

Andrew D. Cohen Interview with *The English Connection*

In mid-July, KOTESOL's The English Connection connected with Dr. Cohen for the following interview. — Ed.

The English Connection (TEC): Dr. Cohen, please tell us a little about yourself and how you became involved in applied linguistics and English language education?

Dr. Cohen: In prep school at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, I studied Latin, which I did for four years. After two years of Latin under my belt, with great trepidation, I began a “living” language, namely French. The summer after high school, I went on the Experiment in International Living to Bordeaux for two months, living with two French families the first month and then cycling in the château country, Brittany, and in Normandy with two of my friend’s sisters. That helped to solidify my French skills and initiated my fascination with different languages and cultures.

I majored in French history and literature at Harvard, and went on to do two years with the Peace Corps in rural community development with the Aymara Indians on the High Plains of Bolivia. I came away from that program with high-level skills in Spanish as well as some fluency in Aymara. That experience led me to do an MA in linguistics and a doctorate in international development education at Stanford University. My doctoral program entailed looking at educational issues in Third World countries from the different social scientific perspectives, with my personal focus being on language related issues.

My doctoral research was an evaluation of one of the first federally funded bilingual education programs in the United States, a Spanish-English program in Redwood City, California. By then, I was already becoming an applied linguist under the expert tutelage of Robert Politzer and Charles Ferguson. Fergy at the time had recently arrived at Stanford from the Center for Applied Linguistics (Washington, D.C.) for which he was the president for some years.

My first job after getting my doctorate at Stanford was as an assistant professor in the ESL section of the English Department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). At the time (1972), this program had twelve professors, all specializing in different aspects of the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language. I believe it was then the only MA program in TESL of its kind in the nation. Now, there must be well over 500 such MA programs. My role was to teach classes in language assessment, bilingual education, English pronunciation, and various other subjects. I was rubbing shoulders with some of the finest experts in the field, such as Marianne Celce-Murcia, Cliff Prator, Don Bowen, and Russ Campbell.

While at UCLA for four years, I became the evaluator of one of the first full-immersion programs in the United States at the time, the Culver City Spanish Immersion Program, and I ended up publishing a series of articles on that program. As part of my teaching at UCLA, I also supervised a course in Hebrew for developing ESL teachers (with a native Hebrew speaker as language instructor). I intended to put the shoe on the other foot by having the developing teachers learn a language quite different from any they had previously learned in order to get them to empathize more with their ESL students.

Every Friday, I would lead a discussion about the strategies that these developing teachers deployed in their efforts to learn and use Hebrew.

While doing my doctorate at Stanford, I would work closely with Mexican-American children in the Redwood City Title VII Bilingual Program, which included creating for the kids a closed-circuit TV show that I used as a medium for having them share special features from their language and cultural heritage.

An outcome of this experience was that I began to feel somewhat of a hypocrite in that I myself was unfamiliar with my own heritage as an American Jew and did not speak Hebrew. So, instead of staying at UCLA, I went off to Jerusalem Israel with my wife and two-year-old daughter, and became a senior lecturer at Hebrew University in order to give my family and myself a chance to experience our heritage full on. I taught courses in child language development and in cognitive processes associated with the learning of reading and writing in the first language, in this case, Hebrew. I was allowed to teach in English for my first year but after that and for the subsequent 15 years, in Hebrew. There were lots of growing pains along the way, with my instruction through Hebrew plodding a bumpy course for the first three years. Among other things, I had to learn how to touch-type in Hebrew in order to prepare course handouts.

So, it is fair to say that during my 17 years in Israel, I was not engaged in ESL but rather multilingual education. If my students were from English-, French-, Spanish-, or Portuguese-speaking countries, they wrote their course papers for me in that language. Ironically, I found it easier to read and especially scan in those languages as opposed to Hebrew, the official language of instruction. I quickly learned that I was not good at discerning when my students did not have a grasp of the subject matter, and I certainly was unable to discern plagiarism in Hebrew.

When I returned to the States and assumed a position at the University of Minnesota in the Program in ESL at the time, in the Department of Linguistics, I then returned to ESL proper. Eventually the program morphed into a program in second language studies. I ended up teaching at UMN for 22 years. Once again, I was engaged in courses dealing with the teaching of ESL/EFL. My courses ranged from ESL materials development to language assessment to pragmatics. When we started an undergraduate minor in second language studies, I developed a course for undergraduates called "Practical Language Learning for International Communication," which perhaps 500 UMN undergraduates took, either before or after doing study abroad. The course also attracted Asian students doing study abroad in the US, as well as immigrants from Somalia, Ethiopia, Laos, and the Middle East. I also taught a freshman seminar entitled "Alternative Ways for Becoming Comfortably Multilingual," which provided freshman an opportunity to learn about all the ways that they could develop skills in other languages at a point in their lives when such input was extremely valuable for them. For years after that initial seminar, I did a follow-up with available students from that seminar and found out that it had been invaluable to them: They had become informed consumers of language programs, something that many learners are not.

