

Interview with Dr. Andy Curtis, President TESOL International Association

Dr. Andy Curtis attended the 45th Annual Conference in White Plains. He was invited as a plenary speaker and also gave two workshops. Dr. Curtis came for the whole weekend, arriving Thursday night and departing Sunday morning. NYS TESOL 2015–2016 president Sarah Elia and 2012–2014 president Susanne Marcus had the pleasure of sitting down with Dr. Curtis for an interview on Friday morning, November 12. The following is an excerpt of the interview.

Sarah Elia (SE): You are so involved in the conference this weekend. Usually a leader of your stature is not as engaged as you are in a state conference. What brought you here and what made you decide to be so active the entire weekend?

Dr. Andy Curtis (AC): I was just at MexTESOL [Mexico TESOL], and I was the only invited speaker at the closing ceremony, because the other invited speakers had to leave to do other things before the conference ended, which everyone totally understood. But when I can, I like to come at the beginning and stay until the end, so I can fully experience the event. And one of the things that I have wanted to do, one of my goals coming in as the 50th president of TESOL, has been to strengthen our relationships with our affiliates, including New York State TESOL, MexTESOL, and many others.

What I found is that, for many years, we [the TESOL Association] have been quite quantity based in our affiliate relations. So, we got very excited when we reached 100 affiliates, which was an achievement. But instead of focusing on the *quantity* of the affiliates, I wanted us to focus on the *quality* of the relationships with our affiliates. And to do that, you've got to be there, not only presenting, but you also need to as present and as available as you can be, for as long as you can be.

The way I am doing my presidency is different. Everyone does it differently. I gave up a well-paid, full-time position, mainly because I couldn't do my presidency the way I felt it needed to be done, and do a full-time paid job at the same time. So, I've chosen to be largely without an income for these three years—in fact being the president has cost me income. So, like most things in life, it comes down to a time-money equation. If you're going to give one thousand days of your life to your field and to your association, then really *give* it. Pay it back, and pay it forward, with as much passionate professionalism as you can give!

Susanne Marcus (SM): Your point is so well taken. Having been president for two years, I could not give up my main position, but I let other paid positions go because the presidency of a statewide organization requires a great deal of time. NYS TESOL is just one little affiliate of you as an international organization, and you're dealing with multiple personalities and multiple regulations, not only internationally but also in the United States. So one of the things that interests me, coming from the K–12 world and changing NYS regulations, is how our state has decided to create more duly certified professionals to work with our ELLs. They have done this by decreasing the number of credits you would need to become certified in ESL. So rather than requiring a full master's, there is an incentive to permit NYS content area certified teachers to go for an additional 15 credits and then be deemed qualified to work with ELLs. I wanted to know if you see this as a trend, either nationally or internationally. This has caused a lot of concern among teachers and administrators alike. There is great concern for our ELLs, who have the

greatest need for the most skilled teachers who understand the complexities they bring to the classroom. This is very disconcerting to those of us who researched and worked in the fields of applied linguistics, second language acquisition, cross-cultural communication, and so on, with full master's degrees and beyond. We tend to be the voice of our students and their families, their advocacy group. Are you seeing nationally a trend toward decreasing the training of ESL/ELL educators than in the past?

AC: Yes, I think in the United States, in particular, and although I don't think it's global, and it's not unique to the United States, I do see more of this trend in the United States, which I think is part of this tendency toward commodification of education, including language education, and tendency to focus on the quantity of education over the quality of education. This is a problem when business paradigms and political agendas drive education, which is how we can end up with a quantity-based model of education. So the depth of learning is not there. It seems to be more about learning a lot, but at a more superficial level, and I think that can be seen in a "de-skilling" of the language teaching profession, in some contexts, and in the teaching profession in general, including in many states in the United States, where the idea seems to be to go for more quantity and less quality, higher volume and better test results, without a deeper understanding and without those all-important deep levels of learning. So to me it looks like pressure to move toward what I see as a more superficial, surface level of learning. And for that, you don't need as many qualifications, or as much experience. It's the old model of the teacher as technician, delivering content knowledge that can be tested easily, but not necessarily creating in-depth understanding. And it's not only in New York. It's across the country, and in a number of other places around the world. But I do see a lot of those trends happening here, and I don't see so much of them in Canada, for example.

SM: As an affiliate of TESOL, we have been working much more on advocacy these past few years. Do you think there is a different angle from which we can approach the policy makers for explaining exactly what you have just said? Because you said it so well; it *is* a "de-skilling." It is about looking very carefully at students' scores and then equating them with teacher effectiveness. This doesn't really tell you much because there are so many variables that have absolutely nothing to do with teachers. So, how can we get this information to the people making policies?

