

---

## Developing our Professional Competence: Some Reflections

Joanne Pettis

---

For many, the melting snows of spring and burgeoning greenery signal the advent of a new year. For others, the new year began several months ago in January. However, for me, the new year begins in September with the start of a new school year. It is then that my pulse quickens in anticipation of the excitement of meeting new groups of students and seeing my colleagues again after the long, lazy summer. It is also at that time that I make my professional resolutions. I promise myself that I'm going to spend more time with teachers, discussing educational issues and finding out about the realities of their teaching situations, their particular concerns, solutions, innovations and strengths. I'm going to read more and reflect on the implications of my reading. I'm going to find time to work with more students, trying out ideas I've been exploring, honing new techniques, and learning more, always more about adult language learners and second language acquisition.

It is the time that I become particularly aware that I am both a teacher and a learner. For just as adult ESL students realize that learning English is a possibly lifelong process, so too have I realized that the development of professional competence is equally long-term and ongoing. At the beginning of a new year, I find myself reflecting on the implications of this realization for me as an adult ESL educator.

Like many adult ESL educators, I recognize that my role is multifaceted. Some of us see ourselves as change agents, bridges to Canadian society, and student advocates. We also no doubt recognize our fundamental and pivotal role in facilitating the development of our students' communicative competence. Although I am not working directly with adult ESL students in the classroom, I believe that my work and that of my colleagues who provide support to teachers and programs is ultimately directed to that goal. Giving a definition to the term *communicative competence*, however, has provided me with important context.

I have been influenced by a definition provided by Tedick and Walker (1994). They suggest that communicative competence is the ability to communicate and understand messages across linguistic and cultural boundaries. I like this definition because of the reciprocal nature of communication and the fundamental context of culture it portrays. The Canale and Swain paradigm of communicative competence that subsumes

linguistic, discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic competence (Richards & Rodgers, 1986) has also influenced my conception of communicative competence, particularly as it is this paradigm that has informed the development of the Canadian Language Benchmarks, which many of us are beginning to work with. The Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995) proposal of an alternative construct with an additional actional competence and other modifications introduces an exciting new representation of communicative competence. However, whether the Canale and Swain paradigm provides my conceptual framework or the model articulated by Celce-Murcia et al., if my goal is communicative competence it behooves me to ensure that I have the requisite principles, knowledge, and skills to accomplish it.

What those principles, knowledge, and skills are will no doubt also reflect the particular conception of teaching I hold and the implications of my other roles. However, three things are clear:

1. If I am to be a professionally competent educator, I must be principled and knowledgeable in addition to skillful;
2. My professional needs and interests have changed over time and continue to evolve;
3. My commitment to professional development must be ongoing and personal.

Let me address each of these observations.

### *Principles, Knowledge, and Skills*

Principles, knowledge, and skills are fundamentally integrated in the professionally competent teacher. If I am to be professionally effective, I believe I must ensure a balance in my expertise. To be knowledgeable and principled without the appropriate skills necessary to apply this knowledge is limiting. The knowledgeable teacher who is also skillful is a powerful educator, and the adult ESL profession has a substantial number of knowledgeable, skillful teachers. Skill, too, in the absence of knowledge is of limited value. Skillful teachers, who have amassed an effective array of activities and techniques that they can and do employ but who have not developed a parallel level of knowledge, limit their effectiveness. Unfortunately, the application of their skill is constrained by the limitations of their cognitive framework.

The growing body of knowledge on topics such as learning styles and language learning strategies, the role of discourse in communicative language teaching, adult ESL/literacy, and the cultural dimensions of language learning and teaching beg for exploration. Even “old” stand-bys such as linguistics cannot be neglected, for surely knowledge about English, its vocabulary, and its grammar is a fundamental requirement of adult ESL teachers. Teachers regularly claim that the ability to speak English is insufficient preparation to teach English, yet some contradict this by saying that, because they do not overtly teach grammar, there is no need for them to acquire

grammatical knowledge. I would counter that assumption: if we are not relying on a grammar syllabus, we must be particularly knowledgeable and skillful so that the necessary range of topics is addressed appropriately and sufficiently.

Some have also suggested that teachers do not need to know much linguistic information if they “just” teach beginners. I wonder how effective teachers would be in teaching reading to grade 1 students if they had no background in teaching reading, or how competent they would feel if they only read at a grade 1 level themselves. In addition, experience tells us that our students’ language encounters in the real world are unlikely to follow the hierarchical organization presented in many classrooms. When a beginner student asks a teacher to explain the grammar of *Smoking is not allowed*, the teacher will no doubt want to provide a more appropriate explanation than “That’s just how we say it,” and needs to draw on linguistic knowledge to do so.

