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An interview with Donald Freeman

Interview by: *Karim Sadeghi*



Donald Freeman is Professor of Education, University of Michigan, where his work has focused on researching and designing teacher learning opportunities. He directs the Learning4Teaching Project, a series of national research studies of ELT public-sector teachers' experiences in professional development conducted in Chile, Turkey, and Qatar. He is Senior Advisor on the ELTeach Project (National Geographic Learning), which provides on-line professional development to ELT public-sector teachers in 23 countries. Before joining the School of Education at the University of Michigan, Freeman was on the faculty of the Graduate School for International Training in Brattleboro Vermont, where he was professor and dean. He founded and directed the SIT Center for Teacher Education, Training, and Research and edited the professional development series, *TeacherSource* (Heinle/Cengage), and coedited *Teacher Learning in Language Teaching* (CUP) with Jack C. Richards. He is author of *Doing Teacher-Research: From Inquiry to Understanding* (Cengage) and, most recently, of *Educating Second Language Teachers* (Oxford). Freeman is a past president of TESOL, and member the International Advisory Council for Cambridge ESOL, and immediate past chair of the International Research Foundation for English Language Teaching (TIRF). Below is an interview with Donald Freeman (DF) conducted by Karim Sadeghi (KS).

KS: Thank you dear Prof. Freeman for agreeing to do this interview with IJLTR editor. As an entry question, could you please briefly introduce yourself, highlighting your educational and academic background as well as your current position?

DF: I started out as an ‘accidental’ language teacher: I was hired to teach French at a rural secondary school in northern New England (midway between Boston and Montreal) with no professional training. I’d studied French and lived and worked in France as a student. I hadn’t really planned on becoming a teacher, but I found I was hooked by students’ learning. That led me to do a masters’ at the Graduate School of International Training (SIT), and then to teaching in Japan and working as a trainer there and later with the UN in southeast Asia.

I joined the faculty at SIT and over time, my focus shifted gradually from students’ language learning to questions of how language teachers learn. In 2007, I joined the School of Education faculty at the University of Michigan as director of teacher education. When I finished my term, I wanted to get back into global work. Currently I teach and I direct a group that focuses on transnational research on professional development in ELT specifically for public-sector teachers.

KS: You graduated with distinction from Yale College in the Philosophy and Psychology of Language and then you switched to ESOL and eventually to Teacher Education (TE) as your EdD at Harvard University. How did you become interested in language in the first place and then why did you decide to switch to ESOL? Within TESOL, you have almost exclusively devoted your life and work to TE? What was the motivation behind devoting yourself to TE rather than other areas within TESOL?

DF: I’ve always been fascinated by language as a bundle of contradictions. At university, structural linguistics was the predominant view. In courses, we talked about how languages have formal structures. But I also worked in a psycholinguistics lab, Haskins Laboratory, in which we were looking at how infants learn to differentiate sounds. Here language was functioning—and indeed being learned—without any knowledge of those structures. The point is that people use language to do things; they don’t conjugate verbs. Becoming an accidental teacher of French at secondary school, as I did after university, intensified my fascination. It reinforced the contradiction that, unlike most content areas taught in schools, say maths or science or even literature, people regularly learn to use languages without teachers and outside classrooms. Which raised for me the enduring question of what students ‘get’ from being ‘under the influence’ of a teacher in a language classroom that they wouldn’t get from simply spending time with the language in a setting in which it is used regularly.

This led me to language teaching, and specifically to language teacher learning. Part of it was timing. In the 1990s, language teacher education was just becoming established as a field, with its particular knowledge-base. The fact that teachers—of language or any content area—might be thought of as having a professional learning process was then very new. (I write about this period in terms of ‘knowledge geographies’ in Chapter 10 of *Educating Second Language Teachers*).

The territory was wide open and the possibilities for research, for program design were exhilarating. This general topic of what Walberg called teachers’ ‘mental lives’ has held my interest as you point out for most all of my career. Over the last 30 years, the topic itself has been parsed into many overlapping sub-areas-- teacher learning, teacher cognition, beliefs, teacher knowledge, teacher practices—all of which are caught for me in the phrase ‘how teachers use what they know to do what they do.’

