Are you experienced? Coffee with Rose M. Senior

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Rose Senior is a language teaching expert based in Perth, Australia. She is the author of *The Experience of Language Teaching* (CUP, 2006), which won the Ben Warren International House Trust Prize in 2006 for being the most outstanding work in the field of language teaching education published that year. *iT's for Teachers* caught up with her for coffee and a chat about what it's like to be a language teacher.

iT's: Would you like coffee or tea?

Rose Senior: I'd like a white coffee, please – which for some reason is known as a "flat white" here in Western Australia.

iT's: We've found that most of the material we read for language teachers is about methodology or language, but not what it's like to be a language teacher. Your book is all about the latter. Can you tell us a little about it, and what drew you to this topic?

R. S.: When I look back at my schooldays, what I remember most vividly is how the naughtiest girl in my class was able to drive our French teacher to distraction – rather than how effectively my Latin teacher explained the use of the ablative absolute. I suspect it's the same with all of us: We remember the personalities and behaviour of our classmates, and the mannerisms and body language of our teachers, rather than methodologies that they followed. So yes, I've always been aware of everything that goes on around the actual teaching – what's happening in the wings, if you like – rather than what's going on centre stage.

Being a teacher all my life has meant that I've spent a great deal of time in staffrooms, chatting with colleagues and listening to what everyone has to say. One conversation that comes up regularly at the beginning of new courses focuses on the nature of people's classes. Someone will say to someone else, "How's your class?" or "Have you got a good class this term?" And the person will reply, "Yes, they're lovely", "I've got a great class", or "I'm going to have my hands full with this lot." The interesting thing is that teachers don't need to explain to their colleagues what they mean by "a good class" – it's something that everyone just knows. So I decided to find out more about good classes – what they were, how they functioned and what made them good or bad in the eyes of the teachers. The whole project mushroomed as I began to delve deeper and deeper into the thoughts, feelings and everyday classroom behaviour of language teachers. I became fascinated by the results, determined to understand in as much depth as I could what it means to be a language teacher on a day-in, day-out, year-in, year-out basis.

iT's: Why do people become English teachers? It can't be for the money ....

R. S.: No, it certainly isn't for the money. And it isn't for status, job security or career prospects either. Our profession is notorious for exploiting its most valuable asset – language teachers – for financial gain. I remember a teacher recalling taking a summer job where he and his fellow teachers struggled to teach competently in a school with sub-standard facilities and scant resources. He had a vivid memory of the owner arriving in a Rolls Royce and announcing that further cost-cutting measures were necessary. I think that says it all.

People become English language teachers for a variety of reasons. For young English speakers with an introductory teaching qualification, language teaching is a way of seeing the world and earning enough money along the way to keep themselves going. For mothers with young children, teaching English part-time is an excellent way of remaining in the workforce and earning extra money. Others reach their 40s or 50s and then step back and critically examine their careers, only to be dissatisfied with what they see. For them, moving into language teaching can provide a new direction and reinvigorate their lives. For energetic retirees with a sense of adventure, English language teaching can open up a range of exciting possibilities and, in the words of one teacher, "help sustain the belief that life is open-ended".

iT's: Some people seem to think English teaching is easy, especially if you are a native (or highly proficient) speaker of English. Do you agree?

R. S.: There's a common belief that anyone who can speak English can teach it. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although we learn our mother tongue naturally and effortlessly through constant exposure to the language that surrounds us, we learn second or further languages rather differently – usually with some kind of formal instruction to help speed up the process. It follows that native speakers, who are unlikely to have done much formal study of their mother tongue, are at a disadvantage. Yes, they can provide excellent models of language-in-use, and yes, they can make comments such as, "I'm sorry, but we just don't say it that way." But until they've spent time and effort coming to grips with how English functions as a system, they find it difficult to provide grammatical explanations with ease and conviction.

I would even go as far as to say that English teachers whose mother tongue is not English are in some ways better equipped to teach English than their native-English-speaking counterparts. Having studied English grammar themselves, they have a thorough knowledge of the structure of English. This enables them to explain *why* certain structures are ungrammatical, rather than simply providing models of correct usage. Also, such teachers are well placed to anticipate and remediate the kinds of errors that students from the same linguistic background as themselves are likely to make.

iT's: How do English teachers get better at their jobs? Is it just a question of "practice makes perfect"?

R. S.: This is an interesting question. I've interviewed and observed a large number of language teachers over the years and have come to the conclusion that some teachers go on and on developing, while others plateau-out and don't develop any further. I don't think it's a matter of "practice makes perfect" because some teachers who've been in the profession for a long time simply teach in the same way over and over again, never attempting to do things differently or to make their lessons more interesting and dynamic.

