
A SPECIAL TALK WITH PROFESSOR RICHARD DONATO
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In this issue, we are privileged to have an interview with Professor Richard Donato, Chairperson of the Department of Instruction and Learning in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. Professor Donato's research interest lies in the areas of second and foreign language acquisition, early language learning, classroom discourse analysis, and sociocultural theory. He has worked internationally on language education issues, and his work has appeared in a broad range of prestigious journals. With his wealth of publication and editorial experience, he has graciously shared with us invaluable practical tips and considerations in writing for scholarly publication in ELT/TESOL.

➤ **Apart from teaching, why should ESL/EFL teachers be encouraged to write for scholarly publication? What are the benefits that usually justify the extra work involved?**

Share your ideas.

ESL/EFL teachers are naturally curious about issues dealing with teaching and learning. Teachers encounter instructional situations daily that raise important questions and concerns. Writing about these issues opens the door to potential research on important topics. The benefit of writing for academic publications is

that teachers join the conversation of a professional community, contribute to the community, and benefit from the sharing of ideas that community membership brings. Of course, this type of writing requires finding the right journals for sharing ESL/EFL teachers' ideas and issues.

- ☞ **For some academics, teaching is always a priority and writing for publication seems to be last in a long list of tasks. What are your suggestions for ESL/EFL teachers who want to start their writing but seem to put it off until they have 'more time'?**

We make time for what's important.

During a faculty member's busy week of teaching classes, grading assignments, attending meetings, and planning for instruction, it is quite easy to postpone writing and view writing as being in last place in a long list of priorities. Many faculty members who are not in primarily research institutes or universities regularly face this issue. One strategy that I use to ensure that I sustain writing is to think of writing as a project and then to protect consistently some time each week (e.g., 2 hours a day two or three days a week) to make sure the project advances and is completed. After each writing session, I write a brief plan for how I will continue the piece I'm writing and what I need to do next. Making a brief plan for yourself after each writing session will ensure that you keep your momentum and not lose track of what have written and what still needs to be done to keep the writing project active and alive. In this way, I view writing as a project that is part of my professional position.

If during the semester, a faculty member's schedule is much too busy to devote a few hours a week to writing, another strategy is to devote some time during breaks to writing and commit oneself to write at least for part of the time when classes are not in session. Everyone deserves a break, for sure, but during breaks in the

academic year, some of the time might be spent writing. I will often plan some of my writing during the time when I know I have extended periods of time with no teaching or extensive administrative duties.

➤ **What is your advice for first-time authors who think that they simply have ‘nothing to write about’ or that they lack confidence in their ability to meet this new writing challenge?**

Trust your own ideas and experiences.

I received an excellent piece of advice when I first started out writing for academic publications. As a novice writer, I felt I had nothing to say or that what I wanted to write about was already extensively discussed in the literature. In other words, I thought I had no original and interesting ideas and certainly nothing I had to say was publishable. A well-published senior faculty member told me during my first year as a university faculty member that this was a very common way to think among beginning writers and early career faculty members. He went on to say that all of our ideas, even those already discussed in the literature, are original since we bring to them our own perspective, concepts, and voice. Thus, the fear of not having anything to write about might not be totally justified when viewed from this perspective.

To begin the writing process, write about what you know based on experience. My first writing was about my teaching and instructional strategies. I drew inspiration from my own classes that I taught. I wrote and published book reviews, when asked to do so, and composed reports of a few pages for publications sponsored by professional organization. Many of those pieces were short, but I still refer to some of those publications today. Later I began writing with my colleague Professor G. R Tucker who taught me a lot about the writing based on his extensive experience in research and publication. I continued to conduct research and write with other faculty members, colleagues in other universities, and my own

students. Being a member of writing team provides support, ensures that the writing moves forward and is completed, and makes the writing stronger because of the various perspectives and ideas that co-authors can bring to the writing project. Ideas for writing projects are never in short supply when we work as a team.

- **Many authors may suffer from writer's block at one time or another and feel haunted by their unfinished articles. What should they do in order to cope with this problem?**

Stop writing and start talking.

