International English

Jeanne Marcum Gerlach, Editor

For this column, I am pleased to share Olena Tarasova’s impressions of American English teaching and Kathy Megyeri’s reflections about teaching English in the Ukraine. Olena met Kathy when they both participated in an international conference in Delaware in 1998. Later that year, Kathy spent two weeks in Kiev teaching and observing. She and Olena worked on projects together and hope to continue their partnership in the future. These articles open our eyes to the differences and similarities of teaching English in both countries. The writers remind us that teaching English is, indeed, a global process.

My Impressions of My American Colleagues

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I’m the luckiest person in the world. This is what I’m sure about because I had an opportunity to meet so many interesting people across the Atlantic and even make friends with them in America. Those people also are teachers, as I am. And I learned from my American colleagues that this profession is not considered very prestigious in the US. But I don’t think American and Ukrainian teachers should be disappointed, because we are with people who are always young and interested in rock, pop, rap, football, basketball, racing cars, and roller skating. Teachers get to feel like teenagers forever.

In both the US and the Ukraine, there are people who only call themselves teachers, but their profession is a boring burden to them that they have to carry daily to earn money. When I visited America, I was present at such lectures and classes. Many teachers were uninteresting, boring, and unengaging. But I found many of the people I met in Delaware during the conference who later came to Ukraine, and some others who made their presentations, to be dedicated, enthusiastic, inventive, and as innovative and pioneering as one could imagine. Age didn’t matter. Where the teacher came from, whether it was a capital city or a provincial town, didn’t matter. The different sizes and conditions of their schools didn’t matter, either, because most of them were the best American teachers. Their overwhelming love for their profession and for their students was sacred. They had a strong desire to develop students’ personalities, to teach them how to become masters of themselves, to teach them what is right and what is wrong. They wanted to show students how to become aware of their talents, how to develop them, how to occupy a deserving place in society, and how to achieve worth. They thought it important to make learning materials not only interesting but compelling, engaging, and captivating to excite both the mind and senses of the student. They tried to create an environment that fosters and encourages learning. For them, human values are the core of any subject or discipline and the main principle of teaching. These teachers are highly motivated to learn more and more about everything. They are eager to travel as much as possible and meet as many different people as they can. They try to live in those people’s conditions and with their problems. They try to test and experiment and achieve their own personal goals. They are very much like children, and that’s why they are always young.

At the same time, some American teachers are highly competitive and ambitious. Though we were told that teamwork is the foundation of a school, I could clearly see many of the teachers in America are set on individualism and privacy. The average teacher, I think, concentrates on his/her own family, school, home, and success and doesn’t know much about the world. Many do not even know their neighboring countries and never speak about Europe or the Ukraine, in particular. Maybe this is the result of being too self-confident, but it could also be ignorance. To me, it seems that those teachers just don’t care about other parts of the world and the people in it.
In my opinion, American teachers are more like friends to students than an authority you have to obey, so they are not dictatorial. It is better because the atmosphere of friendliness, easiness, and benevolence prevails, which allows students to easily express themselves. But sometimes the teachers cannot tell the truth to their students about the real state of things—their abilities, their talents, their behaviors, and their attitude to their studies. They aren’t allowed to give students a good talking to when they deserve it. They can’t say they aren’t pleased with the students’ work. They have to praise and find diplomatic phrases so as not to offend students. They have to be very democratic, and thus they become victims of democracy. Too much democracy at school is not always good; but then, this is my personal opinion.

American teachers respect authority, order, and law. Though the history of their country is the history of constant antagonism with the British, the one country that once hindered their independence, it is obvious that Americans want to look, act, and live the way the British do. That is quite natural because many Americans are of British ancestry, and British culture is the foundation of American culture.

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I never thought to find so much in common with my colleagues across the Atlantic, representatives of a different civilization. Teachers in the USA have computers, copy machines, videos, rich libraries, visual aids, and more importantly, from my point of view, higher salaries. In the Ukraine, teaching is now a hobby, a rather expensive hobby, because you don’t get much for your work—little or nothing. You can’t support your family on the salary, but then my colleagues say you can’t compare everything. I know that teachers are the same when they achieve success. They are really Teachers with a capital letter when they work hard daily, when they improve and enrich their knowledge, when they move forward to apply the achievements of modern civilization, and when they place their personal selves on the altar of love to their profession and to students. That’s why some teachers burn with passion while others just smolder. That’s why some teachers succeed and others fail.

Reflections on My Ukrainian Colleagues

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Watching a Ukrainian instructor teach English is like watching a magician perform in the Kiev circus. In crowded, cramped, stuffy classrooms without textbooks, computers, overheads, record players, or VCRs and using old rags for blackboard erasers, the teacher makes a foreign language come alive. It’s a language most of her students know only from rock videos, the cinema, and EuroNews on television, and it’s a language not usually spoken outside her classroom. So the burden of building the props of her magic act is on her. Thus, she begs for textbooks, copies English phrases and country music lyrics pirated from cassette tapes, writes her own play scripts, and searches for poems and short stories an English-speaking tourist might bring into the country or a relative might bring from the West. In class, she acts, sings, dances, cajoles, motivates, encourages, reprimands, recites, and repeats English words and phrases. She writes English phonetically on the board as students diligently write in their “copybooks.” She knows that if she teaches them the basics and lays the foundation, their...
creativity and imagination will follow, and, eventually, the students will think in English as well. She teaches them about American holidays, lectures them on American history, drills them on the fifty states and capitals, recounts the accomplishments of US Presidents, and juxtaposes the command economy with the free-market system. With a monthly salary of less than $60, she must tutor students outside of class to make ends meet and help provide for her family. The result is that with barren rooms, a nonexistent school library, no copy machines, and no access to the Internet, she will type exercises on multiple sheets of carbon paper so her pupils learn their American history, government, and literature more thoroughly than most Americans.

