

## Interview with Marge Terdal: "A Good Little Story, Actually"

John Armbrust  
Portland State University

*This volume and each article in it are dedicated to Dr. Marjorie (Marge) Terdal. Throughout her 19 year tenure as professor of Applied Linguistics she served as an inspiration to colleagues and students alike. Her dedication to the field of TESOL is reflected in the large number of her students who teach around the world. In the local community Marge has been a strong supporter of the Oregon TESOL affiliate, ORTESOL.*

*Marge helped to found ORTESOL and served as President from 1980-1981. She presented at many of the conferences throughout her membership and served as the ORTESOL Journal editor from 1988 until 1994. At the national level Marge was a TESOL Journal contributing editor for several years and the TESOL Journal special issue co-editor for Volume 12, Number 3 coming out in the Autumn, 2003.*

*In her retirement Marge has been conducting international teacher training workshops, traveling to Cuba, Nepal and Greece in the Elderhostel program and devoting more time to her family. Those of us who have been inspired by Marge will miss her even as we feel a little envy. The faculty and students in the department of Applied Linguistics at Portland State University have been enriched by working with Marge. The contributors to this volume demonstrate the lasting impact that Marge continues to have on the field of professional language education.*

---

**John Armbrust is an instructor in the Intensive English Language Program at Portland State University.**

---

Over a period of 15 years, a procession of students passed through the doorways of Marge Terdal's classroom and office at Portland State University (PSU). In the process, they had the good fortune to be instructed, counseled, and encouraged by one of the finest educators in the TESOL profession. When Marge retired from her position in the Department of Applied Linguistics in the spring of 2001, that opportunity largely came to an end. Before grading the last of her students' papers and projects, however, Marge agreed to spend some time talking about her career in ESL/Linguistics and to share some of her views on classroom research.

Marge's introduction to ESL was like that of many in the profession, a combination of timing and serendipity. As she explained, "It's really a good little story, actually."

Upon moving to Oregon in 1965, Marge worked as a stay-at-home mother for several years following the births of her children. After that, she returned to the world of academia, initially in part-time positions training teacher aides for the Albina Head Start program and then in remedial English classes. Eventually, she was asked to teach a class for Spanish speakers. Although she already had a master's degree in English Literature from Michigan State University, she acknowledged that the prospect of teaching English to nonnative speakers was somewhat daunting. In fact, she recalled that her first reaction to teaching that group of non-English speaking students was, "I can't do that. I don't know anything about teaching English to nonnative speakers." As a result, she enrolled in the TESOL Methods class offered at PSU, became excited about the world of ESL instruction, and as they say, the rest is history.

At the time Marge began taking her first courses at PSU, there was not yet a graduate program in linguistics. There were, however, inspiring professors such as Jim Nattinger, who helped introduce her to a whole new world of possibilities. As she explained, "I found that I really loved linguistics more than I had really liked literature classes." At that time, she also joined the ESL teaching staff at PSU. Marge and fellow instructors Jan DeCarrico, Prue Douglas, and Shirley Morrell soon became known as the 'Gang of Four' after attending the TESOL conference in San Francisco and immersing themselves into the professional ranks of ESL. About the same time, Marge became one

of the original officers in the ORTESOL affiliate, which had recently been organized by Jan DeCarrico.

Eventually Marge decided to continue her own education, and she completed a Ph.D. in Curriculum Instruction at the University of Oregon in 1985. Realizing that, in her own words, the Department of Linguistics at PSU did not need someone else in linguistics, she focused her studies on curriculum development and teacher training because "what was needed was someone who knew about teacher training and teacher education." According to Marge, her "timing was good because I got the degree in '85, and in '86 I was allowed to teach the TESOL Methods class." In the next few years she developed and taught courses in Second Language Acquisition, Culture Learning, and English in the Workplace, among others.