All writers experience writer's block. When this happens, it is often a sign that we are trying to write text without the necessary information or without knowledge of what the audience needs and wants to know. A good way out of writer's block is to stop writing and start talking. Talk to someone else about what you are writing. Allow the other person to ask you questions about the topic of your writing and then try to respond to these questions in the text you are in the process of creating. Another solution to writer's block is to read. One colleague told me that whenever she had writer's block, she found that reading well-written pieces always helped her remove the block and start to write again. A final immediate way that I deal with a writing block is to ask myself, what have I just discussed, what was the topic of my last sentence or paragraph, and what new information do I need to add to the theme of the last sentence that I wrote. It is common for all writers to get lost in their own words during the writing process. By reflecting on the topic of one sentence and what new information we need to add to this topic in the next sentence, we can often unblock the writing process.

- **Some authors, particularly less-experienced ones, seem to delay submitting an article for publication because of their fear of rejection. How can those authors get over that fear?**

Let it go.

Never hesitate to submit an article for fear that it is not good enough. The writing will be reviewed and, even if not accepted for publication the first time, the feedback that you will receive will help make revising well focused and productive. Rejection can happen and fear of rejection should never prevent a writer from submitting a work for review. One way to get over the fear of submitting is to allow supportive friends to read your work and provide you with honest comments to which you can respond before sending your work to a journal or other publication venue. Many writers find it difficult to close the writing process and send the article out for review. This reaction often derives from fear of review rather than the real need to continue working on an article. By first simulating the review process with supportive colleagues, it may be easier to let go of the article and send it to a journal.

- **Some authors are daunted by the publication process when they are asked to revise their manuscript, or when their manuscript is rejected. From your own experience as a writer and reviewer, what suggestions would you give to them so that they will not give up writing?**

Act quickly.

After spending many hours crafting an article, many authors become discouraged when told that the piece still requires editing and revision. My advice to beginning writers is to take feedback seriously and view it as a way to improve your work. Whenever I receive a request to revise, I never delay in responding. I try to do revisions within two weeks (and sometimes one week) of receiving comments. If the writer waits too long to make revisions, it is likely

that the revisions will never be made. A request to revise should motivate the writer to continue writing because it means that a journal finds the article worthy of publication and that, by responding to this feedback, the article will be even stronger than before.

☞ **Many authors who are non-native speakers of English say that they have encountered a range of problems in writing for publication in English which they feel put them at a disadvantage as compared with their counterparts, who are native speakers of English. What do you think about this?**

Journals are ‘going global.’

Being a non-native speaker of the language of publication can be an advantage rather than a disadvantage. Recently, more journals have the goal of presenting a global perspective on ESL/EFL research, theory, and practice by including the voices of the international professional community. The new editor of the Modern Language Journal, Professor Heidi Byrnes, has made it the mission of the journal to represent this international perspective. If you review the past year’s issues of the Modern Language Journal you will find many articles from all over the world. Those teaching English as a foreign language bring a new set of issues and concerns to the language teaching community and also have insights into language teaching and learning that may not be revealed by studies conducted in only one context.

‘Native’ is not necessarily better.

Of course, the quality of writing is important and care should be taken when submitting articles to international journals that publish exclusively in English that careful language editing has been done before submitting to the journal. If the writer feels insecure about his or her ability to write for publication in academic English, asking for editorial assistance is reasonable and expected.

Additionally, writing quality is not only an issue for non-native speakers. All writers, no matter how proficient they may be, need a critical eye on the words they use to express their meanings. Editing language is a skill that all writers must cultivate, no matter what their language background might be. Being a 'native speaker' does not categorically mean a strong command of academic English. As one who works with linguistically and culturally diverse students and professionals, I have often observed that those who identify themselves as 'non-native speakers' can often organize ideas and express them better than those who have traditionally been called 'native speakers of English.' Indeed, the issue is the ability to craft in language interesting ideas and compelling arguments and not the language learning background of the writer. All writers, no matter what the language background may be, struggle with expressing complex ideas in language. Allowing others to read your words and provide reactions on its communicative effectiveness is a good way to check on the clarity of your meanings and wordings.