But this magician-teacher is not on stage alone. Her eager pupils await transformation. The students and their parents know that English, today's international language, will be the key to their success. Like youth in other parts of the world, they know that tomorrow's jobs will require them to learn English, math, and computer science, so those subject matter teachers are in demand in the Ukraine, as they are elsewhere.

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Last October I observed and taught in two secondary schools for two weeks in Kiev—the Kyiv Mohyla Collegium and the Gymnasium Troyeschina. The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Information Agency, the American Council of Teachers of Russian, and the American Council for Collaboration in Education and Language Study paid for my trip. The program originated in 1996 when President Clinton visited Ukraine and asked what he could do to support democracy in the land that had broken free of the former Soviet Union.

“Send us teachers,” they answered. “If democracy is to work here, it has to start in the schools.” How fortunate I was to be among twenty-nine teachers selected to visit and teach in that part of the world. My assignment was in Kiev, while my colleagues traveled to other parts of the Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. During this time, I came to appreciate the inventiveness and creativity of teachers who have less than I but who attain better results, probably for many reasons. Granted, their economy is in “transition,” as they say, and they have opportunities to travel outside the country, but what makes them unique is their enthusiasm for English. Their dedication to teaching in spite of poor pay is truly amazing. But they enjoy remarkable support from parents, small class sizes, a close relationship with one another, and students who share most of the burden of their own education. Unlike our letter grades, numbers 1–5 are given on report cards, with five being the highest. In public schools, the students wear uniforms, buy their own books, and stand to address their teachers as “Professor.” The magic that the Ukrainian teachers perform is that their students place a great deal of emphasis on scholastic achievement. They are highly motivated, and their classroom management and structured discipline is commendable. After eight years of compulsory education, students can opt to go to work, enter a two-year trade school, or continue to the eleventh grade, after which they will enter one of three types of institutions—a technical college, a specialty institute, or a university. Students prepare extensively for their entrance exams for college; thus, most teachers make a good second living at tutoring. Students take a minimum of three languages—Russian, Ukrainian, and English—but German, French, and Spanish are also offered. The Kiev Collegium is well known for its English instruction, and the nearby Troyeschina Gymnasium is known for its technology, offering computer aided instruction on Windows 98, a rarity in most other schools. In English classes, pupils are instructed in “British English,” since the teachers are mostly trained in Great Britain, but students want to learn American English because of the imported US rock videos and movies. As student Roman Petreniko wrote, “I hope that someday we will be like American students.”
Like American teens, Ukrainian students are preparing for the changing job market. They fret about the quality of life they will have in the future, for they know they cannot take the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter for granted. Most worry about the political instability as they cope with transition and watch multiple political parties jockey for control. They see their country's elderly on small fixed retirements often begging for food or attempting to sell a family heirloom in the metro stations and along country roads. But over and over during my teaching time in the Ukraine, I heard from both students and teachers alike that they never realized the universality of emotion and desire that the US and Ukrainian people possess. Both of us are optimistic, open to possibility; we desire to know more about each other, and we enjoy learning. American student Alec Tash summed it up succinctly when he wrote, “The Ukrainians are just like us.” What a valuable lesson for today's youth to learn of their counterparts half a world away. It is a true beginning to democracy, thanks to those Ukrainian magician-teachers and the US government that made the exchange possible.

Memberships Available in the NCTE Committee on Instructional Technology

A limited number of memberships in the newly reconstituted Committee on Instructional Technology will be available to interested members of the Council. Major functions of the committee will be to study emerging technologies and their integration into English and language arts curricula and teacher education programs; to identify the effects of such technologies on teachers, students, and educational settings, with attention to minority, disabled, and disadvantaged students; to explore means of disseminating information about such technologies to the NCTE membership; to serve as liaison between NCTE and other groups interested in computer-based education in English and language arts; to maintain liaison with the NCTE Commission on Media and other Council groups concerned with instructional technology.

If you would like to be considered for membership in this group, send a one-page letter by October 10, 1999, explaining your specific interest in the committee, relevant background, and your present professional work to: Administrative Assistant to the Secondary Associate Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.

Call for SLATE Starter Sheets

The SLATE Steering Committee invites submission of Starter Sheets, on sociopolitical aspects of education. Samples of past topics have been tracking and grouping, the English Only movement, equal access to computers, and censorship.

SLATE Starter Sheets are intended as action-oriented information sources for English and language arts professionals. The format for Starter Sheets should include, but is not limited to, the following: (1) presentation and background of the issue/topic; (2) general discussion, usually including NCTE positions; (3) recommendations for action or further examination; and (4) brief list of references and/or core resources. Starter Sheets manuscripts will undergo blind review by at least two outside referees who have expertise in the area. Please submit four copies of the manuscript, typewritten and double-spaced on 8½" × 11" paper with one-inch margins. Use your name and affiliation on a title page only. Manuscripts should be between 2,000 and 4,000 words in length. Send manuscripts to: Lynn Carhart, Monmouth RHS, 1 Norman J. Field Way, Tinton Falls, NJ 07724-4005.