AC: Deena Boraie, a past president of the TESOL Association, from Egypt, spoke at MexTESOL, and talked about an idea that really resonated with me, which was something along the lines of: We may dislike these decision-makers, and we may especially dislike some of these politicians, but we must learn their language, and we must stop talking to them about language education as if they cared the way we do, because they don't! So, we need to learn the language of these politicians and other decision makers, then use that language, their language, to help them understand the importance of what we're doing. There is this growing concern that business and politics is driving education, which means businesspeople and politicians, so I very much like the idea that, instead of opposing them and arguing with them, we embrace these people, learn their language, learn their lives, and *then* we can get our message across to them. Deena's point was that teachers love to talk to teachers about teaching, of course! But, in these talks, we are leaving out some of the major decision makers, who these days, more and more, for better and for worse, are the business folks and the politicians. We have to learn how to talk with them, using their words and their language, so we can understand each other better.

Because we care so passionately about what we do, there is an assumption that these people—businesspeople and politicians—should care too, which I think is a fundamental misunderstanding. They do care, but what they care about is votes. They care about money, and they care about business. There is a whole set of things they care about that have nothing to do with our day-to-day classroom realities. So, we have to find ways to tap into the things that these people care about, rather than talking to them about the things we care about, like language education.

I don't mean to suggest that doing this is easy, because it's not, but to me, it is a lot like learning a new language. I learned this partly from the TESOL Association's annual Advocacy Summit in June, which culminates with a day on Capitol Hill, when it occurred to me that so many of our politicians seem to suffer from some kind of attention deficit disorder! So, if you can't tap into their interests within 30 seconds, you have lost them. If you start talking about the importance of young people in state-funded education, you've lost them. Because, if their kids are going to elite private schools, what do they know about, and why would they care about, state-funded education? So you find that self-interest, you find it quickly, and you work it as best you can within the 30 seconds you have with them, before their attention starts to drift.

SM: I'm curious to know how much TESOL has reached out to communities throughout the world—for example with the movement of Syrians recently in places like Europe, where there is a huge influx of immigrants—to support these new communities as they receive a great number of language learners. So, how are these countries embracing their new immigrants? Is there something we can learn from other countries when they try to help their new immigrants adjust? I don't know if it is something we have ever looked at.

AC: In relation to "reaching out," TESOL International has been doing a lot more in recent years—especially this year—to "Take TESOL to the World." This is an initiative based on the idea that, as many of our members cannot come to the annual convention in North America, we should do more to take TESOL to them. So, this year, the association has worked with local organizations to have our first ever major events in India, in Vietnam, in Singapore, in Mexico, and elsewhere.

About our work with immigrants and refugees, the association has an active Refugee Concerns Interest Section, and I'd recommend looking at their newsletter, which is, like all our IS newsletters, online and freely available to everyone, whether or not they are TESOL members. This is another way in which we are reaching out to communities worldwide, by making more of our resources freely available. I should also add that the most recent issue of the RCIS newsletter has articles from TESOL professionals working with immigrants and refugees in and/or from Burundi, Myanmar, Rwanda, Burma, and other countries with similar concerns.

SE: TESOL International is one of a number of associations, within the United States and in other countries, advocating for the rights of language teachers and language learners, including new immigrants and the recent influx of Syrian refugees into many countries. If these organizations could come together, and work together, wouldn't they have a better chance of effecting more positive change?

AC: One of the things that Professor [James Paul] Gee said this morning [November 12], although he said it very gently and very nicely, was "get over yourselves!" Because teachers are far more territorial than people expect us to be. Because we are committed and passionate,

people expect us to all work together smoothly, but I think the decision makers know that we are not necessarily inclined to work together, and the politicians know that we are not inclined to come together. Put your other issues aside, and unite, Professor Gee said, and then, when you've got what you need for your learners and for you, then you can go back to your "in-fighting."

I think that part of the genius of these decision makers is that they know, first, that we care passionately, and second, they know that we are not necessarily inclined to work together. So, yes, we can learn from and work with these other, "sister" organizations, but we generally don't. So, until we, as Professor Gee put it, "get over ourselves," we are not going to be united. And as long as that continues, we're going to keep playing into the hands of the decision makers, who will keep using the age-old tactic of "divide-and-conquer," until we're finally able to speak together with one voice, so loud that it can no longer be ignored.

We (SE and SM) were both grateful to have had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Andy Curtis in such an honest, open way. His warmth and authenticity were remarkably refreshing, especially for someone in his position. Thank you to Valentina Portnov, 2015 Annual conference chair, for reaching out to TESOL and inviting Dr. Curtis to our event.