



Interview with Ken Wilson

Author, teacher, and teacher trainer

Steve Cornwell

We are pleased to have Ken Wilson returning to Japan and JALT2011. In this interview, Ken discusses a variety of topics with Steve Cornwell, the Director of Programs for JALT.

SC: Ken, we are thrilled to have you come back to JALT this year! And to speak on the topic of motivation, (Note: Ken will be speaking on *Motivating the unmotivated – do teachers have to do ALL the work?* at the conference.) As many of our members know, you have had a busy career as a performer, director, author, teacher trainer, plenary / keynote speaker, and much more. You have had a busy travel schedule this year. I know you have been to Turkey, China, not to mention IATEFL UK. Where will you be conducting workshops/speaking between now (July) and the conference? And what are you working on currently as far as material goes?

KW: Since the start of the year, my itinerary has taken in a week of training in Belgrade, Serbia, a British Council roadshow in China (subject: *Motivating Young Learners*), talks at two conferences in Istanbul Turkey and another one at IATEFL UK in Brighton, which I had to leave early in order to do an author visit to Taiwan. My wife Dede and I also managed a two-week vacation in Cuba in January.

In July, I'll be in Brazil, then in August I'll take a short break on Prince Edward Island, Canada (where Dede's family live). In September, I'll be at the ETAS conference in Zug, Switzerland and in October, I'll be in Mexico for MexTESOL. Finally, before I come to JALT in November, I'll be doing some work in Korea for Oxford University Press.

To be honest, I sometimes worry about the amount of flying that I do for work—my family and I are trying to reduce our collective carbon footprint and we're doing OK at home—but all this flying puts me up there with the worst offenders.

Having said that, I realize how incredibly lucky I am to get these opportunities, and I really enjoy speaking to teachers all over the world. It's the conversations with people that I meet at conferences that give me a lot of my research information about what's going on in classrooms and how to make the materials I write provide what teachers and students need in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Regarding what I'm working on now, my writing partner Mary Tomalin and I are coming to the end of a series of elementary-level books for Indonesian schools. The project has taken us three years so far and we're currently writing Level 6, the last level.

It's going to be published by an Indonesian publisher called Dass Sebastian, a Malaysian, who publishes school books in Indonesia and Australia. What attracted us to the idea was Dass Sebastian's integrity as a publisher and his great track record of locally-produced materials.

But the real plus was his enormous enthusiasm for this work and the vision of the project he had in mind. Dass wanted to produce a series of books locally in Jakarta, with western writers who had an understanding of local conditions, which he described to us in clear detail before we started.

I'm very interested in producing materials which are relevant to local needs, rather than ones which merely follow a series of international norms. Although my book *Smart Choice* is sold in other countries as well as in Japan, it was the Japanese college freshman compulsory year of English requirement that gave us our student model when we were writing it.

SC: Your plenary topic *Motivating the Unmotivated* is one that will be of great interest to those of us teaching in Japan. At my school in meetings sometimes people say, “we need to motivate the students more!” But, I wonder how much we can really do (or can we really do anything?) Without giving away your entire plenary, can you give us your thoughts on this? Or tell us what we might be thinking about in the months building up to your plenary?

KW: I think the key is that you can’t separate student motivation and teacher motivation and you won’t get one without the other. Motivated teachers exhibit enthusiasm for their work, and research by, amongst others, Zoltán Dörnyei, a Hungarian Professor of Psycholinguistics who works at the University of Nottingham in the UK, suggests that teacher enthusiasm is the single biggest factor in student motivation.

But telling teachers that their enthusiasm could be the difference between success and failure in their students just heaps more stuff onto the shoulders of people who are already overworked and stressed out.

My solution is that our students have to take more responsibility for their own learning, but again, we can’t achieve this just by shouting, “Will you please DO something?” at them. We need to use classroom activities and techniques which bring out their latent skills, and which also give them more responsibility for what goes on in the classroom.

By giving students more responsibility for classroom events, you create a sense of purpose, engagement, and motivation. It’s important that they can, if they wish, also contribute their world knowledge to the proceedings. There are lots of ways they can do this, and I will describe some of them in my talk.

It is also healthy to occasionally reduce your reliance on the books and other prepared materials that you bring into the classroom. Your students need the chance to see beyond the contents of the book—or at least find their own personal take on those contents. In other words, don’t let the book dictate everything that happens in the classroom.

Scott Thornbury advocates less reliance on using materials in class, and I have some sympathy

for what he says. His dogme approach to teaching is designed to allow language to ‘emerge’ from the natural exchanges you have with your students, and should relate to whatever is going on in their lives or what they are thinking about at any given time.

But at the end of the day, most teachers would be at a loss how to conduct an entire course based on starting the day desperately hoping for emergent language from their students. Imagine trying to do that on a slow Monday morning! And it is simply impractical to imagine doing this with beginners or elementary students.