KS: *You have nearly 100 publications (most related to second language teacher education) as books, chapters, invited works as well as peer reviewed papers. Your first publication (Observing teachers: Three approaches to in-service training and development) appeared in TESOL Quarterly in 1983 and the most recent one (What counts as knowledge in English language teaching) in Routledge Handbook on English Language Teacher Education in 2019. Having researched in the same field for nearly 40 years, do you think there are still issues left untouched in SLTE or do you believe most of the current research is of replication nature?*

DF: I think there is decidedly more to do and new ground to break. As I said above, research in teacher learning in TESOL and ELT really started in earnest around 1990, so we've only been at it for 30 years. During this time, a lot has changed. Beyond our conceptions of what language is and how it is learned, our recognition of who ELT teachers are has expanded. This expansion has raised questions about what we think we know—how do our research findings and common program designs embed unexamined assumptions? To give one example: Much of what has been studied in teacher learning in TESOL and ELT has been predicated directly or indirectly on the idea of 'native- speaking' language competence. This idea, which is now been widely discredited, divides the teaching force into 'native' and 'non-native', which has led to a deficit narrative in which the 'native' is taken the standard which 'non-native speaking' teachers should emulate and look to achieve. We are still talking and writing about 'native-like fluency'. This is a social judgment; it is linguistically undefinable. My five-year grand-daughter uses English at home and with her mother's immediate family (my wife and me), and she uses French in the world outside and with her father's family. So what is her 'native-like fluency'? She's a five-year in both languages.

KS: *In two of your recent works, you talk about the knowledge base in ELT. Could you share with our readers what this knowledge base is and what ESOL teachers are expected to be equipped with if they wish to be successful teachers?*

DF: I actually started writing about the knowledge-base 20 years ago, when Karen Johnson published the article, "Re-conceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education" in 1998 [*TESOL Quarterly* 32 (3), 397-417]. The basic argument then, as now, was that the knowledge language teachers use in classroom teaching is distinct from the disciplinary knowledge found in applied linguistics, SLA, and other academic areas. Underlying this argument, which has been supported and elucidated by research, is the fundamental idea that teachers *know* a great deal. Defining what they ought to know in terms of academic disciplines leads to a deficit norm. Recognizing and studying the knowledge they use 'to do what they do' in the classroom defines the knowledge-base.

This is why language teacher education is endless fascinating to me, to return to an earlier question. Socio-professional and institutional arrangements have meant that new teachers study disciplinary knowledge in universities and training colleges to become teachers. But the knowledge they use on the job—in classrooms with their students—develops in parallel and from a range of sources. The challenge to us in teacher education is how to meld these two

KS: *The three key words that merge in most of your work as titles of the books/articles you have written are: Teacher Training, Teacher Education, and Teacher Development. Do you use these terms interchangeably or do you believe them to be different. If the latter is the case, could you briefly tell us the main differences?*

DF: I do believe the three terms are different, particularly when we are aiming for precision in describing the social and institutional arrangements of teacher learning. The distinction is one that I first wrote about 30 years ago in 1989 [*"Teacher training, development, and decision-making: A model of teaching and related strategies for language teacher education."* *TESOL Quarterly* 23, (1) 27-45]. Basically, I felt there was a need then to untangle terms so that we could work from a shared

operational vocabulary. I proposed that *teacher education* be used as the superordinate term under which *teacher training* or *preparation* and *teacher* or *professional development* would each fit. I also argued that we could distinguish forms of teacher learning associated with each term. While that initial work was fairly blunt, especially looking back at it now, it has served a useful purpose in elaborating what was treated as a single, undifferentiated process.

KS: As part of the review of your book 'Education Second Language Teachers: The Same Things Done Differently' (Oxford University Press, 2016), the guest editor of this Special Issue of IJLTR, Prof. Thomas SC Farrell, describes you as one of the three people who have influenced his professional life. What do you feel about his claim? How do you think you have influenced (or teacher educators can influence) other teachers/teacher educators, and in what ways?

DF: I was pleased to know that Tom has found my work useful; colleagues' positive responses are always gratifying. I've certainly benefited from the multiple ways he has approached the concept and practices of reflection in language teaching.

To the more general question though, influence is very much an individual process. I know I've been influenced when I meet someone's work that 'clicks' for me either because it captures and addresses something I've been trying to work out or it challenges my assumptions and the ways I've been going about something. For me, the socio-cultural thinker Yrjo Engstrom was each example of the former. When I first heard him speak in 1991, it was like an enormous penny dropped and ideas fell into place. Likewise, the methodologist Earl Stevick really influenced my thinking. The educator Caleb Gattegno was definitely an example of the latter. The 'commonsense' of his reasoning has shaped the ways I understand teaching and the role of awareness in learning. I've been fortunate to have many 'influencers' in my intellectual life.

KS: You have been invited to train teachers, offer consultancy on national teacher education programmes, examine grants/theses and deliver talks on teacher education in more than 35 countries. How do you find these experiences? Given that Iranian applied linguistics community hold you in high regard, it is unfortunate that you have not been to Iran for similar purposes. Is that because you have not been invited or are there other issues involved?

DF: The work I've had opportunities to do with colleagues, institutions, and governments in different countries has been central to grounding my thinking and expanding my understanding. You're right that I have not been invited to Iran, which is certainly a gap in my experience. I've heard fascinating things through colleagues and friends. I'd be pleased to come if invited, when the diplomatic situation between our governments makes it feasible to do so.

KS: What do you think is the relationship between language teacher education and language learning? Is there any evidence supporting the link between educated language teachers and better student learning/achievement?

