

The Language Teacher

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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.

Email: jaltpubs.tlt.interviews@jalt.org

Welcome to the January/February edition of TLT Interviews! For the kickoff issue of 2022, we are happy to bring you two fascinating interviews. The first interview is with Mark Hancock, a teacher, trainer, and author of numerous ELT course books and teacher's resource books. He has lived and worked in three different continents and is now based in Chester, England. He has long had a special interest in pronunciation. His first book *Pronunciation Games* was published in 1995. Since then, he has also written *English Pronunciation in Use Intermediate* and Mark Hancock's 50 Tips for Teaching Pronunciation, both published by Cambridge University Press. His self-published books *PronPack 1-4* received the 2018 ELTons award for innovation in teacher resources. Mark also runs online pronunciation courses for teachers, and he co-founded the teachers resource website (<http://www.hancockmcdonald.com>). He was interviewed by Thomas Entwistle. Thomas is an English language specialist with the British Council, Japan, and is currently part of the English language team at a private university in Nagoya. His research interests include phonology, study abroad transformative learning, and EFL in monolingual contexts. So, without further ado, to our first interview!

An Interview with Mark Hancock

Thomas Entwistle

British Council Japan

Thomas Entwistle: Hello, Mark. Thank you for giving up your time for this interview. First of all, could you tell us a little about your teaching background, and how it is you came to focus on pronunciation?

Mark Hancock: I started teaching English fresh out of university at a secondary school in Sudan. The local Sudanese teachers were much better than me, but I guess the school authorities thought it would be motivating to import an “alien” from England. From this experience, I learnt that I had a lot to learn.

A few years later, having gained a few more practical qualifications and more experience teaching in Turkey, I ended up teaching at the Cultura Ingle-

sa in Brazil. They awarded me some paid hours developing materials at the headquarters in Rio and requested fun activities for teaching pronunciation. This eventually led to my first book, *Pronunciation Games* (Hancock, 1995). Sometimes, you discover you like something by doing it, and so it was with pronunciation for me. I found that I enjoyed discovering the patterns hidden in the sound of the language—patterns that even the speakers of the language are unaware of. Over 30 years later, and I'm still discovering more and enjoying it.

Yes, I enjoy it too. However, why do you think it is that some teachers don't enjoy teaching pronunciation and relegate it to a side activity in textbooks?

Well, for one thing, teacher trainees are often presented with a view of phonology which is unhelpfully precise and inflexible. In ELT, we've been long accustomed to seeing a version of grammar which is simplified and modified in such a way as to make it classroom-friendly—in other words, a pedagogical grammar. The same does not seem to be the case for phonology. It's the opposite of classroom friendly. And to make matters worse, there seems to be an assumption that the objective of all good learners is to end up sounding like the Queen, or an American speaker of equivalent prestige. This is both unrealistic and undesirable in my view.

Regarding coursebooks, I think I know why they neglect pronunciation. Firstly, it's difficult to integrate into a syllabus which is based on topics or grammar. Secondly, many coursebooks are global while many pronunciation problems are local. For example, a learner in Japan may find it difficult to distinguish /r/ and /l/, while this is rarely a problem for a European learner. Coursebooks usually need to be usable by both.

Interesting what you said about aiming for Queen-like pronunciation being both unrealistic and undesirable. What would you say would be a more realistic aim in a monolingual context like Japan, where most English teachers are, in fact, non-native speakers of English?

I assume that the aim is to be intelligible. It's not to sound English or American; it's to be able to

communicate with the world. In that context, the accent doesn't matter, because there's no evidence that a "native" accent is more intelligible than a "non-native" one. For many students, their teacher's accent is their best model—including teachers who have a Japanese accent.

But in any case, we don't need to stress too much about choosing a model. A learner may aim at a British accent, but the chances are that in the end, they will come out with an accent of their own anyway. And that's fine.

I suppose the idea of "mutual intelligibility" (Underhill, 2005) is key when it comes to, as you said, being able to communicate with the world. How do you imagine that the role of global communication and World Englishes is going to shape how we teach pronunciation in the future?

