

Looking at the Past, Present, and Future of ELT: A Conversation with Donald Freeman¹

**M. Martha Lengeling² & Valeria Marquez Arellano³, Universidad de Guanajuato, Guanajuato,
Guanajuato, Mexico**

Abstract

Within the English language teaching (ELT) profession, Donald Freeman is well known for his research in teacher education, teacher knowledge, and teacher learning. He was an invited guest for the *XI Seminar of Applied Linguistics* at the University of Guanajuato in May 2020. This interview of Professor Freeman examines how he started out in the profession and his transition to the area of teacher education. As well, Professor Freeman discusses three phases of teacher education, his perceived gaps in ELT, the impact of COVID-19 on teachers, and lastly, he provides reflection for English teachers throughout the world.

Resumen

Dentro de la profesión de enseñanza del idioma inglés (siglas ELT en inglés), Donald Freeman es bien conocido por su investigación en formación docente, conocimiento docente y aprendizaje docente. Fue invitado al XI Seminario de Lingüística Aplicada de la Universidad de Guanajuato en mayo del 2020. Esta entrevista al profesor Freeman analiza cómo se inició en la profesión y su transición al área de formación docente. Además, el profesor Freeman analiza tres fases de la formación docente, sus limitantes percibidas en ELT, el impacto de COVID-19 para los profesores y, por último, ofrece una reflexión para los profesores de inglés de todo el mundo.

Introduction

In May of 2020, English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Mexico had transitioned to teaching online and conferences and seminars had also made this move due to COVID-19. The Master's of Applied Linguistics in English language teaching (ELT) at the University of Guanajuato in Mexico offered their *XI Seminar of Applied Linguistics* for their students via Zoom for the first time and Donald Freeman was the guest plenary speaker. He is a professor of education at the University of Michigan. His presentation was titled 'English-for-teaching': *Rethinking teacher proficiency in the classroom*. It was based upon research regarding EFL teachers' proficiency in the public sector in various countries of the world and Mexico was one of them (see Freeman et al., 2015). In this article, the authors interviewed Dr. Freeman regarding his presentation. He questions how we can rethink EFL teachers' English proficiency by including English for specific purposes (ESP) training. Training on how to use English for tasks and routines within the EFL context, specifically for the public sector. What this refers to is providing teachers with the 'English-for-teaching' that is needed to carry out in their classes instead of a general language proficiency exam, which is often the case for many institutions in Mexico. The idea of 'English-for-teaching' is seen as a way for teachers to gain confidence, efficiency, and effectiveness in their use of English in the classroom.

In this article, we address five themes taken from the conversation: 1) Becoming a foreign language teacher and transitioning into a teacher educator, 2) Teacher education throughout the years, 3) Three gaps in ELT as identified by Freeman, 4) Living the present with COVID-19, and lastly, 5) Reflection on our ELT profession: Looking forward.

Becoming a foreign language teacher and transitioning into a teacher educator

In the area of ELT, Donald Freeman is well-renowned for his contributions, more specifically in teacher education, teacher knowledge, and teacher learning. For this interview, we wanted to know how he entered into the profession, first as a language teacher and then his change as a teacher educator. Freeman began as a French language teacher unexpectedly as he narrates below.

I essentially fell into language teaching and in my case, it wasn't teaching my own language. It wasn't teaching English. It was teaching a second language that I had studied and that I spoke, which was French...

He explained how he was hired at the end of August to fill an urgent need. The following excerpt shows how Freeman recalls his first job interview for a French teaching position as a recent university graduate.

...the principal didn't ask me much about teaching or my teaching background, but simply wanted to know about how I knew French. I said I'd studied it at university. I had lived and worked in France one summer during secondary

¹ Received: 26 March, 2021. Accepted: 26 April, 2021.

² lengeling@hotmail.com, 0000-0002-2570-5002

³ v.marquezarellano@uqto.mx, 0000-0002-5353-7472

school and then after university. So he said: "Fine, good, you're hired". ...that is what I mean when I say that I fell into teaching.

This excerpt shows how language teachers were mainly hired due to their proficiency in their L2; if a person speaks the language, he or she can teach it. This used to be more common in the past, and teachers often 'fell into the job' (Lengeling, 2010) because they knew the language. Freeman fell into teaching, but he became interested in teaching. He pointed out how he did not have any preconceptions about teaching the language, but how this lack of information made him feel interested in what captured his students' attention, their struggles, likes and dislikes, and as a result, he became interested in learning and understanding what to do as a teacher. He has a high point when he begins to interact with a fellow colleague at school.

