at least in that house. Another student in the class also from India raised her hand, and she said that she is actually a descendant of the untouchables. Maybe it was her father or mother or grandparents. In my class, the whole group was just stunned. Here is somebody, the male student, from the top class, and then this other student, reacting to what he was saying, was from a totally downtrodden caste, and they were teaching peace. They were teaching the meaning of caring and the meaning of getting over prejudices. They were teaching that to the rest of the class, and they taught it to me. It was a very deep, practical lesson that I will never forget. Now the classes here in Japan may not be that diverse, and not have international students from all over the world, but the students have some divergences. The teacher will learn and will be affected very much, and the students will be affected when some of these activities get rolling.

Language teachers often develop classes based on goals and objectives related to language outcomes. How

could a teacher connect the language of peace approach to the goals and objectives they construct?

My feeling is that it takes a little bit of tilting or widening of the perspective. OK, we're going to learn a number of words by the end of the term or we're going to learn this grammar point as an objective, but we can also have objectives about peace activities. The students will learn a number of words that would be useful in talking about family or that would be useful in talking about climate change or plastic—plastic cities that we're creating down at the bottom of a lake or at the bottom of the ocean. It's a matter of thinking can we do the same thing as usual, but bring in peace as part of it? Having another objective that ties in with these prior objectives could go a long, long way to making it real, and to making it doable.

Could you offer the readers a final comment on the language of peace approach that you'd like them to take away from this interview?

The language peace approach goes together so well with positive psychology. They're like "birds of a feather" in a way. It's an awakening. It's a rais-

ing of consciousness. It's not a total overhaul of everything in teaching or learning, but it's a way of breathing differently. Breathing more deeply. Feeling more at home with other people and with yourself. The conflicts are there, the other bad stuff is there, but it's seeing these things in a different way. This approach requires you to reframe your mindset and see the world differently. When you do this, your eyes are open to see more angles. Peace breaks through. Peace breaks out. It doesn't want to be stuck in there. I'm not saying it's like magic. I'm saying it's an opening—it's an opening of the person to the possibilities of good things in the world, of positivity, even in the midst of pandemics, even in the midst of war, and we can find we are open to see more beyond that.

Thank you so much for this time.

Reference

Oxford, R. L., Olivero, M. M., & Harrison, M. (Eds.). (2021). *Peacebuilding in language education: Innovations of theory and practice*. Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781788929806>

[JALT PRACTICE] 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).

Email: jaltpubs.tlt.my.share@jalt.org • Web: <https://jalt-publications.org/tlt/departments/myshare>

Hello, and welcome to My Share, the TLT column where readers offer up their tried-and-tested classroom activities for the benefit of the wider teaching community. As we reach the end of another challenging year, the importance of collaboration and peer-support feels as relevant as ever. With that in mind, this issue includes three useful and engaging contributions from fellow teachers, for you to add to your repertoire.

First up, John Alexander has developed a simple yet versatile guessing game that encourages students to collaborate on creating clues using increasingly specific descriptive language. As with many My Share activities these days, this one would work equally well online and face-to-face. Second, Amy Takebe's disaster preparedness lesson uses authentic listening materials to stimulate discussion and decision-making that could have serious real-world applications. Finally, Ivy Liwa provides a travel lesson that asks 6th graders to act as tour planners to develop their research and presentation skills.

We hope that you find these activities useful and accessible to bring to your own classrooms. If you feel inspired to share your own practical and original activities with the My Share community, please do get in touch at jaltpubs.tlt.my.share@jalt.org. As ever, we welcome submissions from My Share newcomers and veterans alike.

In the meantime, Steven and I wish you a very happy new year, and all the best for 2022!

— Lorraine Kipling



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