



International Black Professionals and Friends in TESOL Caucus E-Newsletter, Volume 5, Issue 2

A periodic e-publication for members of this TESOL community.

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Black Voices in ESOL and EFL: IBPFT Caucus Colloquium 2003

Shondel Nero, IBPFT Chair

If you were not there when six professional Black women spoke their mind, you surely missed out on a very provocative and energetic discussion. This is how I remember the IBPFT colloquium at the March 2003 TESOL convention in Baltimore, Maryland, when the presenters (myself included) brought their collective experience to bear as women of African descent in the TESOL profession. We talked about our particular cultural backgrounds, our education, our teaching approaches, the contributions we've made to the profession, and the discrimination and stereotypes we've encountered in the hiring process and in the classroom and how we've overcome them. The presenters were introduced by outgoing IBPFT chair, Tamara Rollie Thorpe.

As the first presenter, I began the colloquium by briefly describing my own background and how I came to the field of TESOL. I was born and raised in Guyana, and developed an early passion for language. After completing high school in Guyana, I moved to Montreal, Canada, where I earned a BA in French and Spanish. In 1984, I moved to New York City and later earned an MA in TESOL and a PhD in applied linguistics, both from Columbia University's Teachers College. Now, I'm a tenured professor in the MA TESOL program at St. John's University, in New York.

As someone born and raised in a country where the majority are people of color, coming to North America was my first experience being construed as a minority by virtue of being Black. I had to learn very quickly that *minority* implies that you are always framed as the exception (for better or worse); that is to say, being Black in North America is not

seen as normative. Moreover, being a Black professional further exceptionalizes you, which means I am often *the first...* or *the only...* or I am assumed/expected to be *less than...* or *better than...*. This is discrimination in the sense that I am constantly being exceptionalized, which was the focus of my talk at the colloquium. How do I deal with this? By being human. By refusing to always represent the race. By refusing to be all things to all people at all times, just to disprove the assumption that Black is not normal. In any case, that is a losing proposition. I argued that my charge is to be the best professional I can be with all of my strengths and flaws. By going out into the schools and giving my time and expertise to teachers and students of all ethnic and racial persuasions. By raising their awareness of, and sensitivity to, linguistic and cultural differences so that they might not exceptionalize others. Of course, I've had overt and covert experiences of racism, but I try to respond to those incidents constructively within the context. It is a challenge--combating racist attitudes is truly a work in progress.

My colleague, Khadar Bashir-Ali, who is cochair of IBPFT, followed my talk by describing her own experience as a Somali immigrant here in the United States. Khadar is now a U.S. citizen, a PhD candidate in sociolinguistics at Ohio State University, and an advocate and tireless worker for the welfare and education of African refugees in the United States. Khadar fired up the audience with her spirited oratory, wicked sense of humor, and incisive critique of racist attitudes. She described her first reality check with regard to race: going to Italy convinced she was Italian (having grown up as a middle class Somali speaking fluent Italian) only to find out she was not! Her race awareness was heightened in the United States, where she had to struggle through the less-than assumption (i.e., less than competent to be a graduate student, less than equipped to be a teacher, less than qualified to teach English). Khadar talked about the stare she would sometimes get when she walked into a room of professionals, but she also talked about her defiance in the face of such racism and adversity ("I come from a harsh culture....We Somalis are feisty people....I can take on anyone!") to which the audience burst into laughter. Importantly, it's Khadar's tenacity, intelligence, and unflinching belief in her work with refugee students (in sum, her human touch) that have been her greatest contributions to the field.

The next presenter was Michelle Maitland, a graduate student in TESOL from Central Connecticut State University. Michelle spoke of how her parents' African American and Venezuelan heritage influenced not only her personal development but also her decision to become an educator. Against this background, she contrasted her EFL/ESOL teaching experiences both in the United States and elsewhere (in South Korea). In a voice of quiet authority, Michelle drew from these recollections, citing classroom examples in which students expressed their stereotypical views. She stressed that international students--coming from largely homogeneous societies--were not immune to harboring stereotypes of other races and, more specifically, people of color. Yet, Michelle argued that teaching ESOL presented invaluable opportunities for educators to have a positive ripple effect on their students. She ended by urging those present to work at ending discriminatory thinking and practices and begin a new era of mutual understanding.

