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Applying Interdisciplinary Expertise in the Classroom

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## Introduction to the Theme Section

### Graduate Student Development: Applying Interdisciplinary Expertise in the Classroom

Many graduate students come from different careers, educational backgrounds, and areas of expertise. This theme invited students to share how they have implemented their passions and unique fields of knowledge into their TESOL teacher training and experience in creative, interesting ways.

I did not originally intend to be a TESOL educator—instead, I thought that I was going to be an RN. Having enjoyed biology and chemistry in high school, possessing a strong desire to serve people in a meaningful way, and desiring to prove to myself that I could master the “hard sciences,” I had convinced myself that pursuing a nursing degree would be a wise choice. However, my life plans would begin to alter dramatically when I enrolled in an introductory TESOL class at my university.

It was in that TESOL teacher-training class that I had a revelation. When I walked into the classroom on the first day, I remember thinking, “*These are my people.*” I had never before experienced entering a university classroom and realizing within a few minutes that my classmates were quite similar to me. We were natural conversationalists, world travelers, appreciators of culture and foreign language, and we came from diverse majors from a variety of disciplines.

Discovering TESOL was like finding a career that braided together the interdisciplinary strands of my life—my passions for communication, language, and culture. I selected Communication as my major because of my passion for connecting with people and my interest in global, intercultural, and interpersonal communication dynamics. My knowledge of the field of communication has enabled me to engage with my students in the classroom at a deeper level. Additionally, I studied Arabic for three years in college, and I was pleased to find that

my knowledge of Arabic facilitated my teaching of English as a second language. Most of all, TESOL has allowed me to integrate my intercultural knowledge into the classroom. My first major cultural immersion experience was in Kazakhstan, when I was just 15 years old. As I found myself in a Kazakh university interacting with the local students and practicing English conversation with them, I realized how deeply I love interacting with people from other cultures. My passion directly influences my teaching, as I find joy in the cultural exchange of ideas that takes place in the ESL classroom. Along with my interdisciplinary knowledge of culture, language, and communication, I have realized that I am also able to incorporate my scientific fields of knowledge in teaching English to international students who study engineering, chemistry, biology, and other similar majors.

Throughout my graduate student development, I have observed a commonality among many TESOL graduate students—we bring diverse knowledge from our prior experience. Many graduate students in our field have different bachelor's degrees: business accounting, theater, engineering, and linguistics, to name just a few. Some enter TESOL as a second career, bringing a wealth of knowledge from their previous work. Most are either native speakers of English who have learned a second language or are native speakers of another language. Many graduate students have multidisciplinary areas of expertise that they bring with them into the TESOL classroom, bringing fresh perspective and creativity to the classroom. This theme section introduces five graduate students who have implemented their prior experience and interests into their teacher training in fresh, interesting ways.

### **Overview**

We begin our theme section with three narrative pieces by graduate students who have incorporated their unique interests, educational backgrounds, and previous careers in the TESOL classroom. Vozza, an ESL educator and professional businesswoman, begins the theme section with an account of how she integrated her experience giving presentations in business settings into her adult ESL classroom. She provides practical implementation advice and shares positive student outcomes. Badie, a UCLA graduate with a minor in theater, shares her experience using theater concepts as effective tools and activities in the ESL classroom. Her application of her educational background into the classroom provides practical pedagogical implications. Moglen shares how he incorporated his interest in news media into a multiskill ESL class. His suggestions for implementation are simultaneously theory based and practical.

The second part of our theme section addresses the concept of

incorporating cultural knowledge into the ESL classroom, and more specifically, the issues of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and nonnative English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), and the concept of World Englishes. Berger begins with a reflective piece on her teacher training as she considers her previous language-learning experience and cultural background. Her ideas for promoting equality between NESTs and NNESTs stem from her previous experience as an English teacher in France. Finally, Teixeira and Pozzi explain how they implemented their knowledge of other cultures and their passion for educating students in World Englishes by creating a class with the purpose of introducing students to legitimate forms of English.

This theme section serves to highlight the experiences of several graduate students who have successfully applied their interdisciplinary expertise in the classroom. Through their pieces, we seek to provide practical pedagogical implications for the field, as well as inspiration for TESOL educators to integrate their unique fields of knowledge and diverse educational backgrounds into their teaching.

#### **Author**

*Erika Kercheval is completing her MS in Education with a concentration in TESOL at California State University, Fullerton. An alumna of the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she earned a BA in Communication, she has also studied Arabic and traveled to the Middle East. As an instructor at CSU, Fullerton's American Language Program, she incorporates her passion for intercultural and interpersonal communication into her teaching.*