TEC: Please give us an idea about what you plan to convey in your plenary session that you will be giving at the international conference. Will it be useful for the early-career teacher as well as for the more experienced instructor?

Cohen: My plenary will consider whether language strategies deployed by learners have kept pace with mobile apps and online programs aimed at assisting them. The talk will use as a vehicle a case study of myself as a hyperpolyglot attempting to fine-tune word meanings in Chinese, which was conducted by me and my colleague/Chinese tutor, Isobel Wang, who is now a research fellow at the University of Graz in Austria. Fortunately, the study, “Fine-Tuning Word Meanings through Mobile App and Online Resources: A Case Study of Strategy Use by a Hyperpolyglot,” was just accepted for publication by the journal *System* and hopefully will appear before the conference. Here is an abstract of the study:

The purpose of this study was to investigate a hyperpolyglot’s strategies for fine-tuning his understanding of Chinese vocabulary through mobile apps, online programs, and interactions with a tutor. Videotaped verbal reporting revealed that the subject used strategies for (1) managing vocabulary resources – planning, organizing, and monitoring/evaluating their use, and for (2) processing the information in the resources – finding word equivalents in Chinese for English words, fine-tuning the word meanings and then verifying them. He predominantly used strategies either in sequence or in pairs, sometimes separately, and only occasionally in clusters. While he was successful at fine-tuning 57% of the vocabulary items through accessing selected resources, his fine-tuning efforts still were unsuccessful 43% of the time. The effectiveness of fine-tuning depended on the subject’s ability to find the information he needed, to orchestrate the various aspects of word knowledge, and to monitor and evaluate his performance. This case study with one highly experienced language learner applied a close-up lens to the process of vocabulary fine-tuning, and provided insights for researchers and teachers regarding strategies for accessing technology aimed at enhancing vocabulary knowledge.

The plenary will situate this work in the larger context and is especially relevant to teachers in foreign-language contexts such as EFL teachers in South Korea, where learners may not have very much contact with the target language outside of class. While the study focused on fine-tuning of vocabulary and looked just at vocabulary for writing, the findings have implications for the other skill areas – listening, speaking, and reading.

It is fair to say that one of my career goals has been to support early-career teachers as fully as possible. I always answer email queries from whomever around the world. In addition, my research efforts often have looked for issues that have been swept under the rug. In the case of this current research project, I have been skeptical about claims made regarding technologies in that as a consumer it is readily apparent to me that I am good at underutilizing whatever technology I access, be it on my mobile phone or on my desktop or laptop computer. I enjoy exploring whether the emperor has clothes on or not.

TEC: You will also be doing a 105-minute workshop at the conference. Would you tell us a little about it and what type of teacher might benefit most from it?

Cohen: The workshop will focus on another area that I think has been shoved under the rug, namely, that of how non-native teachers of the language as well as native teachers deal with instruction about pragmatics in the target language (TL). I focus in on pragmatics because I think it is such a crucial area in language learning. It is possible for language learners to fill their notebooks with all sorts of information on vocabulary and grammar, while still not having a handle on just when it is appropriate

to use the given words, phrases, and grammatical structures. This starts with basic greetings such as “How are you?” and “Good day” – knowing when and how to use them.

I will make the case that there are advantages to being non-native and that there are also advantages to being native with regard to pragmatics instruction. Examples of both will be provided, drawing largely on an international survey of both groups of teachers that I conducted with 113 teachers worldwide.

I incorporated the results of the survey into a book that I published last year with Multilingual Matters, *Learning Pragmatics from Native and Nonnative Language Teachers*. I am happy to say that the book is selling well, even given the widespread promotion of World Englishes and the downplaying of so-called norms for English performance, be they US-based, British, or Australian.

In the hands-on part of the workshop, participants will discuss first in small groups and then with all workshop participants their responses to a 20-item questionnaire that they will be requested to fill out before the workshop. (There are slight differences between the native- and non-native versions of the questionnaires.)

My sense is that the workshop will be of value to both teachers and developing teachers in heightening their awareness as to how they deal with their knowledge of TL pragmatics in the language that they teach or intend to teach. I have conducted this workshop both in the US, in Padua, Italy, and in Stavanger, Norway.

TEC: Of all the ELT-related activities and research that you’ve been involved in, which has provided you with the most satisfaction?

Cohen: That’s a good question, since I have been engaged in so many ELT-related activities over my career. It is fair to say that I have gotten satisfaction from numerous activities, be they doing plenaries or workshops for regional TESOL meetings in the US, such as Rocky Mountain TESOL and Southeast TESOL, or leading a breakfast discussion as a luminary for the International TESOL Conference.