Even the principles that guide our andragogical decision-making can change over time and deserve to be reconsidered periodically. For instance, a particular principle I have held for a number of years is the centrality of learner-centeredness in adult ESL instruction. However, I find I must reconsider this principle in light of an article by Auerbach (1993) that I read recently, in which she argues that learner-centeredness should not be equated with participatory education. Instead, it can be shown that learner-centeredness requires an accompanying critical analysis of the social context to be truly participatory. Without social analysis and with its focus on individualism, learner-centeredness may further marginalize learners and reinforce the status quo. Certainly food for thought and discussion.

### *Changing Needs*

Every workshop presenter I know has at one time or another received contradictory feedback. I’ve received comments, such as “Really practical!” versus “Not enough meat!” for the same workshop or, conversely, “Provocative ideas” versus “Too theoretical” for another. What does this tell me? Generally I conclude that I could have done a better job of describing my workshop, and there was a mix of experienced and novice teachers in the crowd.

It is no surprise that novice teachers and experienced teachers have different needs. Research into this shows that novice teachers tend to be concerned with *What-to-teach* questions, whereas experienced teachers want to explore *How-to* and *Why* questions to a greater degree (Freeman, 1982). If this is so, then logically teachers will naturally seek out different types of professional development activities and a different content focus as their careers progress. If we find ourselves always seeking the same “practical” content or classroom activities type of workshop after 10 or 15 years of teaching experience, shouldn’t we explore the reason and seek more balance in our profes-

sional development (PD) pursuits? Don't get me wrong. I love to get new activities or techniques to use in a class. However, I also love a professional development activity that challenges and changes my conceptual framework, and it is learning from these endeavors that enables me to make better andragogical decisions about those new activities and techniques.

### *Personal Commitment to PD*

Development of teaching competence is our professional responsibility, and we can undertake a wide range of activities in fulfillment of this obligation. As Crandall (1996) pointed out in her keynote address at the TESL Canada Conference, there are courses to take, journals to read, colleagues to talk with and observe, classroom research to conduct, textbooks to review, and workshops to attend. This range of professional development opportunities allows us to develop a comprehensive, yet personal PD plan, and I am convinced it must be a personal plan. Employers and professional organizations may support our pursuit of PD by funding us to the occasional conference or organizing a workshop, but as educators we must make a personal commitment to our own ongoing professional growth.

As I tell my son, sometimes he carries out a chore at home because he is paid for it. Then I am satisfied because the chore has been done; he is happy because he has done a good job and put some money into his wallet. However, I cannot possibly pay him for every job that needs to be done around the house, nor should I have to. He lives there; he has a stake in its maintenance and improvement. When he sees something that needs to be done and he takes it on unasked and without pay, he is demonstrating his sense of responsibility to our family's well-being in addition to his own. I think it is the same for those of us engaged in the adult ESL profession. Going to the occasional workshop because it is organized for us, or because we are funded by employers, although mutually beneficial to a degree is not enough for our own and our profession's well-being. Each of us, I believe, must be personally committed to seeking out additional opportunities to learn and develop. If we continue to argue that adult ESL is an area of educational expertise, we must ensure that we indeed have that expertise. Knowledge and principles without skill or, conversely, skill without knowledge or principles are professionally unacceptable states. There is no place for professional complacency in the field of adult ESL instruction. The students and our profession deserve more.

So when we begin another school year and our students return to our clean classrooms in hopeful anticipation of a dynamic and effective year, I will make my New Year's resolutions. I will promise to spend more time with teachers and students. I will promise to try out a new technique. I will promise to be more organized. And I will promise to examine my assump-

tions about adult ESL education regularly and make a personal commitment to the continuing development of my professional competence.

### *The Author*

Joanne Pettis coordinates adult ESL institutional programs and curriculum resources for the Settlement and Adult Language Training Branch of Manitoba Culture Heritage and Citizenship. She is interested in adult ESL teacher preservice and inservice professional development and is currently completing her master's thesis in TESL education.

### *References*

- Auerbach, E. (1993). Putting the P back in participatory. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27, 543-545.
- Celce-Murcia, M., Dörnyei, Z., & Thurrell, S. (1995). Communicative competence: A pedagogically motivated model with content specifications. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 6, 5-35.
- Crandall, J. (1996, May). *The challenge of professionalism and professionalization in ESL*. Keynote address presented at the national TESL Canada Conference in Winnipeg.
- Freeman, D. (1982). Observing teachers: Three approaches to in-service training and development. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16, 21-28.
- Richards, J.C., & Rodgers, T. (1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tedick, D.J., & Walker, C.L. (1994). Second language teacher education: The problems that plague us. *Modern Languages Journal*, 78, 300-312.