Michelle's presentation was followed by that of Tonya Jefferson. Tonya, a native of Richmond, Virginia, noted that she is no stranger to discrimination and prejudice, growing up as she did in the southern United States. Her culturally and linguistically diverse background prepared her for teaching ESOL and living abroad. She had already traveled to Europe by the time she began teaching native Korean children and adults in Seoul, Korea, in 1995. Tonya's tolerance and understanding of diverse cultures kept her in Seoul for 3 years as an ambassador of education. She spoke of a mostly positive experience being an African American woman in Korea, despite the stereotypes about African Americans there. Like Michelle, Tonya seized the opportunity of teaching English in Korea to work at combating prejudice and discrimination in the classroom.

Gertrude Tinker Sachs, a native of the Bahamas who teaches at the City University of Hong Kong, was the next presenter. Through a clever show-and-tell approach, Gertrude demonstrated how cultural artifacts can reinforce racial stereotypes, particularly of dark-skinned people. Drawing on 12 years of living and working in Hong Kong, Gertrude used artifacts from her early years to present-day advertising language to demonstrate how stereotypes can be reinforced in the media and in the products we buy. Using Darlie (a twist on Darkie) toothpaste and skin whitening products as two examples, Gertrude showed how culturally stereotypic notions of Black are contrasted against culturally positive notions of White. Calling herself a cultural worker, Gertrude forcefully argued that her presence can serve to either reinforce or challenge stereotypes of Black people. She noted that very few of her Hong Kong students and people that she encounters on a day-to-day basis have ever met a Black person and, therefore, her ways of acting, thinking, and being can affect the ways people think about her race (which refers back to my point about the so-called exceptional syndrome). Gertrude pointed out that her work as a teacher and educator gives her the opportunity to influence, in very positive and critical ways, how EFL/ESOL teachers and their students have traditionally thought about dark-skinned people. As a cultural worker, Gertrude stated that she worked in implicit and explicit ways to challenge notions of how dark-skinned people are understood and portrayed. At the end of her presentation, she treated audience members to their own tubes of Darlie toothpaste.

Tamara Clements gave a fitting end to our presentation by sharing her experience of working with adult and continuing education ESOL students in New York City. A product of proud, working-class, Philadelphia-born parents and Philadelphia public schools, Tamara felt her upbringing grounded her along her chosen paths. She noted that her exposure to various schools, to Romance languages, and to employment in a variety of educational and intercultural settings have taught her to recognize many of the dynamics of language competence and performance. As an attuned and sensitive teacher, she pointed out that each communicative context has compelled her to focus not only on the learners' needs, but also to attend to the professional needs of practitioners, guided by her personal experiences. Tamara spoke of her confidence in her adult students who, despite the challenges of adult life and education in New York City, step into the roles for which she has helped them train. She said that her students understand clearly that there is no progress without struggle, and they commit themselves to setting realistic goals and obtaining the resources to meet them.

In the end, what struck me most about this session was not only how diverse our backgrounds and experiences are as Black women, but also how much we have in common. The Q & A session following our presentation was spirited and thoughtful. Each of us had an opportunity to address the questions and concerns of audience members. We could sense from the audience that this session was for many cathartic, for others provocative, and unsettling for some, but we knew this session was sorely needed and much appreciated. We hope this is only the beginning of what should be an ongoing dialogue about teaching and learning across racial, cultural, and linguistic differences and our common humanity.