I guess pronunciation teaching will split in two ways: (a) For the majority, whose needs are purely practical, there will be a split between productive and receptive pronunciation. For spoken production, the focus will be mostly on aspects of pronunciation which affect intelligibility. Teachers will need to demonstrate how each of the pronunciation features that they focus on impact intelligibility. The syllabus may look something like what Jennifer Jenkins called the Lingua Franca Core. Other features not in the core, such as intonation and features of connected speech, will be focused on only for building awareness for receptive (listening) purposes. (b) There will be a split between the majority above and a minority whose needs are not simply to be understood but also to be accepted. These learners might, for example, be immigrants living in a country where English is spoken and who want to be accepted by the people they are living among. For them, it might be important to acquire "native-like" features, and so a more traditional pronunciation syllabus may be maintained.

Talking about teaching pronunciation, I recently watched your webinar for IATEFL PronSIG (2021) where you explained the four "Ms". Could you tell us about those?

The four "Ms" was a mnemonic to help me—and hopefully others—to remember the diversity of what's involved in pronunciation teaching. Pronunciation is unique in that it is both a system—along with lexis, grammar, and discourse—and a skill—part of both speaking and listening. The four "Ms" are *muscle*, *mind*, *meaning*, and *memory*. Muscle is the physical aspect—the articulation. Mind is the cognitive aspect—the patterns. Meaning is the interactive, communicative aspect—being under-

stood. Memory is the listening aspect—the storing of acoustic patterns in the memory. Different aspects of pronunciation usually involve two or three of the Ms, occasionally all. The important thing is to keep in mind this diversity and not get into the habit of reducing it to one thing only—listen and repeat.

I find the first aspect interesting. The "muscle," or physical aspect. In what ways is pronunciation a physical thing?

Uniquely among the language skills, pronunciation has this strong relationship to the anatomy of the human body. From the muscles of the chest walls that create the surges of air that make stress, through the control of the glottis that creates voicing, and finally to the control of the mouth cavity which creates vowels and consonants. A key part of pronunciation teaching involves training learners how to control these muscles in order to create the foreign sounds of the new language. This doesn't necessarily have to involve explicit use of technical jargon, however. Teachers need to find ways of explaining these things more intuitively. I like to use little "experiments," such as putting your finger on your nose and thumb on your chin. Then say the vowel sounds in *hit* and *hat* and notice how your finger and thumb move apart. Then you can ask the learners to say what this proves (that the mouth opens more for the "a" than the "i").

It's mentioned in the introduction of your book Authentic Listening Resource Pack (Hancock, 2018) that learners need exposure to authentic listening. Why do you think this is, and should teachers look to replace scripted audio in textbooks with authentic listening?

Most of us don't realise how "messy" real speech is. Expert listeners learn to ignore the false starts and mangled syllables and just hear the meaning. If you record a natural conversation among friends for example, and then listen back to it later, you may be surprised about how messy it is. The trouble with a lot of the audio recordings in published materials is that they are neatly planned in the minds of the writers and performed by actors, and all of the mess of real speech is edited out. If learners have a diet of such recordings alone, with no unscripted ones, they will be unprepared for the real world. When they get out there, they won't know what has hit them. I wouldn't say that scripted audio has no place in learning, but it really needs to be supplemented by unscripted audio at some point.

Which would benefit learners in monolingual contexts like Japan should they be confronted with authentic speech

in the future. Lastly Mark, what would you say to any readers who are reluctant to focus on pronunciation?

I think that a lot of teachers are reluctant to teach pronunciation for the wrong reason. They think that there is a single “correct” version of English pronunciation out there, and that if their own accent doesn’t match it, it’s better to stay away from the topic altogether. Let me give you a concrete example: On one of your videos, Tom, you point out that you yourself pronounce the vowel sound in words like “nose” in a way which differs from the “official” pronunciation (English With Tom, 2021). You explain that this is because you are from the North West of England, where this sound is not a diphthong as it would be in the standard British English accent. My point is that the terms “official,” “standard,” and even “correct” are not really appropriate in pronunciation teaching in the modern world. English is a global lingua franca, and all accents are welcome to join the party. You just need to understand and make yourself understood. Teachers who don’t have a “standard” accent should not be ashamed of that. They should not let it put them off teaching pronunciation and being a model for their students. And this is true not only for “native speakers” of English such as yourself. A clear speaker of English with, for example, a Japanese accent is just as good. There may even be an advantage, since for a Japanese learner, good Japanese-accented English would be a more realistic model to aim for. So, my final message is: If you are an intelligible speaker of English, then the language belongs to you, and *you can teach pronunciation without fear.*

Thank you for taking time to speak to us Mark. I found your insights and ideas very interesting, and I’m sure the readers will, too. I urge readers to check out your websites: <http://hancockmcdonald.com/> and <http://pronpack.com/>.