However, at the same time, teachers should ‘allow the class to breathe’, with student input impacting on what goes in the classroom. This approach reduces reliance on the book itself and can lead to some amazingly inventive stuff happening in the classroom.

All this should also lead to a positive and fulfilling atmosphere in the classroom, which makes teaching a more pleasant occupation. So, if you show a little enthusiasm, you get it back in bucket loads.

I will give examples of what I mean in my talk!

SC: In an email you mentioned you know Nicky Hockley who was one of our plenary speakers at JALT2010. Nicky has shared with us how early in her career she just did not use technology; now she is one of the leading proponents of using technology to teach English! And she has a blog, which is what I want to ask you about. I see you have a blog at <kenwilsonelt.wordpress.com>. What led you to keep a blog and how do you feel it has changed your work? Also, if readers want to keep up with you and your travels, how can they do so?

KW: My original idea was to have a website where I could make available for free some of the sketch and song material that I have produced over the years, which is now out of print. I have been a published author since I was 23—a very long time ago!—so it’s no surprise that some of the stuff has long been out of print.

My first publication was a collection of teaching songs called *Mister Monday*, which was a somewhat surprising success. In all, I’ve written about 150 songs with some kind of language

teaching purpose. In the early days, they were grammar-oriented or lexis-oriented, and some were written simply with the intention of getting a conversation started.

Anyway, the point was that I wanted to put the audio files of the songs on some kind of site where teachers could download them for free. I also wanted to upload some of the sketches (skits) I wrote for the English Teaching Theatre, also to be downloadable for free.

I asked my daughter Rowan, who was working in publishing at the time, to help me set something up, and she suggested a blog rather than a website. This was the summer of 2009. I was already on Twitter by this time, so I tweeted something like – ‘I’m thinking of starting a blog – does anyone think this is a good idea?’

Within about half an hour, I’d had about twenty replies, basically saying, “Go for it!”

So I started blogging about my own personal journey through the world of ELT, and lo and behold—I was suddenly getting between 500 and 1,000 hits a day! I found a free way to make the songs and sketches available for download via box.net, and that worked out well, too.

I then started reading blogs by other people and I found some amazing ones, often written by non-NEST teachers of English in various parts of the world. I was really surprised that some of these perceptive thinkers only seemed to get a handful of visits. So I began to ask the bloggers if they would like to guest blog for me. And the guest blogs are quite an important feature now.

Most of my guest bloggers (GBs) are non-NESTs. This wasn’t a plan or a policy, it just happened. The first GB was Agata Zgarda, a Polish teacher in Brazil, who wrote a very funny piece about how complicated it is for a European to host a dinner party for Brazilians. That was in December 2009. Almost exactly a year later, GB number 25 was another Polish teacher, Ania Musielak, who wrote about using drama techniques to teach English to Polish soldiers.

During 2010, there were also posts by another two Poles, two Romanians, two Brazilians, a Turk, two Hungarians, a Slovak, an Argentinian, and a Sri Lankan. The native speaker GBs were an American in Paris, a Mexican-American in Germany, a Greek-Canadian in Switzerland, a

South African in Korea, and six Brits, including an English guy in Romania, a Welsh woman in Vietnam, and an English woman in Japan (Joanne Sato). And I’ve published a lot more GBs in 2011, too.

Regarding my whereabouts at any particular time, there’s a page on the blog devoted to that. It’s called Talks and Visits 2011.



SC: You mentioned the songs you have written. Can we go back there for a moment? Do you actually think specially-written song material is useful for learners? Aren’t authentic songs better?

KW: Native-speaker teachers are often quite dismissive about specially-written ELT songs, but a lot of non-NESTs love them. I’ve had emails from non-NEST teachers who remember THEIR English teachers using the songs in class, which shows how long some of them have been around. I even got an email recently from a teacher in Brazil who said that her mother, also an English teacher, had played them to her as a child, and she wondered if they were still available.

I completely understand NESTs who prefer to use authentic songs with their students. And, if you can find a way to use them with beginners, so much the better. But the reason I started writing them all those years ago was that I had a class of beginners for the first time and I really wanted to use songs in class, but I couldn’t find any that they could understand.

SC: Early in your career you were heavily involved in the performing arts. You have written English lessons/materials for television and radio, you were the director of the English Teaching Theatre that performed around the world. And you’ve already talked about the

songs you have composed and recorded for English Language Teaching. (Can we interest you in a visit to sing karaoke while you are here in Japan?) Seriously, I have met many teachers who have a background in the performing arts. What is it that draws people from drama into teaching ESL/EFL? And what is it about drama and song that appeals to many learners around the world?

KW: That's a very good question and one that I have to be a bit careful about answering. You often hear people say things like, 'A good teacher is like an actor' or other claims that suggest all teachers should have acting skills.

My personal take is that acting skills are quite useful to teachers, but so are drawing skills, mime skills, and the ability to sing. Being good at mental arithmetic is useful, too. But none of these skills are essential in teaching. You can be a good teacher even if you can't do any of these things.