☞ **Do you have any suggestions on writing for publication, particularly for non-native English speaking graduate students who are preparing themselves to enter into the community of TESOL professionals?**

Keep the milestone in mind.

This question is a complex one. The dissertation is the major milestone for any student in a doctoral program. Care needs to be taken so that progress is made on attaining this milestone and completing the doctoral program. Any writing project that is not connected to a student's dissertation work and that takes time away from the primary goal of completing the dissertation should most likely be avoided. However, sometimes a writing project may relate directly to the dissertation study (e.g., review of literature, findings from a pilot study, the development of an educational intervention, etc.). If work on an article for publication derives from or supports

the dissertation process, re-purposing dissertation work into an article would not deflect the doctoral student from her or his major goal – successfully completing the milestone – and might offer the possibility of having a publication before graduation. Another way that writing for publication may take place during the dissertation process is for you to write with an advisor about topic that is central to the dissertation. Perhaps you are conducting a dissertation study on a portion of the data from the advisor’s larger research project. If this is the case, writing an article can inform chapters of the dissertation and move your work forward rather than delay it.

➤ **Should ‘writing for scholarly publication’ be part of the TESOL curriculum? As far as I’m concerned, TESOL programs in Thai universities do not offer formal instruction in writing for publication to their graduate students.**

Situated writing practice in a formal course!

In my opinion, every doctoral program needs to offer at least one full semester course on academic writing for doctoral students. This course must also be anchored in students’ current writing projects and not be offered as a ‘preparation’ for future writing projects but as a situated learning/writing experience. In my own university, I have offered such a course and only students working on their own writing projects are permitted to take the course. A course on writing for publication is essential for doctoral students. In these courses, students can analyze published articles to understand the various discursive moves of the genre and the use of particular kinds of words for expressing academic meanings, share their writing with other students in writing conferences, learn about editing and revising, compare high quality writing with weaker texts, and learn how to give feedback respectfully and to accept it gracefully. The goal of the course should be twofold – a) to help students understand concepts associated with academic writing, and b) to advance

students' current writing projects (e.g., qualifying papers, an article, an abstract for a conference, a chapter of the dissertation, etc.).

☞ **It seems that most of the literature in TESOL/Applied Linguistics has placed emphasis on how to help less-experienced authors negotiate the demands of writing for publication. Little is given to research or discussion on ethical issues in writing for publication. Should we pay more attention to such issues as authorship, plagiarism, and duplicate/multiple publication?**

Learn to act professionally.

As I presented above, many issues dealing with the ethics of research and writing can be presented and discussed in a full semester course on academic writing. In an effort to 'get published,' students may rush to complete the project and overlook consulting with their research advisor, reviewing the paper for proper citation, or acknowledging the ideas of others and previous studies or theories. I often observe that when a student 'plagiarizes,' it is not a result of intentional dishonesty but a result of not knowing the ways to acknowledge the ideas of others when they are used to inform one's own writing or to situate one's own work. Other ethical issues might involve writing respectful letters requesting that an article be reviewed, learning the rules for submitting an article to more than one journal, and publishing variations of a particular study. These issues, and many more, can be easily included in the curriculum of an academic writing course. By addressing these issues, the student will be protected from embarrassing situations that can be perceived as unethical and dishonest and that can potentially damage the reputation of the doctoral student even before beginning a professional career.

Our talk with Professor Donato has demystified several integral aspects of writing for scholarly publication by taking us

through each of its stages. The talk has also addressed the potential implementation of 'situated writing practice' as part of formal writing training for graduate students and raised our awareness of ethical concerns in writing for publication. We hope that our readers, particularly for those who have had less publication experience, or for whom writing is an ordeal, will find the talk not only inspiring but also practical for their professional development.

The Interviewer

Pramarn Subphadoongchone is a lecturer at the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. He is currently serving as the editor of *PASAA* and also on the Thailand TESOL executive committee.