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For our second interview, we feature a captivating discussion with Simon Rowe. Simon grew up in small town New Zealand and big city Australia and currently resides in Himeji, Japan. He teaches creative writing and storytelling at Kwansai Gakuin University in Nishinomiya. He has written for *TIME (Asia)*, *The New York Times*, *the South China Morning Post*, and *the Paris Review*, and is author of two short story collections: *Good Night Papa (2017)* and *Pearl City (2020)*. More information can be found on his website (www.mightytales.net). He was interviewed by Torrin Shimon, who has taught English in Japan for more than a decade and is an associate professor at Kindai University in the Faculty of Law. He received his PhD in applied linguistics from Temple University. His research interests include reading fluency, reaction times, phonology, self-efficacy, and testing. Now, for your reading pleasure . . .

An Interview with Simon Rowe

Torrin Shimon

Kindai University

Torrin Shimon: *How did you get involved with creative writing/writing fiction?*

Simon Rowe: I started by writing travel stories for newspapers and magazines in 1990. Travel and writing became a self-perpetuating existence for nearly two decades. In 2012, I undertook a master’s degree in writing, and this both inspired and equipped me to write short fiction. Many of my tales are set in exotic locations, but mostly in Japan, and are driven by a central theme of triumph over adversity.

Interesting. Why is writing about that theme particularly important to you?

News services deliver bad news daily. Personally, I would like to hear more stories of normal people doing amazing things—stories that uplift and inspire. They are out there, it’s just that they don’t get told enough. I feel that writers can achieve this effect in their writing. Wouldn’t you want to write about someone triumphing over bad luck, rather than succumbing to it?

Yeah, for sure. Could you describe your own writing process of writing fiction?

I take a 4B pencil and a spiral-bound A4 notebook, and I distill the story idea down to a single sentence on paper. For example, “a recovering alcoholic mail pilot crashes his plane in the Australian desert

with a bottle of gin on board.” This refers to my short story called *The Finke River Mail*. Or “an aging hitman flies into Hong Kong for what will be his last assignment—and last supper.” And this one is about *Oysters to Die For*; another short story. I then draft a scenario, which becomes the plot. To this, I add a cast of one or two characters, and build in the themes for depth and meaning. Then I take these scribbles, and with research I have collected, for example Australian landscape, aircraft terminology, alcoholism, and so forth, draft the entire story by hand. After that, I create a Google Doc and once the story is laid out, I begin editing and polishing. I then send it out to friends for feedback. Hemingway said, “There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.” I agree.

When did you realize that you really enjoyed “bleeding at the typewriter” and were particularly good at it? I imagine many people often give up after their first try.

I lost a lot of “blood” in the early days. But like most skills, writing is something that improves with time. If you are passionate about telling a story, your words should come easier. If they don’t, it might mean you aren’t reading enough books. With that being said, I’ve written my fair share of terrible stories ... and got paid for them! I can only guess that some writers give up because their heart isn’t in it, or they lack the confidence to air their words in public.

How do you create the right conditions to be creative? Do you ever get writer’s block?

Ideas come at all times and in all places. It happens to me when riding a bicycle, swimming at the gym, or doing something totally non-writing related. I find the best way to solve a plot or character problem is to take a walk. Walking frees up the mind. Writer’s block is just a speed bump; it gives you time to consider the possibilities.

You previously mentioned Hemingway. Are there other authors who have influenced your writing style?

Let me see—Raymond Chandler for hardboiled detective-speak; John Steinbeck for writing form; S. E. Hinton for coming-of-age themes; Tim Winton and David Malouf for Australianisms; Annie Proulx for character development; Joseph Conrad, Alice Walker, Jack London, H. G. Wells, and Bram Stoker for narrative structure; Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, and the American travel writer, Eric Hansen, for realism in setting.