I only make this point to make sure I'm NEVER quoted as saying that teachers should always be actors.

But you're right. You do meet a lot of people with some kind of background in theater who are now working as teachers. I've worked with lots of professional actors and I think they are amazing people, who work very hard at an interesting but desperately unstable job. I guess teaching is a more stable and long-term prospect for some of them.

My own personal journey into theatre was completely accidental. Because of my presumed expertise as a guitarist, based on the fact I'd written and recorded the songs, I was asked to join the English Teaching Theatre as a teacher-guitarist. I picked up any acting skills I have from the actors I worked with. And I stayed long enough to float to the top and become the director of the company.

As to why drama and music appeal to students, I think the answer is something to do with the classroom need of most learners to take a break, change focus, and not be so tied down to sitting at desks and using books. There are some students who prefer to do just that—spend the whole lesson at their desk, working through the book. They see drama, music or any other

'fun' activities as a waste of time. Some teachers agree with them. I *think* students like this are in a minority and I *hope* teachers like this are, too!

I love karaoke, so I'll take your invitation seriously.

SC: Our field seems to be changing rapidly. What advice would you give to teachers just starting off? And while you are offering advice, what would you suggest that *old*, or should I say experienced teachers, think about to keep their teaching current and fresh?

KW: I think the answer is the same for both—embrace the great things that technology has to offer. Young teachers will know the technology and just have to work out how to make it help them with their teaching. More experienced teachers may be alarmed by it (many are not, of course), but I recommend that they just dip their toe in and see how the water is.

Just taking your computer into the classroom and using it to project images onto the screen is a huge time-saver when it comes to preparing lessons. From there, I suggest checking out what iTools and Learning Management Systems are available to supplement the course material you're using. Once you understand how to use them, they will make your life easier.

It's funny when teachers say they are no good at technology. These same people have a computer, a smart phone, they routinely use social media sites and if you suggested they should try to do without email or Google for a day, they would look at you as if you were mad. No good at technology? Most teachers use more powerful technology every day than the guys who went to the moon in the 1960s.

I describe myself as a *techno-klutz*, even though I blog, tweet, have a Facebook account, and use Skype and other social media services. And I would be lost without my Macbook Pro, my iPhone, and my iPod. I don't have an iPad yet, only because I can't justify the expense of something that I probably wouldn't use for work.

But when I see all the cool things you can do with technology, I really wish I was starting out as a new teacher.

SC: Here in Japan it is approaching the end of the semester. Any advice to our readers on how we might spice up our classes on Monday?

KW: Having eulogized the use of technology in the last answer, I will now risk sounding like an advocate of dogme. If it's the end of term, and all thoughts of exams, end of term assessments, etc. are over, I would recommend concentrating on what the dogmetists call *emergent language*. In other words, go into class expecting the students to be the driving force of what happens.

It can be difficult to do this without looking as if you haven't prepared for class, so the way to do this (if your students aren't used to this approach) is to come into class with a clear and visible lesson plan, but tell the students that you can go for the planned lesson, or do something unplanned and improvised.

The key is NOT to then ask students to tell you something obvious, like what they did last night. You need something different and thought-provoking to create an atmosphere.

I recently took a class of students I didn't know. I knew that I would only have about 20 minutes with them, and I also knew that they knew each other very well. I didn't want to spend the whole time finding out their names, so I started the class by putting this image on the screen.



Rather than ask them the obvious questions like 'What do you think he might be looking at?' (the kind of complex question that students of any level find really complicated!), I simply asked them to put themselves into the man's position and write down how they felt, what was happening, etc.

They then shared their written thoughts with other members of the class. Eventually, we talked about fear, its causes, its effects, and how to deal with it. I didn't *teach* any new words at all, but I provided new contexts for the words they had come up with.

Just one idea for using *emergent language*.

SC: Ken, thank you for taking time to answer my questions and share some thoughts with our readers. We look forward to continuing this conversation at JALT2011 in November!

Ken Wilson is an author and trainer. He has written more than thirty ELT titles, including a dozen series of course books, including *Smart Choice* for Oxford University Press (OUP). He also writes lots of supplementary material, and in 2008, OUP



published *Drama and Improvisation*, a collection of more than 60 of his ELT drama and motivational activities. His first publication was a collection of songs called *Mister Monday*, which was released when he was 23, making him at the time the youngest-ever published ELT author. Since then, he has written and recorded more than 150 ELT songs, published as albums or as integral parts of course material. He has also written more than a hundred ELT radio and television programs for the BBC and other broadcasters, including fifty radio scripts for the *Follow Me* series, thirty *Look Ahead* TV scripts and a series of plays called *Drama First*. Until 2002, Ken was artistic director of the English Teaching Theatre, a touring company which performed stage-shows for learners of English. The ETT made more than 250 tours to 55 countries, including three visits to Japan. Ken is an enthusiastic blogger, tweeter and social networker. He lives in London, England with his wife Dede and two cats, and works in a shed at the end of his garden.



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