In my second year of high school teaching in this rural high school, I was assigned a student-teacher, which, you know, the expression 'the blind leading the blind' or in this case, 'the new leading the new.' Here I'd been teaching for a year and I had this 'student-teacher.'

This student-teacher was a Spanish instructor who was studying for her master's degree in teaching. Freeman was fascinated by the techniques and approaches she incorporated in her classes, and hence tested them. They had conversations about teaching, helped each other, and made sense of their practice. This experience was key for Freeman as a novice teacher. As a result, he considered the idea of enrolling in a master's degree program to understand the process of teaching.

I enrolled in the same master's program at the School of International Training [SIT] where I studied teaching French and English, and that's really where my transition to becoming a teacher happened. Then [I] moved to Japan where I taught at an experimental language institute for five years. I worked in corporate language training as well. Japan was really when I got into the English language teaching.

With his master's degree, he decided to move to Japan to teach English and train teachers. Teaching English for him was different as it was his mother tongue, and thus he gained more experience as a language teacher. These experiences as a French and English language teacher were the beginnings of how he moved into becoming a teacher educator as they seemed to have shaped his early teaching and perhaps given him a nudge for his future in the area of teacher education.

I moved to Southeast Asia to work for the UN [United Nations] in refugee resettlement... [to] train teachers. The teachers were nationals of the different countries where these camps were located (Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines). They taught English and what was called 'pre-vocational skills' to refugees. That's when I really became deeply involved in teacher education because I was teaching teachers... The late 1970s and early 1980s when I was living in Japan was an incredibly rich time for teacher development... The Japan Association of Language Teaching was just getting off the ground... and through it, I became active as a teacher trainer... I went from this experience in Japan to working on teacher training and supervision in the refugee programs... but [the work was] always in non-formal settings, not in a university. I didn't become a university teacher educator until later on in my career.

From a French teacher to an English teacher, we now see how Dr. Freeman moved into teacher education. He had the opportunity to work in Japan and then for the UN where he saw the realities of refugee students and how teachers worked with them. This change from language teacher to teacher educator is quite normal. One gains experience teaching languages and little by little a teacher may become a teacher educator. These transitions are not always planned but the person is at the right place and the right moment. He recounts this in the following regarding how he saw himself:

Both in becoming a French teacher and later becoming a teacher trainer, I came to kind of see my expertise as being like a doughnut: The outside was visible-- you could see me teaching French; you could see me being a teacher trainer-- but no one really knew what was at the heart of those activities, what it was that someone needed to know in order to do the work that I was doing. In many ways, I fell into teacher education in the same way I fell into language teaching.

Dr. Freeman uses a simile of a doughnut to describe how he saw his knowledge at this period of becoming a teacher educator. On the outside, his knowledge or expertise seemed to be visible, but the middle of the doughnut illustrated the knowledge he wanted to explore as a beginning teacher educator. He continues to explain his learning as a teacher educator:

One of the characteristics of my experience as a new teacher educator was captured in, the old expression, 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating.' When I was doing a workshop with teachers and they found something of value in it, then I knew that I was working on issues that were relevant to them and that could be useful to them.

When he states that 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating,' he seems to refer to the notion that one can only know the quality of something when one witnesses the outcomes. Working with teachers provided him with valuable information about teacher education. This sounding board of what was important for the

teachers also helped him to understand their processes. This move and his experiences provide the readers with a backdrop of his own teacher development, and specifically in the area of teacher education. Becoming a teacher educator also opened other doors for him to give presentations and work with professional associations. This work still continues to the present.

Teacher education throughout the years

In the interview, we asked Professor Freeman how he views teacher education and he brought up three phases. He begins with the first in the early 1990s and refers to this phase as 'about naming the things that were part of what we came to call the knowledge base of language teaching' (see Freeman & Johnson, 1998). This naming refers to providing the profession with a specific type of professional language:

It became clear that we needed a professional vernacular for language teaching. We needed a common language to be able to talk about what was going on as people were learning to teach languages. For example, we would say if someone's learning to be a language teacher, they need to know grammar. But we didn't have much evidence for why they needed to know grammar other than that we knew their students were studying grammar so therefore teachers needed to know it. Similarly, we said they needed to know methodology because that's what teachers do. So our language about teacher learning was taken directly from the classroom and what students were doing.

According to Professor Freeman, the need for a specific type of language seemed to be missing in the profession and this 'common language' would help teachers to articulate what they felt was needed for teaching.

