

Interview with Keith Folse

After his keynote speech at the 2019 WAESOL Conference in Renton, WA, Jessica Weimer, member-at-large on the WAESOL Board, recorded an interview with Dr. Keith Folse. Excerpts of that interview are summarized below.

We usually have someone or something who inspired us to become educators. Who or what inspired you?

Oh, this is an easy one. Mrs. Emily de Montluzin. She was my high school French teacher. My family was really poor--we're talking food stamps, outhouses and running water. Teachers saved me. School was my lifeline. I loved school because people smelled nice and they looked clean, and they had what we didn't have. So, Mrs. de Montluzin, in my high school, my little *podunk* school, she was the one who got me interested in French, and I was going to be a French teacher until I changed careers down the road. She's the one who helped me get a scholarship to go to university and fill out the application. On my mom's side, nobody went to college, and on my dad's side, only a few of them had. What did I know in Podunkville, Mississippi about how to fill out a college application? I mean, I was smart, but it's the difference between being smart and having access. In hindsight, I think, "Oh my gosh, be more aggressive." But people don't realize, poor people aren't aggressive. So, Mrs. de Montluzin got me into the honors college at the university, and she's the one I look up to most. There's actually a scholarship for her. If you Google demontluzin.org you'll find it.

What projects are you currently working on?

I'm doing a lot with corpus linguistics research. Students want and need to be able to write a paragraph. They need to be able to function in History 101. I don't know what History 101 looks like, but I'll bet you some things: they're probably doing a mid-term and a final, and they have to write a paper. So, I've been doing data collection of native-speaker student writing, to see what their writing really looks like, to figure out what grammar you would most need to teach in order to have them write that kind of material. It's teaching grammar, but not for grammar's sake.

Where does your passion for grammar, vocabulary, and writing come from? How do you make these topics engaging for your students?

Well, that's a big question. I don't know why I got so interested in language. We're just good at noticing what people say and how they sound. It's not about correcting incorrect. It's not prescriptive, but descriptive. It's truly I just notice things in a pattern, and that's what grammar is.

I think if you've been a language learner, and every teacher should really have to be a language learner at some point, you know what it's like to be a recipient of that. And if you know what it's like to be a recipient, then you're



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is a Professor of TESOL at the University of Central Florida. He is the author of 68 books on a variety of subjects from grammar to vocabulary to composition, including five best-selling books in the Great Writing series by National Geographic Learning. Dr. Folse teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses and is a sought after presenter and speaker at conferences nationally and internationally. We thank National Geographic Learning for sponsoring our 2019 Keynote.

able to serve that food better because you've been on the other side of the table.

I think part of what I was saying in the talk today is that you're not teaching grammar as a knowledge set. It's not a piece of information. It's information to do something else. If you learn this, you'll now be able to do this. If I teach you this and you can follow it, you're going to be able to follow a conversation.

How has your approach to or philosophy of teaching evolved over the years?

So I first started teaching in 1979. I remember a student asking the question, "What's the difference between *persuade* and *convince*?" *Are they the same or not?*" You know the feeling, when you go home and you stop and think, "I don't know." But look at what corpus does now. Corpus allows us to go do a search of how something is actually used. So I think there's a lot more emphasis on this. Before it was explained that it was all about grammar points. If you made a test it included grammar, and even your reading tests would have grammar questions in them, right? And then we went away from that. But I didn't go that way though.

The idea of no grammar was ridiculous. But by the same token though, and I'll give Krashen 10 points in that there was too much focus on grammar. In the Krashen days, we went the opposite where it was all about comprehensible input and doing fun activities. We still didn't produce French speakers and Spanish speakers at all, even though the classes shifted that way. And now I think we're back to something that makes more sense, which is that you can do all kinds of things that you want.

I first started teaching with audio lingual and I taught French. You had three hours of French with an instructor and one hour of lab. You had one hour with me on a drill session where we just did audio lingual drills, and you had to keep it upbeat, but it was boring. Anything would be boring after five hours! Yeah, that's all you did. That's all we did in grammar. We just did certain books that were just charged to fill in the blanks. That's all we did, and it was magically going to produce English.