DF: This is certainly the \$64 question as they used to call it on TV. The connection between classroom instruction and classroom learning is a difficult one to study in any content area. In language teaching and learning, the complexity is compounded by the realization that people learn languages all the time without teachers, outside the formal environment of classrooms. So as Professor John Trim used to say during the development of the CEFR, 'Strange things happen to language when it goes to school'—it gets 'skills' (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and 'levels' (beginning, intermediate, advanced etc.) and even 'grammar', 'phonology', and 'lexis'. He was making a point that we tend to forget: that language is a manufactured content area. All of which gets compounded in teacher education since we need a content to teach teachers.

Translanguaging is a good example. Students have always used whatever language resources they have at their disposal to understand and to do what is expected of them in the classroom. Now

with the concept of translanguaging, we are acknowledging and naming this social and learning process that goes on all the time. Doing so in teacher education—talking about translanguaging with new and experienced teachers—creates a space to examine this process and to figure out how to support it.

The point being that as our conceptualizations of language and how it is learned and used change, they often reshape what we do in teacher education. What is perhaps different now than previously is that we likewise have a research-base in teacher learning and teacher education. This research base brings in the socio-political and institutional domains—what we loosely refer to as the ‘contexts’ of teacher learning-- that contributes to and shape the process.

KS: What do you think are some of the hot topics in second language (teacher) education that deserve further attention by researchers?

DF: I'd probably nominate three areas: Two areas spring from the previous question. One has to do with the need to study the connections between teachers with specific backgrounds and experiences, their classroom teaching, and their students' learning. While small-grained studies like ethnographies and case studies are definitely useful, the fact is that policy-making depends on well-designed large-scale work, which generally uses quantitative or mixed methods designs.

A second area involves better defining and understanding language as content, as we've said, in classroom teaching and thus in teacher education. This work needs to be conceptual/theoretical as well as empirical. I say this because simply studying existing ideas tends to reify them. In any endeavor, how we define the problem is part of what makes it 'a problem'. Here again think about classroom language use: If we define students and teachers using a shared L1 as a problem, we will study it in one way; if we define those same practices as involving translanguaging, we will study them in another.

A third area is the geo-political idea of 'native-speakerism', which has had a regressive impact in everything from policy-making to teacher qualifications to provision of professional development to test design and materials development. Here I think the conceptual work will need to take the lead. We need a different way of thinking about and defining language use, and particularly how appropriate and effective that particular use is in given circumstances.

Our work on English-for-Teaching is a case-in-point. Around the world, ELT teachers' English language knowledge is assessed against norms of general fluency, and teachers are subjected to a deficit narrative when they don't measure up. The narrative equates general English fluency with pedagogical ability and teaching knowledge, and uses general fluency as a metric. However, we know that language use is always contextual. So why not reorient the problem? The question should not be how much general English an ELT teacher needs in the classroom. Rather it should be what English does the teacher need to control and be confident of in order to teach. We have called this particular English language for the specific purpose of classroom teaching, English-for-Teaching (Freeman, Katz, Garcia Gomez, & Burns. 2015. English-for-Teaching: Rethinking teacher language proficiency for the classroom. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 69 (2), 129-139. Also www.elteach.com).

KS: Are you happy with being a language teacher educator? If you were given a second chance to select your career, would you choose to be an applied linguist and more specifically a language teacher educator once more? Why?

DF: I'd do it all again (and it isn't over yet I hope!) But I need to acknowledge that I was very fortunate to get in on the ground floor of language teacher education. The field in TESOL and ELT was literally getting underway in 1980's and 90's and that serendipity was a large part of

what has been so exciting . I would say that now, as when I was getting started, we need to encourage folks to think outside the box. I am increasingly concerned by how we limit ourselves through the ideas and constructs we are using to conceptualize research problems or to design teacher education programs.

I'll give a very small example: I've reviewed proposals and journal papers about large-scale studies of teaching in ELT that use 'snowball' sampling techniques. This means that you get a questionnaire and then are invited to pass it along to others who may be interested. There is nothing wrong with this sampling technique *prima facie*. The problem, however, comes when claims are then made about which teachers end up being represented in the study sample through it. Individuals are quite likely to pass along the questionnaire to people who are like them, so such studies can end up as echo chambers. Similarly, evaluations of professional development programs rarely describe the participants in full. Instead they focus on what went on in the program, how participants viewed it, and used what they had learned. In this way, program evaluations perpetuate the assumption that all participants are 'equal', when we know by human nature that this is not the case. Send me to a workshop on technology and I can guarantee I'm likely to stumble; send a twenty-year old pre-service teacher and they are more likely to thrive. My point is simply that we have to recognize that the ideas we use to define a problem in research or in teacher education shape what we do about them.

KS: It has been a great pleasure talking to you Prof. Freeman. Thank you again for this great contribution. Anything else that you would like to add?

DF: Thanks for the opportunity.