From knowing a vernacular about teaching, the next phase was in regard to how we see the context of learning, and perhaps the most common place where languages are learned, schools. Professor Freeman points out that schools are 'social institutions' in the next excerpt.

But the second phase has to do with the recognition of schools as social institutions and the role they play in creating the material our students are learning. We know that our students could potentially learn English without us. They do so in many situations. They could go out and pick it up through interactions in person or online. This raises the question: What are students getting out of studying the language in the classroom that they wouldn't get if they were simply to learn it on their own?

Learning a language does not only happen within the classroom but we now can see how students learn a language in a number of social contexts, such as social media, the Internet, interactions, the media, games, to name only a few. Freeman draws attention to the complexities of where languages are learned and the relationship to the idea of schools as a social institution. It is assumed that schools are the primary place where students learn the language, but we now know that there are many contexts for learning.

The third phase deals with methodology at different periods in history and how methodology seemed to be instrumental for the teacher. Freeman uses the metaphor "your church" to correlate this relationship between the teacher and methodology, which perhaps illustrates a set of beliefs that guide the teacher.

I think the third change really then had to do with how we looked at methodology. Throughout the 90s and into the early 2000s, methodology was a singular undertaking. You affiliated yourself as a teacher with one particular way of teaching and that was your "church" if you will. It was the methodology you followed.

The methodology of a specific time or curriculum seemed to guide the teacher within his or her practice. As teachers, we often take on the mantle of methodology in order to show us what to do in teaching and provide us answers. Freeman continues to describe the complexities and evolution of this phase with the following:

How do you know your teaching is actually working? That is the phase we're in now, which I would call knowledge-for-teaching. The hyphenated form is important. It's not just knowledge from the [academic] disciplines [like linguistics or psychology] which was how we looked at it in the 1980s and before. It's also not just methodology, knowledge of pedagogy, which is how we looked at it in the 1990s. Nor is it only knowledge in context-- what Shulman called 'pedagogical content knowledge'—which was the prevailing view in the 2000s. It's knowledge for a particular purpose-- for teaching languages.

Freeman describes the development of teaching knowledge in these phases which he calls 'knowledge generations' in Chapter 6 of his book, *Educating Second Language Teachers*. It can be assumed that this knowledge-for-teaching relates to the reasons for learning a language. This is the job of the teacher to understand who the learners are, what they bring to the teaching-learning process, and what their reasons and interests are for learning another language. This is a basis for all teachers to explore to meet the needs of our students within a specific context.

Three gaps in ELT as identified by Freeman

Another area that we asked Professor Freeman was about what he felt the gaps were within ELT. He replied with the following as a starting point: "I would say as we look toward the future that we need to understand more about the role of schools and schooling in how people learn languages—so-called 'instructed language acquisition,' and how this differs from informal environments". He then goes on to explain three gaps: content, methodology, and teacher learning.

Freeman points out how he feels the first gap is concerned with the content and its reference to how other content is connected.

The first gap has to do with how we understand the content that students are learning in the language classroom... When you are learning a language, it needs to be embedded in learning other forms of content because language by itself is content-free. So how are we going to define language in the context of schools so teachers can teach it? We do this definition because language teachers need some content to teach and grammar has traditionally provided a definition of what that content is.

Content is often seen as the grammar used in the context of where one is situated. This grammar content provides the teachers with what they feel they have to teach. One may question if grammar is enough for content. More and more we can relate grammar to other content and go beyond grammar teaching. In the second gap, Freeman feels there is a separation between content and methodology based upon the idea that teachers want control of the use of language in the classroom.

The second gap has to do with methodology. We have operated off a false dichotomy between content and methodology... that classroom language is separate from and packages the methodology. In fact, I think classroom language is methodology. We know from our work that when teachers feel that they control classroom language, they report that they pedagogically are able to do things that they didn't do before. It isn't simply that the language is enabling them to do those things. The language is those methodological moves. The teacher's classroom language makes the methodology happen. This is why translanguaging is so interesting. It raises the question of how methodology makes the second language real? (I don't mean 'relevant' which is a tired argument.) I mean, 'real' in the second language classroom. Say for example, you're teaching and one of your students asks you a question in Spanish. You might say, "Okay, can you ask me that in English?" But that doesn't make the language real because they have already asked you the question, which you have understood. You could answer them in Spanish, but that way English is crowded out. Or you could understand the question asked in Spanish and answer it in English. If you stay in English and they stay in Spanish, it becomes a translanguaged exchange in which each party—teacher and student—is using language authentically. And methodologically, this shifts the balance of power between teacher and student. Each is doing their own thing.