Once I led a full-day workshop for 250 EFL teachers in Edirne, Turkey. I have also led a five-day institute at the University of Nanjing on strategies instruction for Chinese EFL teachers representing numerous different regions of China.

It gives me satisfaction to know that my publications dealing with the numerous research areas I have been involved in (e.g., language learner strategies, language assessment, mental translation, research methods such as verbal report, pragmatics, and other areas) have been read with interest by ESL/EFL teachers worldwide.

TEC: You have been in Korea numerous times. What is your impression of the ELT scene here?

Cohen: I have been very impressed with the high level of professionalism of teachers of English in South Korea. When I gave a plenary and another paper at the Korean Association of Teachers of English (KATE) International Conference, held in Busan way back in 2002, I was struck by just how many of the participants had doctorates in English applied linguistics from numerous places around the world, including from

South Korea. The level of the presentations that I heard was excellent, and the engagement of these professionals in the issues of importance to the field was most impressive.

While being a plenary speaker at the Conference of the International Association of Korean Language Education (IAKLE) in Seoul in 2012, I had an opportunity to give talks at four universities as well and to interact with ELT experts and was impressed by their knowledge of the field and level of engagement.

TEC: If you could change anything about ELT – in the classroom, outside the classroom, even ELT conferences – what would it be?

Cohen: My concern is that there be more focus on strategy instruction for learners. My opinion is that teachers may be very proficient at instruction, but that if learners are not well versed at how to learn the language, much of the fine instruction may be a reduced benefit. Fortunately, there is a new volume edited by Chamot and Harris, entitled *Learning Strategy Instruction in the Language Classroom: Issues and Implementation* (Multilingual Matters, 2019). I have a chapter in the volume on strategy instruction for pragmatics. I think this will turn out to be a seminal volume because it is the first book of its kind to deal exclusively with strategy instruction.

TEC: Would you share with us a little about your life outside of ELT?

Cohen: Last year, I published a form of memoir intended to stimulate professors and students to take stock of joys that they have encountered or could encounter if they become professors. The result was a book with entries categorized according to different aspects of a professor's professional work life based on my own personal experiences, with the addition of a few others suggested by colleagues. This is a feel-good volume to demonstrate both to those in the profession and to those others interested in ways in which entering the career of being a professor can produce joy. It is entitled *The Joys of Being a Professor: My Life in Academia*, and it is available through Amazon and through Barnes and Noble, in both printed and digital versions.

As to my hobbies at the age of 75, one is definitely language learning, as I am working on my 13th language right now, Chinese, and have been for nine years. I have professional-level proficiency in Spanish, French, Portuguese, Hebrew, and my L1 English, some ability in Arabic and Japanese, and have experienced considerable attrition in Italian, German, Quechua, Aymara, and Latin. I know what it means to speak a language comfortably as I have given professional talks in five languages – my L1 English, Spanish, Hebrew, French, and Portuguese.

I still lead group singing with my guitar, though my principle instrument is trumpet, and I play trumpet with a community wind band in Alameda, California. I played competitive soccer and squash, having to cease my squash playing at the age of 65, when I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis – information by the time of the diagnosis. I get around with hiking sticks since I have limited balance.

My wife, Sabina, and I have been married 51 years. It was love at first sight, as we were engaged within three weeks after meeting at Stanford University to do our doctorates. We have a married daughter living in Oakland, California, with their three kids, and a married son living in Aventura, Florida, with their three kids. We enjoy living

in Oakland, California, near our daughter and her family, so we can help out regularly and be part of their lives.

As a semi-retired professor, I choose my overseas travel selectively these days, given that it is not easy for me to get around as a result of my disability. Nonetheless, I enjoy my overseas trips as I feel that they enrich my life, and when my wife comes with me as she did recently to Padua, Italy, and to Stavanger, Norway, I know that it enriches her life as well. She will not be coming with me to South Korea since she has been in the country several times before. Instead, she will be on a trip to Israel to visit dear friends there.

TEC: How do you plan to spend your time at KOTESOL IC 2019?

Cohen: I will go to as many other sessions as I have time for since I really enjoy getting a good sense of just what my international colleagues are engaged in with regard to research and practice. This is a standard procedure for me at conferences. I do not simply give my presentations and disappear, but rather do my best to attend other sessions and to provide supportive comments and questions.

On previous trips, I have been to Korean museums, in Seoul and in Busan, which I have found very impressive. During my last trip to Seoul, I went to the amazing kitchen rhythm show, which I assume is still being offered to tourists, to pastry shops (free samples), to wonderful restaurants, and to clothing stores. You might say "I have been there and done that." I still regularly wear a light-weight jacket I bought many years ago in Korea.