That’s a great list. Are you influenced by any Japanese fiction writers?

No. However, I would say that the life and writings

of the Irish-Greek writer, Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), are highly inspirational. He was a traveler, journalist, storyteller and teacher, whose travel-ogues show the true value of ethnography as a writer’s tool for research. I highly recommend his *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (2009), which he wrote in 1894.

Is living in Japan and traveling to new countries your “muse” so to speak? Does living in a different culture help bring out the stories you write?

Stimulation is a writer’s best friend. In my case, Japan is death-by-stimulation. Story ideas leap out at me from dark alleys, confront me in backstreet bars, float up my nostrils inside temples and shrines, and generally give me no peace of mind in the waking day. From an ethnography standpoint, living in Japan is a fantastically immersive experience, one that enables you to write with truthfulness and authenticity. Lafcadio Hearn would agree!

Several of your stories have a supernatural element in them. For instance, West Wind, The Gem Polishing Unit, and Spirited Away to name a few. Why does this element appeal to you?

For me, real life converges with the ethereal all the time in Japan. For instance, through engagement in Buddhist and Shinto beliefs, superstitions, folklore, myths, legends, and even the world of *yokai*: monsters, ghosts, and goblins. Magic realism can be used to turn the mundane into the mystical, and I have used this tool to bring extra dimensions to my characters and their actions. *West Wind*, in which a retired miner rescues a woman from a car wreck and in return, receives her help in ridding his farmstead of an abominable beast, is a good example.

Which short story are you the proudest of and why?

West Wind—because it’s set in the valley where my family and I go river swimming in summer. I enjoyed writing this story because the characters are quirky and many readers say the ending stays in their minds.

For you, what would you say is the purpose of writing fiction? To entertain, reveal a great truth, transmit knowledge, or something else?

The purposes are many, but I would say the biggest one is to escape the humdrum of daily life. Building imaginary worlds, characters, and scenarios is fun! Writing can also be a cathartic process, and a way to communicate social issues or injustices, or it can be just a way to make sense of the world. For me, the purpose is to tell a story which resonates. Gaining new insights and meaning from the text through

reader feedback is also hugely rewarding. Without a reader, there is no story.

How did some of your stories end up becoming short films?

In 2013, I entered the Asian Short Screenplay Contest in the U.S. The contest was judged by actress Michelle Yeoh, and my story was chosen as one of three winners. The prize was development of the film. *Good Night Papa*, the story of a down-and-out taxi driver who picks up a mysterious passenger and receives an unexpected gift, was produced by JBF Entertainment in San Francisco. You can see it on YouTube. A second project I've been involved with, a feature-length film set in Japan, is currently seeking funding.

That's great. I look forward to hearing more about it. Could you describe one of your creative writing courses that you currently teach?

Yeah. I teach a fifteen-class course in storytelling to university students. It's designed to give them maximum freedom to use their imagination to write in fiction and nonfiction forms. Emphasis is placed on story development, and this is taught using "building blocks." For example, setting, character, plot, themes, and so forth. By the end of the program, students can tell stories with confidence. The results often amaze me. I think students feel they can express themselves more easily and meaningfully in writing, than they might do in a speaking or listening class.

Could you tell us how teaching creative writing is different from academic writing?

Because creative writing marches to a different beat, many students who take my course find themselves floundering in the first week. This is a good thing because it highlights to them the difference between the critical and analytical processes of academic writing, and the creative processes required for writing fiction and nonfiction. Once students become aware of the freedom and possibilities which creative writing offers, they fly.

Nice. Could you provide an example of one of the stories your students wrote?

Here is a wonderful start to a dystopian tale which one of my students submitted for his final assignment: "The surface of the Earth, The Ground, is no longer a place to live. There are always immense black clouds and heavy rain which contain slight acid. No one cares about the atmospheric pollution. Humans had forecasted this situation, but they didn't improve the environment. What they did was make a new world underground and migrate.

There are countries, cities, fresh air, plants, rivers, an artificial sun, and lots of displays which show the sky. Ninety-eight percent of people are living in The Underground. Now, The Ground is a place for people in poverty and prisoners sent from The Underground. They're called 'F(leas) O(n) E(arth).'"

