



## **Interview with Sandra McKay\***

*Sandra McKay, Professor of English at San Francisco State University and editor of TESOL Quarterly spoke on getting published as part of the June, 1998 Temple University Japan Distinguished Lecturer Series. Since getting published is of interest to many readers, we were fortunate to be able to interview Sandra on this topic.*

**Thank you for taking the time to answer some questions. Our readers will find your comments helpful as they write articles for publication. Many of our readers are familiar with your work as editor of TESOL Quarterly. Could you tell us a little bit more about your background?**

My career in the TESOL profession began with a grant to be involved in teacher education in Guatemala under the auspices of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. I had just graduated from the University of Minnesota with a doctorate in education when I was awarded this fellowship. Until that time, all of my teaching had been in the area of L1 education.

After teaching a year in Guatemala City, where I enjoyed working with nonnative speakers of English, I went to Washington D.C., teaching for two years at the Georgetown University American Language Institute. After that I moved to San Francisco and worked part time in the Stanford University program for foreign students and in the MATESOL program at San Francisco State University. After two years I was hired in a tenure track position at San Francisco State University where I presently teach undergraduate sociolinguistics courses and graduate courses in the MATESOL program.

**In addition to the year in Guatemala City, what other overseas experiences have you had? How have they affected you?**

While I have been involved in ESL and ESL teacher education for many years, I have had a good many opportunities to be involved in teacher education programs outside of

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\* This interview has been taken from <http://www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/files/98/oct/mckay.html> and the picture has been taken from <http://www.cape.edu/images/people/ET-McKay.jpg>.

the United States. In 1985 I received a Fulbright to work in the English department at Chinese University. I have served as an academic specialist in TESOL teacher education for the United States Information Service in a variety of countries including Hungary, Morocco, South Africa, the former Soviet Union, the Philippines, Thailand, and Latvia. Finally, I have enjoyed working in Japan at Temple University giving several weekend lecture series and teaching in their M.A. and Ph.D. program.

My overseas experiences convinced me of the need to approach our profession with a global perspective, recognizing that each country has unique attitudes toward and needs for English language learning. I believe it is essential that language learning theories and teaching methodologies take into account the local context and not assume that a specific theory of language learning or teaching methodology is appropriate for every situation.

As editor of *TESOL Quarterly*, my overseas experiences have persuaded me of the need to strive to make the *Quarterly* a truly international journal in which second language theory and practice is presented from a variety of perspectives. Hence, I strongly encourage second language researchers and educators from outside the North American context to contribute to the journal.

**Many of our readers would like to write for publication. Can you offer any advice to teachers who are just beginning to write for publication? What is the biggest error or mistake they make? Why should teachers write? What should they write about?**

Perhaps I can answer these questions by summarizing one of my favorite articles, "Anyone for Tennis," by Anne Freedman (1994). In the article, Freedman uses the analogy of learning how to play the game of tennis with becoming a competent writer. Throughout the article, she emphasizes the difference between the rules of a game and playing a game: She points out that, while learning the rules of the game of tennis is essential, it does not assure that one can play the game well. In order to master playing the game, an individual has to like playing tennis. Given this interest or even passion, one has to observe other players, practice, and develop his/her own strategies, tactics, and style. One also has to be well aware of the individual who will receive the shot and how they may respond to it. In short, becoming a skilled tennis player requires a long period of apprenticing in which one can develop all of these abilities.

Likewise, learning how to play the game of writing for publication entails learning the rules of the game: engaging in careful research procedures, submitting the research findings to an appropriate journal, and undertaking the necessary revisions. As in tennis, a writer has to begin with a passion to master the game primarily, in the case of L2 publishing, because one believes that the sharing of ideas related to L2 teaching and learning is a goal well worth the effort. Then one has to observe (i.e., read a great variety of professional journals), practice (i.e., become involved in the writing and submission process), and develop unique strategies, tactics, and style (i.e., assume a particular stance and voice toward issues in the field). Finally, and perhaps most importantly for success, a writer has to carefully consider who is going to receive the shots, and what a particular audience of L2 practitioners know, believe, and assume about L2 teaching/learning. Obviously, just as different tennis partners have different

skills, different journal audiences have unique interests and perspectives. It is important to carefully consider this audience in taking up the game of publishing.

In using the analogy of a game, I in no way mean to make light of the process of publication. Rather I've chosen to use this analogy because I believe it highlights the manner in which writing for publication is a skill that develops over time and depends on a strong belief in the value of exerting the energy to master the game.

**To return then to the questions you posed, what advice do I have for L2 professionals who are just beginning to write for publication?**

First, I think a writer has to be convinced of the value of publishing. I personally view it as one of the most important vehicles we have for developing as a profession, as we fine-tune our theories and methodologies, always aware of the need to contextualize them for the local context. Second, one has to be willing to be an apprentice--to read a variety of journals noting how each journal has a particular audience and perspective and to practice by submitting a manuscript to what one considers the most appropriate journal for his/her ideas. The development of a specific style as a writer will come with time as one learns how to interact with a variety of audiences and create a unique voice that will be heard and remembered.