Minutes

IBPFT Caucus

Open Meeting: March 27, 2003

Baltimore Convention Center, Room 320

Call to Order: 5 pm

Leaders Present: Tamara Thorpe, Outgoing Chair

Shondel Nero, Incoming Chair

Khadar Bashir-Ali, Incoming Co-Chair

Michelle Maitland, Newsletter Editor

Marc Algren, TESOL 2003 Baltimore Conference Chair

Jun Liu, IBPFT Liaison

Eric Dwyer, Incoming Conference Chair for TESOL 2004 (Long Beach, CA)

I. The New Era of the IBPFT Caucus

A. Membership

1. Last year's low membership
2. This year's fantastic membership
 - a. Now, one hundred twenty-three members!
3. The need to further increase IBPFT membership

B. Caucus Fees

1. Formerly, there was a fee.
2. Presently, there is no fee!

C. Important websites/e-mail addresses:

1. New website: http://www.geocities.com/ibpft_tesol/
2. E-mail address: ibpft_tesol@yahoo.com

D. Newsletters

1. Will be online this year

E. Purpose of the caucus

II. Introductions

- A. Many African countries were represented at the meeting, including, but not limited to:
 - 1. Angola
 - 2. Cameroon
 - 3. Barundi
- B. A South American member was also present
 - 1. Suriname

III. The Passing of the Batons

- A. Outgoing Chair (Tamara Thorpe) and Incoming Chair (Khadar Bashir-Ali) of IBPFT
- B. Marc Algren (Outgoing Conference Chair) and Eric Dwyer (Incoming Conference Chair)
 - 1. Eric Dwyer's desire to ensure Black representation at next year's TESOL 2004 Long Beach, California conference
 - 2. The neighborhood surrounding next year's convention has a high percentage of people of color.
 - a. Mr. Dwyer is accepting ideas and suggestions for how diversity can be better reflected at next year's convention.

IV. Apology

- A. Marc Algren verbally apologized for the oversight regarding the Black Heritage Tour to the Black Wax Museum.

V. Khadar's Statement Regarding Grants

- A. TESOL scholarship--\$2,000 dollars!
- B. Our need to take advantage of it
- C. Letting all of our voices be heard
 - 1. How?
 - a. By submitting proposals--May 1st deadline
 - b. By becoming more involved in TESOL Newsletters
 - c. By writing books
 - d. By getting involved in leadership

VI. Goal Setting

- A. Tangible goals
 - 1. Increasing membership
 - a. Suggestion of getting more Caribbean Blacks into the ESL profession (one member was tired of being the only Caribbean TESOLer)
 - b. Suggestions for getting more young Blacks interested in the TESOL professions and in teaching languages
 - 2. Communicating at historically Black colleges

- a. However many of these colleges don't have ESL programs
 - b. Exceptions = Jackson State & Morehouse
- 3. Communicating at elementary schools (Shondel's experiences)
 - a. Suggestions for Blacks to network and meet others within their state
- 4. Having reunions, becoming active and forming our own regional groups to enable us to keep in touch throughout the year
- 5. Personally mentoring TESOLers of color in our districts for the sake of improving retention rates
 - a. Job opportunities/career promotional activities
- 6. Assessment
 - a. ETS
 - b. Writing books (due to a lack of Afrocentric textbooks and literature in TESOL)
 - c. Serving as mentors to others (Shondel = de facto mentor)
 - d. Speech pathology is coming out with a manual to teach about Black English (ASHA) and to prevent the misplacement of Black children in speech classes
 - e. Philadelphia colleges seeking qualified MA applicants of color

VII. Africa's Need for Books

- A. Finding appropriate books for Africa
- B. Having an exchange of books/ professional materials between Africa and the U.S. and vice versa
- C. Per Tamara Thorpe's conversation with Eric Dwyer, TESOL is seeking to have the Book Drive be a part of next year's convention--not IBPFT
- D. Having a worldwide book drive taking place throughout the year, not just at convention time
- E. Angola's main issue is with teacher training
- F. One problem = the lack of EFL books for Haiti and Africa--ESL books won't do
- G. Paper assessments needed for Haiti and other Third World countries
- H. Joining hands with the Latin American community/professionals, since they share our concerns

VIII. Materials Development

- A. For North America
- B. For Generation 1.5
 - 1. These are students who were brought here as children from other countries and/or who were born here in America of immigrant parents and speaking another language other than English

IX. Colloquium (Panel) for Next Year

- A. Idea has been chosen: Generation 1.5 and developing materials for this group

X. New Leadership Positions to be Elected

- A. Marinus Stephen--Chair Elect for 2005
- B. Tonya Jefferson--E-List Manager
- C. Ismael will e-mail Shondel about a potential person for the webmaster role

Meeting Adjourned: 7 pm

Spotlight Session, 2004 Annual TESOL Convention

Current IBPFT chair, Shondel Nero, and IBPFT founding member, Mary Romney, will be the featured speakers at a Spotlight Session at the TESOL 2004 convention in Long Beach, California. Below is a description of their presentation.

