

The Lessons We Learn: Q and A with Marcia Arthur, ESL Educator

Marcia Arthur

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Marcia Arthur has been teaching English for over 30 years in places like Japan, the Philippines, Seattle, and Renton, Washington, and feels so blessed to have found such a rewarding profession. Her undergraduate degree is in Communication Disorders, and she worked as a speech therapist for a brief period, but learning how people learn is what really excites her. She earned a master's degree in education in 1989, and she tries to keep up-to-date with learning theory and new technology for learning. Marcia loves the Northwest for the magnificent mountains, the lovely mixture of fresh and salt water, and great scuba diving. She especially enjoys the variety of theater around Seattle with its topical themes and evocative stories. And the Seattle Symphony is another of her indulgences.

WAESOL Educator: What do you think are the qualities of an excellent teacher?

Marcia Arthur: I think most excellent teachers have a great desire to help people and confidence that they can. Other vital qualities include patience, good organizational skills, a strong ethical code, and persistence. Of course, a good sense of humor and charisma can boost a teacher's performance immensely, if they're lucky enough to be so endowed.

WE: How long have you been teaching ESL/EFL?

MA: In 1981 I started teaching English abroad, but I really found my passion when I started teaching immigrants and refugees here in the States.

WE: How do you view students? Has this changed throughout the years?

MA: Interesting question. I have a much more intimate relationship with my students as I age. I view us more as partners in their struggle to survive and learn, not only the English language, but also how to improve themselves. When I first started teaching, I focused more on the language as the goal, but now I use language to get to know the students' characters, goals, and dreams. Then we can focus more on communication that serves their needs.

WE: Why did you want to be an ESL/EFL teacher? Or what did you like best about teaching?

MA: I've always cherished a love of language and chose English as my first major at university. Later I changed to speech therapy to satisfy my desire to help others. But when I needed money to go to grad school, my sister encouraged me to join her in Japan where I could quickly earn enough money to continue my education. Once there, I became enamored of travel and experiencing different cultures and found that I could actually use all that grammar, usage, and vocabulary pounded into me in primary and secondary school in a very practical way! I got to see much of the world while teaching and got to know people through sharing my love of the English language. I attained my greatest fulfillment when I returned to the States, however, and began teaching immigrants and refugees in the Seattle area. To me it was the best of both worlds of teaching and social work. My students needed help in surviving and thriving in this new culture, and I could offer them more than just the language. Their life stories inspired me, and I learned so much from them. So I guess it was serendipity that led me to this particular field, and I've enjoyed every minute of it.

WE: Anything special you have learned from your students?

MA: Of the myriad lessons I've learned from students, the two most valuable to me have been gentleness and the ability to listen. These two qualities aren't easy to nurture in our competitive and self-centered American culture, and I still struggle to refine them, but without them, you risk attaining deep understanding and communication.

WE: Any future plan after retirement? Like: writing, autobiography, travelling, researching?

MA: I will definitely travel as I'll have more time and opportunity and I still have so much to learn about peoples of the world. But I'll take time to explore this new stage of my life before making any more definite plans. There's so much to do!

WE: Any advice to the new teachers in this field?

MA: Be patient, gentle, and listen with an open mind. Students tend to be very respectful so watch your ego carefully. Keep a

humble and respectful attitude and quit when you find yourself losing that. Everything else you can learn from books. (Or whatever has taken the place of books these days!)

WE: Any successful stories of your students that you would like to share?

MA: The variety of students we teach is a challenge but also a delightful kaleidoscope of humanity. I've seen young mothers with little education blossom into confident working women who sparkle when they realize they can continue education all their lives in this country. Some students have obtained two and three certificates before deciding what fulfills them. Others have continued to earn a degree or open their own businesses. Still others have returned to their countries to find success with polished bilingual skills. And don't disregard those who have simply succeeded in enriching their lives and circle of friends by improving their language skills. Since I taught the beginning level for so many years, perhaps I've seen the most progress and therefore find it hard to single out any one success story.

WE: Can you name some of the challenges that most ESL students face?

MA: I think adults find adapting to life in a new and different culture more difficult than anything, and the ESL teacher can be most beneficial in guiding them along that path. Many find it humiliating to have their intelligence, knowledge, and charm hidden behind the formidable "language barrier." They are frustrated by their inability to express themselves adequately. It's also essential to remember that many students have experienced a great deal of trauma, and they need time to process that as well. While some immigrants choose to come here and have a strong financial foundation, many are struggling to keep themselves and their families alive and healthy while they learn the language. While these challenges can be daunting, the ESL class, with wise facilitation, can be a place for healing, laughing, making friends, and confidence building as well as learning.