Wow. He did a great job of setting the mood.

Yeah! Storytelling has huge applications in today's world. It can be telling a company's history, designing museum displays and art exhibits, creating online content for tourism marketing campaigns, or it can be as simple as writing a self-introduction to new colleagues, in which case, you are telling *your* story. Storytelling is universal, so why not teach it?

I suppose just explaining and describing your weekend is a form of storytelling. Do you think students are afforded a sense of freedom in writing fiction because there is less risk of embarrassment to others? Or do you find that the opposite is true—maybe students don't take enough of a risk in their storytelling, perhaps because their proficiency is not high enough or it takes more effort to be entertaining?

I would definitely agree that fiction creates a "safe" zone for students to express themselves without fear of embarrassment or shame. If students aren't taking enough risks in their writing, it's because they lack ideas, or the structure with which to tell their stories. The latter is dealt with as the course progresses; the former, by having students retell famous folktales, legends, films, and manga to familiarize themselves with popular story patterns. Risk taking comes with confidence, and I usually see my students' best writing towards the end of the course. I don't see English proficiency levels as a huge determinant in achieving a simple story well-told on paper.

How do you think your students' L2 proficiency improves from a creative writing course?

Creative writing doesn't have to be painful. Students learn to tell their own stories using simple language within a simple structure: of a beginning, a middle, and an end. Through regular practice and peer feedback, their confidence grows, language expression improves, and vocabulary expands. Many students are surprised at how far they have come by the end of the course. Some have gone abroad to pursue postgraduate studies and job opportunities in filmmaking and animation story development.

That's great! Could you explain more about how you do peer feedback in your class?

Sharing stories serves several purposes: it builds

camaraderie, offers alternative perspectives, and gives students the chance to discuss the strong and weak points of their narratives. Writing fiction is less about being “right and wrong” than it is about telling a strong or a weak story.

For teachers who don't teach a creative writing course, do you have any advice or activities you would recommend doing in the classroom where they could incorporate some creative elements?

Students write best from personal experience. One of the simplest and most interesting creative writing tasks I do draws on the five senses: sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. I ask students to think in terms of these senses and to write down all words and phrases associated with two places—a beach and a temple. After sharing our ideas, I then have students describe in writing a place they know well. They then read their description aloud and have their partner guess the place. The point of this is to show the importance of creating a “sense of place” with which to transport the reader.

Those are some interesting and useful ideas. By the

way, how have your students reacted to your stories?

Well, students find the vocabulary, nuanced meanings and wordplay in my stories challenging. That's to be expected in all foreign literature. However, as their understanding of storytelling grows, they are able to unlock greater meaning and enjoy the stories more. I use *Good Night Papa* in my course and the tales set in Japan always prove to be the most popular. This is because students draw on their own knowledge and experience to make sense of the story—and there's no place like home!

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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).

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

Happy New Year, and welcome to the latest issue of My Share, where TLT readers share their practical and original teaching activities for other readers to add to their repertoires! Let's start the year as we mean to go on with a diverse range of content themes, skills focus, and activity types, which are all adaptable to various teaching contexts.

First of all, Amy Takebe has developed another interesting lesson with important real-world applications, practicing phrasal verbs and listening skills while focusing on risk communication and earthquake preparedness. Next, Thomas Mayers and Flaminia Miyamasu explain how students can follow up on academic research in an online setting using narrated slideshow presentations. After that, Claire Bower's adaptation of the popular “round robin” activity shows how to make online collaborative writing practice useful and engaging. Lastly, Timothy Ang offers a library scavenger hunt activity to help both new and returning students familiarize themselves with on-campus resources.

We hope that you can find some inspiration from our valued My Share contributors for the coming year. Please do let us know if an activity has worked well for you, and feel free to get in touch at jaltpubs.tlt.my.share@jalt.org if you have an original activity of your own that you would like to share with the TLT community.

Wishing you a very happy, healthy, and fulfilling 2022!

—Lorraine and Steven



JALT2022 – Learning from Students, Educating Teachers: Research and Practice

Fukuoka • Friday, Nov. 11 to Monday, Nov. 14 2022