Here we can see how opening up the panorama of different languages could be valuable: translanguaging. Perhaps no longer expecting students to use English as the only way to communicate can help our students use authentic language. Freeman questions that by just requiring our students to use English does not make this language real. He expands our use of languages as a way to engage our students more in language learning and even give them agency. L1 then can be seen as an advantage and not a penalty in our classroom. Even other languages – besides L1 and L2 – can be used to facilitate the teaching-learning process.

The third gap refers to how teachers continue learning throughout their professional life work in the profession. There is rich research about how individuals enter into the profession (Woodward et al., 2018; Zeichner & Gore, 1990) and career cycles (Huberman, 1993), yet Freeman brings up a gap of knowledge of what happens specifically when teachers wind down their careers or make career changes.

We are given to think about teacher learning in the career trajectory. We've subdivided that span into pre-service and in-service, or pre-service preparation and continuous professional development. But actually that's not the career span. It describes the provision of teacher education... The trajectory addresses teachers' professional lives. For example, we don't know a whole lot about how people wind up their work as teachers? How they end their careers in the classroom. Do they go into administration? Do they ride off into the sunset? What do they do?

Teachers devote many years to schools and students and some even go into related areas of the profession such as administration as Freeman points out. An interesting question to ponder is how a teacher decides to end his or her career. In this article, we have two writers, and one is a younger teacher who finished up her master's with decisions to make as to how she will continue her teacher learning and the other writer is an experienced teacher educator who daily wonders what is next for her and what the time limit is. What ties these two individuals together is their relationship as a teacher and a student throughout two degree programs where both are learning together.

Living the present with COVID-19

At the time of carrying out this seminar and the interview, we discussed how our lives as teachers and professionals had changed. This section shows Professor Freeman's reflection regarding COVID-19.

It has really pushed me to look at what's central in what I'm working on with my students: What's interesting is maybe not as important as the core stuff. A second aspect is looking at the difference between providing input and digesting input. We often spend time in class giving input and then have students do the digesting. We ask people to talk about the input or if it's methodology, we may ask them to try it out and reflect on what they do. I realize now in this current time that this was pretty easy to organize. (There are lots of ways of digesting input.) But it is now much harder to accomplish. How do you digest the input when many forms of social interaction are limited?

Freeman makes a comparison of input and how we understand or make sense of this input within the classroom in the times of COVID-19. Input is what students receive and the ways to get across input are numerous. The next step refers to making sense of this input which Freeman names as "to digest the input". COVID-19 has made teachers reassess what we did before in face-to-face teaching and the challenges we face when teaching online.

Regarding COVID-19, Freeman mentions how the virus has brought to light the injustices within education and how they are prominent:

COVID has highlighted the incredible inequities in education systems in the United States and in other countries. We knew these inequities were there, but now we cannot recognize them. One of the takeaways one would hope from the pandemic is to continually press on these inequities of our educational systems, even as we recognize there are some positive things that delivering education can accomplish through these virtual means.

It is evident how education has had to step up to the pandemic and we have learned how to go about teaching on-line and respond digitally to the pandemic. This change of COVID-19 has opened our eyes to what we may have known about inequities, but with COVID-19 perhaps we cannot see them as clearly as when we were teaching face-to-face. These injustices still need to be readdressed and looked at.

Reflection for our ELT profession: Looking forward

At the end of the interview, we asked Donald Freeman for any suggestions for ELT teachers, and he provided the readers with a variety of aspects to reflect upon. First, Freeman says that the suggestions do not necessarily apply to specific teachers in Mexico, but more generally, to language teachers and teacher educators. His first suggestion was taken from an opening sentence of the well-known American guide to raising children, *Baby and Childcare* by the pediatrician, Benjamin Spock (1946), "You know more than you think you do". This well-known book dealt with the hows, whats, and whys of raising children, giving advice and explanations to parents. From this book, he links Spock's idea to language teaching.

The first line of that book became incredibly famous. It said to parents, "You know more than you think you do". In the author's case, he was writing about knowing how to raise children, but I think the same goes for language teachers-- You know a lot more than you think you do about teaching and learning.

In the case of this reflection, this phrase offers us confidence to trust ourselves and to delve into what knowledge we have. This confidence is important for all teachers and shows how teachers have more experience and understanding than what they may think. Teachers are not clean slates but have knowledge that can be accessed and put to use. As teacher educators, this is an area of opportunity to explore in our classes and even as English teachers.