However, I can go to the board right now I can put a V on the board and put it on the board. I can stand right here and do a drill for four minutes practicing over and over intensive focused practice because I learned how to do a drill. So now I don't do 60 minutes of drills, I don't do 60 minutes of grammar, but the fact is that I've had my feet wet in drilling. I think I've seen some of these methods come and go. I just think it's a much healthier approach now.

What was something you wish you had known when you started teaching and/or what advice would you give to new ELL educators in the field?

What advice to new teachers in the field? Yes, we are going through a hard time right now, you know, the number of students in many cases is down due to immigration, national policy issues. I'll leave it at that. But also for people teaching intensive programs, it's harder for students to get visas to come to the states and it's cheaper to go to Canada now. But in relation to new teachers, I may try to make sure that they also get a k 12 endorsement if they can because that's a backup as well. But even the K-12 ESL jobs are getting lower because states are cutting back. You can no longer have funding for five years of ESL.

Given all of that, my number one advice for young people is to go overseas. You should go overseas while you're young. It sounds like an old fart. But while you're young, you don't have family obligations. But also when you turn 40 or 50, you can also do go overseas and teach for a year or two. In the first six months, you'll spend a lot of money getting set up, but then bank the money.

I wouldn't hesitate to go overseas. I went to a bunch of places. I wouldn't trade a single one and there's even some that were not good. It can be a very lonely experience because you may not have colleagues and you're no longer surrounded by conference options. It's a shock and Netflix will only take you so far. Those are really very, very real and sometimes very harsh encounters that you have with foreign life. But the trade-off with overseas and foreign food and a foreign language if you're smart, not smart, intelligent if you take advantage of what you should be doing.

What role do professional conferences such as WAESOL play in the success of ELL students? What message do you have for the WAESOL Educator and its readers?

You know, you don't get trained in networking, do you? This might sound kind of Mickey Mouse but one of the big pluses of networking is maybe you think your program is small. Maybe you think it is not very good. Maybe you wish they would change something. Then you talk to another teacher at a conference. He was, "my gosh, you do what?" And you realize that where you are looks greener to someone else. You realize that you have a focus in your school or your program and it's been doing that for year and now it is seen as something new. I'm just saying conferences can be exposure to new ideas. And a lot of times you go to conferences and you

think, “I can’t use that, but if I tweak it, it would be so cool with my students”.

But if you don’t get exposed, you won’t know. People aren’t going to sit in a room and read *100 Ideas for Teaching*, right? They might watch a YouTube but there’s nothing like being there and being able to interact with the person who asked the questions.

But also finding out what is happening at other programs, like declining numbers of students. What are other programs doing that have had much larger numbers, where they felt it a lot harder than we have, for example. What have they done to react to this thing?

Don’t try to reinvent the wheel. I guess that’s the message. Rather than reinventing the wheel, go let somebody else who has more expertise than you do tell you what they’re doing. And it’s not about having more years of teaching experience. They may just have had more refugee students and have had to figure out that visa situation already.

What projects are you currently working on?

Right now, I’m doing a lot with corpus linguistics research. I’m doing what I think is very practical. Students want and need to be able to write a paragraph. They need to be able to function in History 101. I don’t know what History 101 looks like, but I’ll bet you some things: they’re probably doing a mid-term and a final, and they have to write a paper. But what does that paper look like? And the person who grades the paper, is there a rubric? In 2019, maybe, but only to cover the professor’s tail in the case of a grade dispute, not really to mark it. You know, “I’m going to give this paper a C, and now I’m going to mark the rubric to make it look like a C”, which is not really using a rubric.

So, I’ve been doing data collection of native-speaker student writing, to see what their writing really looks like, to figure out what grammar you would most need to teach in order to have them write that kind of material. It’s teaching grammar, but not for grammar’s sake.