As Freedman puts it,

Learning to write...is learning to appropriate and occupy a place in relation to other texts, learning to ensure that the other chap will play the appropriate game with you, and learning to secure a useful uptake: the rules for playing, the rules of play and the tricks of the trade. (1994, pp. 63-64)

**It sounds as if one big mistake beginners make is not being familiar with their potential audience. What about more experienced writers? Do you have any advice for someone who would like to try something more ambitious?**

In light of what I just stated, the more experienced writers may want to tackle new challenges or more competitive journals, or, in keeping with the tennis analogy, to take on new and perhaps more experienced partners. The process, however, is similar. One has to begin with a passionate belief in the value of publishing, to read a great deal, and to practice by submitting a manuscript to an international professional journal. Clearly one cannot expect to win the game every time since the challenges are greater in the case of international journals. I personally have had a variety of manuscripts rejected in such situations.

**What do you do then? I assume that the manuscripts said something you felt was important for the field. Do you just file it away? Any words of wisdom when those rejection letters come?**

Of course, I as a writer believed that what I said was extremely important for the field. What I've learned to do is to read the reviews, put them away for a few days, and then re[-?]read them. This gives me some distance and gives my ego time to heal. Then I try to objectively consider the reviewers' criticisms. In many cases the reviewers are correct and I realize I wasn't ready to submit something for publication yet. In a few cases,

however, I have concluded that I didn't send the article to the most appropriate journal. In other words, the reviewer was raising concerns that relate to the particular focus of the journal. For example, the reviewer may have highlighted the fact that the article didn't offer any pedagogical implications or that the article was too theoretical. Such criticisms often relate to the fact that the article is not suited to that particular journal.

**Approximately half of JALT's members are non-native teachers of English. What advice do you have for nonnative writers?**

This is perhaps the most difficult question you have asked and one for which there are no easy answers. While I might suggest that nonnative writers, like native writers, need to follow the same strategies for mastering the game. I recognize that the rules of the game are in some ways culture specific, reflecting specific discourse conventions that may differ from those of the nonnative writer's community. What is unfortunate is that often it is the nonnative writers who are asked to accommodate their discourse style in the publishing process rather than asking the readers to be open to other ways of structuring discourse. In light of this fact, one important strategy for a nonnative writer is to read a great deal, noting how those that publish in largely western journals frame their discourse. In addition, nonnative writers need to draw on local support, getting as much feedback and editing assistance as they can from L2 professionals they know and work with.

I strongly believe that we as a profession would benefit greatly from hearing more voices from nonnative English speaking countries. What such authors can provide is a critical stance toward widely accepted theories and pedagogies that may not be appropriate in other contexts. Hence, as editor of the *Quarterly*, I have encouraged nonnative writers to submit to the journal.

**You introduced a tennis analogy at the beginning of this interview: Let's take it a little further. Many people "know the rules of tennis" but choose not to play. Likewise, many L2 professionals are dedicated, hardworking professionals, but not all write. In fact, I used to feel guilty about not trying to publish more. Is writing for everyone?**

You raise a very important issue. I believe we as professionals should write when we believe we have something unique to offer to the field--whether it be a pedagogical strategy, a new theory, or a research finding. Those who do not contribute to the field in this manner still can make a very significant contribution. Just as coaches or avid fans can offer players very constructive suggestions, well-read professionals can provide their students or colleagues with important insights and critiques of the ideas presented in professional journals.

**Recently, there have been a lot of online publications on the Internet. Do you have any thoughts about writing for this type of publication? Are they viewed throughout our field as the same as hard copy publications? Do you feel that the opportunities to publish are growing?**

Clearly, online publications will continue to grow and provide further opportunities for sharing ideas. At present most of them lack the stringent review process of many traditional publications. Whereas this does allow for more people to contribute their

ideas, what the review process often does is to encourage writers to clarify and refine their ideas. This may occur within the Internet dialogue, but these dialogues may not provide the thoughtful feedback that is inherent in the review process of refereed journals in which reviewers respond to a manuscript in reference to particular evaluative guidelines. It is this review process that, at the present time, affords greater prestige to hard copy publications.

**What do you see as the value of publication to our profession?**

I have perhaps answered this question in various ways throughout the interview. What the publication process provides is a forum for L2 professionals to share, critique, and fine-tune their theories and methods. To return one last time to the tennis analogy, publishing provides individual players with the opportunity to express their passion for the endeavor of L2 teaching and learning, to become skilled players, and ultimately to grow professionally as they meet the challenges other players provide in the process of playing the game.