Drivers of inquiry

Donald Freeman reflected that in his experience, he was always intrigued by the aspects that did not work as intended in his classes and what could be improved or changed. He provides the following explanations concerning what teachers can do.

Those drivers are not deficit drivers-- they are not about what you don't know. They're drivers of inquiry; they're drivers of interest, about what you want to learn... "You know more than you think you know" as a teacher, so don't let other people tell you what you need to learn in order to know more. Learn what you want to learn and what you think will be helpful to you in your work and situation...

Therefore, he proposes that teachers should take on what they feel is needed for their teaching and be proactive. Problems in each teacher's practice provide the teacher the motivation to explore them and make inquiries of these problematic issues. In essence, our problems keep us probing and examining our practice so that we do not stay in our comfort zone. Finally, Freeman gives us a lesson to be learned which is the art of patience.

Patience

During the interview, we discussed the pandemic and the effects it has had on teachers throughout the world. Freeman also commented on the importance of patience we should have within our profession as teachers, teacher educators, testers, program designers, and other roles we have.

Now more than ever we really do need to be patient with how things are going. The signs of impatience are all around us. In most public systems, a major sign of impatience is the testing regime that teachers have to live under. Parents and administrators will say your students to be at this point in the syllabus in order for them to test. (Even sometimes students themselves take up this attitude.). But testing is a manifestation of impatience... As Caleb Gattegno used to say: "It takes the time it takes to learn something." Learners know that sometimes they'll be ready to go on and sometimes they'll say, "I don't get that."

Gattegno created the Silent Way which is a language teaching method requiring the learner to be more in charge of his or her learning by trying to produce as much language as possible and figuring out how to create the language with limited spoken input from the teacher. Patience is needed to get ahead, but we cannot rush or force this. Freeman criticizes how testing has taken over our teaching to make sure students have learned what they are supposed to learn at a specific time in order to meet standards. We conclude this interview with another simile used by Freeman was "old ideas are like the lizard losing its tail," which refers to how losing something also means evolution.

...old ideas are kind of like the lizard losing its tail. As new ideas grow, the old ones are sluffed off. The new generation of teachers are going to be absolutely central in challenging old ideas and developing new ones.

Donald Freeman concluded with these words as to how the upcoming generations of language teachers and teacher educators are key for the development of new ideas by questioning the old ones. This reflecting back on older ideas and moving forward with newer ones shows the need for analysis and embracing changes. This illustrates the evolution of our profession and what the future can hold for us.

Conclusion

Professor Freeman has had an invaluable mark within our profession, as a teacher, teacher educator, editor, member of various editorial boards, and president of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). As well, he has given international presentations, carried out research projects throughout the world, and published books such as: *Teacher Learning in Language Teaching* (1996) with Jack C. Richards, *Doing Teacher-Research: From Inquiry to Understanding* (1998), and *Educating Second Language Teachers* (2016), and *Teacher Development Over Time* (2018), with Tessa Woodward and Kathleen Graves.

To conclude, we would like to invite our readers to reflect upon what we can do for our profession as teachers, educators, coordinators, and administrators. We have lived through a number of changes in the ELT profession, and we can observe what Professor Freeman perceives as the gaps and challenges. The solutions are in our hands and depend upon ourselves as to what each one of us wants to do. This reflection also provides us with a sense of agency and motivation for the future.

References

- Freeman, D. (1998). *Doing teacher-research: From inquiry to understanding*. Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Freeman, D. (2016). *Educating second language teachers*. Oxford University Press.
- Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. E. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(3), 397- 417. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588114>
- Freeman, D., Katz, A., Garcia Gomez, P., & Burns, A. (2015). English-for-teaching: Rethinking teacher proficiency in the classroom, *ELT Journal*, 69(2), 129-139. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccu074>
- Freeman, D. & Richards, J. C. (Eds.) (1996). *Teacher learning in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Huberman, M. (1993). *The lives of teachers*. Teachers College Press.
- Lengeling, M. M. (2010). *Becoming an English teacher: Participants' voices and identities in an in-service teacher training course in central Mexico*. Universidad Guanajuato.
- Spock, B. (1946). *Baby and childcare*. Duell, Sloan and Pearce.
- Woodward, T., Graves, K., & Freeman, D. (2018). *Teacher development over time: Practical activities for language teachers*. Routledge.
- Zeichner, K. M. & Gore, J. M. (1990). Teacher socialization. In W. R. Houston (Ed.) *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring questions in changing contexts* (pp. 329-348). Macmillan.