Spotlight Session TESOL 2004

Re-examining English, Nativeness, and ESL Pedagogy

Presenters: Shondel Nero and Mary Romney

This spotlight session addresses challenges to TESOL in light of the unprecedented spread of English due to population movement, globalization, and technological expansion, which have resulted in the emergence of new varieties and dialects of English, multiple linguistic identities, and challenges to the construct of the native speaker. The presenters argue that our profession should be based on a more inclusive definition of English to include all of its varieties and speakers; propose that alternative paradigms to the native speaker construct be implemented; and suggest that ESOL pedagogy and materials be more relevant to specific populations and contexts.

Dramatic Results: ESL Actors in Action

Michelle Maitland

Every ESL program has its own personality, its own particular strengths. The English Language Institute (ELI) at the University of Bridgeport, in Connecticut, is no exception to this rule. What makes this 12-level, intensive English program (IEP) special is its monthly skit workshop. One of several assigned workshops offered at ELI, the skit workshop affords advanced-level ESL students with an opportunity to use their English in the dramatic form.



In each session, different groups of advanced students (usually 5-12 students) have the daunting task of preparing a 15- 30-minute skit presentation over a 3 1/2-week period. Initially, most students are apprehensive about undertaking such an ambitious project, particularly because they rarely have a background in acting. With the help of ELI instructors, however, the students' fears are eventually assuaged.

The first major hurdle to surmount in this process is the choice of a theme for the skit. Via brainstorming, students pool together their ideas--both original and borrowed--that often come from well-known movies, TV programs, or literature. (For instance, in the past, my students have created their own renditions of *The Dating Game*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Weakest Link*, and *Fame*). Once a list of topics is devised, the students vote on the one they think is the best. The subject matter is then tailored to include elements of ELI life.

Next, students develop the chosen theme into a script. They make revisions, engaging in peer editing until all parties are satisfied. They memorize the script to the best of their abilities, incorporating the appropriate gestures and intonation into the process. Then, with the assistance of a few props, students perform the skit on the last Friday of the session--the day of the ELI graduation party.

It is amazing to see these advanced students in their acting debuts! I have observed some of the most timid and quiet students recite their lines with bold confidence. Other students, dramatic by nature, have taken center stage as if they were born for the limelight. It is great to see the transformation that results when students assume their roles.

Overall, however, the greatest reward is to see the tangible progress students make, to know that certain students could barely speak English when they started at the ELI, and now, with the benefit of the skits, they can express themselves in a way they never imagined--before an audience and in a second language.

About This Member Community

International Black Professionals and Friends in TESOL (IBPFT) Caucus

IBPFT exists to promote and enhance the professional growth and development of TESOL members of color, by providing a forum for the discussion of pertinent issues. It seeks to ensure that TESOL increasingly builds and maintains an organization that reflects the diversity of its members worldwide, and that takes measures to actively promote, support, and value the interests and contributions of the professionals of color among its ranks. The Caucus is inclusive in nature and welcomes the participation of all who are interested in issues affecting students and teachers of color worldwide.



Leaders

E-mail ibpft@tesol.org

Cochair: Shondel Nero

Cochair: Khadar Bashir-Ali

Chair-Elect: Marinus Stephan

Coeditor: Michelle Maitland

Coeditor: Nika Barnes

Discussion e-list: Visit <http://www.tesol.org/mbr/community/managesubs.html> to join IBPFT-L, or visit <http://lists.tesol.org/read/?forum=ibpft-l> if you are already a subscriber.

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To update your membership settings for this e-publication, e-mail changes to members@tesol.org.

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