Marge's experience developing the Culture Learning course typifies quite well her approach to teaching and research. From the outset, she worked with colleague Kim Brown to develop the course content and research projects related to their work in the course. The collaboration with Kim became a hallmark of the research that she would pursue throughout her career and promote in the courses she taught.

According to Marge, the quality of classroom research is enhanced by "collegiality and working with someone else when you do research." She explained, "Almost everything I've done has been with somebody else, and for a variety of reasons. First of all, I think it's nice to work with somebody. Second, I think that everybody has different strengths. So, when I worked with Kim, she brought the creativity and ability to see the big picture, and I brought the attention to details and some ideas on how to actually carry it out and write it up so that people would understand what was going on. Neither one of us would have been as successful by ourselves, in my opinion."

With Kim, she also "redesigned the whole TESOL Methods program," and early on they worked closely to collect data from students in their methods classes. This research helped inform what they did in those classes and inspired them, as she recalled, "to put the focus on the learner of a language rather than on methods of teaching." They focused on the concept that "people teach the way that they learn." In other words, as she explained, "You need to be aware of

yourself, to have some self-awareness, before you can go out and teach other people." This philosophy was also evidenced in the Culture Learning course, where she promoted the idea that "you need to be culturally self-aware before you can begin to understand other cultures."

In her tenure at PSU, Marge inspired a great number of students to try their hand at research. "A lot of it," she emphasized, "has been cooperating with my graduate students who have done research, to do a conference presentation with them or to write up a paper with them." She added that developing professional research skills is an important task for students and "something I know that very few of them will ever do on their own without a push."

An example of her cooperative research with students was the study she worked on in Japan with two former MA students, Robert Gaynor and Linda Dunn. That research looked at the question of whether teachers who are trained to teach in one culture can effectively transfer those skills to classrooms in another. It helped substantiate the observation of many EFL teachers working in Japan that "western-trained teachers have to adapt what they do in their classrooms. The things that they do (in the US) don't always work over there." For Marge, the study gave her the opportunity to "go into a classroom and see if that's really true, because then," she explained, "I could come back and tell my students here, 'Just because you're hearing all these ideas doesn't mean you're going to be able to put them into practice when you actually start teaching. You need to be able to adapt.'" When you begin teaching in a classroom in a different culture, she added, "don't ever expect to change everything that you find there."

The concept of cooperative learning is one that Marge regularly introduced into her courses, requiring students to work together on the planning and completion of projects. She explained that this reflects her philosophy toward learning and research in general. As an example, she cited her experience with her Research Design class, in which students worked in small groups to develop research questions and carry out a project to answer those questions. As she announced to her class when explaining the assignment, "In case that bothers you, just remember, most professional people work in groups, and do

research in groups, and publish in groups; and they either all get it accepted or don't get it accepted. And this is real life."

No one can argue that Marge didn't introduce you to "real life" in her courses. Those of us who had the privilege of learning from her know well the expectations for quality and attention to detail in assignments completed. Perhaps we never resented the demands because we knew, too, that she always put the same attention to detail in the preparation, presentation, and assessment for each of her courses.

We also learned to value the model of openness that she maintained as both professor and advisor. Part of this, she relates, had to do with her own training: "When I went to graduate school, I remember reading something about classroom teaching as teaching in a closed box. But I don't think it should be that way. I think it should be open, which is part of why I keep the door open to my classroom and the door open to my office. I think that it should be open."

When the doors to Marge's classroom and office finally closed, the legacy of her teaching and mentoring *were* firmly established at PSU, in Oregon, and throughout the world. Former students and colleagues will continue to practice what she has so generously taught, and they will continue to challenge themselves by recalling her questions: "What am I doing differently from what I did before to make myself a better teacher? Do I have the mental set to always be willing to try something different, and to keep track of how successful each technique is, so that when something works I can talk about it, *present it at* a conference somewhere?" Wise words indeed from a valued teacher and friend.

*Editor's Note:* This interview took place during spring term of 2001, when Marge Terdal was teaching her final full-time course load at Portland State University.