I'm not suggesting that to get better at their jobs teachers have to experiment all the time. We all develop personal repertoires of things that work, just as we learn optimal ways of explaining things or of making learning more memorable. However, what distinguishes highly effective teachers from run-of-the-mill teachers is that the former are constantly alert to the needs and interests of their particular classes, and are prepared to put time and effort into finding new materials and techniques and trying them out. Such teachers see teaching as an ongoing journey of discovery, rather than as a rush to a destination where, having arrived, they can sit back and relax.

iT's: In your book you mention class-centred teaching, which sounds really interesting. Could you tell us a little about this?

R. S.: Yes. Class-centred teaching is a concept that helps language teachers teach more effectively. It enables language teachers – and indeed all teachers – to keep in mind that successful teaching involves far more than simply presenting new material and organising classroom activities; it involves keeping classes as "together" as possible. My research has confirmed what we as teachers intuitively know: that students work harder and more enthusiastically in classes with cohesive atmospheres than they do in classes that lack a feeling of togetherness and forward momentum. We can't guarantee, of course, that every class we teach will reach a high level of cohesion. Most of us have experienced the occasional class from hell, when things don't go right however hard we try. However, my research has also shown that highly effective teachers have a higher proportion of classes that function cohesively than do other teachers. So what is it that successful teachers are doing?

The answer is that highly effective teachers behave in class-centred ways. Knowing how important it is to maintain a sense of togetherness within their classes, such teachers intuitively adapt what and how they teach – and how they manage individual students and the overall class group – during the course of each and every lesson. These tiny adjustments, made instantaneously on the basis of spontaneous student feedback, are what enable classes to continue to function smoothly. For example, a teacher might decide to let students remain seated and complete an activity with a partner – rather than getting up and mingling with the whole class – because something tells them that it would be unwise to compel students to interact freely with one another on this particular occasion.

The curious thing is that I didn't coin the term *class-centred teaching* until I'd been conducting research for some time. This is because I'd spent so much time trying to understand the social dynamics of class groups that I'd forgotten to examine how the teachers actually went about teaching. It wasn't until I went back and re-examined the data that I realised that experienced teachers were not only *managing* but also *teaching* their classes in ways that enhanced class cohesion. In other words, they were teaching in class-centred ways!

iT's: Based on your research, what are the most frustrating and the most rewarding things about being an English teacher?

R. S.: I can give a pretty clear answer to both these questions, which are really opposite sides of the same coin. We can judge many jobs in terms of two kinds of rewards: (1) extrinsic rewards, which include having high status, being in a position of power and influence, being well paid and so on; and (2) intrinsic rewards, which include doing your job to the best of your ability and knowing that you are respected, valued and appreciated by those for whom you are responsible.

As I mentioned earlier, English teachers are unlikely to score highly on the external rewards front. However, the intrinsic rewards are those that give language teachers a deep level of satisfaction: seeing students' eyes light up when the penny drops, seeing students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds developing friendships with one another, watching students mature and develop confidence, and receiving positive feedback on a day-to-day basis in myriad small ways.

What causes English teachers the most frustration is being denied the opportunity to receive the intrinsic rewards of teaching that they value so highly. External interference often takes the form of management decisions that impact on the freedom of language teachers to do what they know is best for their class. Such interference can include placing students with differing learning needs and goals in the same class, adding extra students to classes that are already full and functioning well, insisting that an inappropriate coursebook or syllabus is closely followed, imposing tests that drastically reduce teaching time and so on.

iT's: In your research, did you find any other common attributes, or values shared by English teachers?

R. S.: Yes, I've noticed one attribute that is shared by virtually all English teachers: being humanistic. As one teacher once said to me, "I'm a people person. I want to be able to develop rapport with my classes and relate to them as one human being would to another. I don't want them to regard me as an old dragon who dishes out punishment at the first opportunity, or as an authority figure who stands on their pedestal dispensing knowledge and who never gets anything wrong. We all get things wrong sometimes. No, I want my students to like and trust me because they recognise that I'm a fellow human being and that I've got their best interests at heart."

Being humanistic isn't, of course, the same as being relaxed and pally with our students and letting them get away with things. Particularly if we're teaching teenagers in high schools, we need to set the ground rules for acceptable classroom behaviour and ensure that these are maintained. There are humanistic ways of doing this, of course. And the funny thing is that, once we've got our classes onside, students will often pull one another into line.

iT's: What advice would you give to someone starting out on a career in language teaching?

R. S.: The advice I'd give is, Go for it! It's a wonderfully satisfying and rewarding career, despite the frustrations I've mentioned. Always do your best for your students, and you'll be amply rewarded.

iT's: Thanks very much for joining us.