Interview with Dr. Keith Folse

Interviewed by Maggie Vosters
MA TESOL Program
Michigan State University
vosters2@msu.edu

Dr. Folse is Professor in Modern Languages and Literatures at University of Central Florida. He earned his M.A. in TESOL at University of Southern Mississippi and his Ph.D. in TESOL, Second Language Acquisition & Instructional Technology from University of South Florida. His research interests include ESL grammar, second language vocabulary acquisition, teacher training and best teaching practices. He has authored 55 books on reading, vocabulary, writing, grammar, speaking and listening. Dr. Folse delivered a keynote speech at the 2015 National Geographic Learning Symposium titled Grammar and the Four Skills: Exploration and Integration. For more information about Dr. Folse please visit his personal website:
http://www.keithfolse.com/

M: You’ve taught all over the world. What first got you interested in teaching ESL/EFL?

K: I was a French major. I was going to teach French. I wanted to teach. That’s why I went to college. In my second semester at the university, I had a roommate from high school who moved out of the dorm, and they moved in a student from Ecuador, who was studying something called ESL, which I had never heard of. And I kept asking him, “What are you majoring in?” And he said, “ESL.” But I had no clue what that meant. But that’s how I got into it [teaching ESL/EFL]…I got into it through French.

M: What are some of the biggest challenges you’ve had with teaching over the years?

K: Well the one that comes to mind immediately was teaching at the University of South Florida. We had a group of German students one summer…and they were high school students, which meant that they were about 15 or 16 years old. Learner needs run the show. Well, I didn’t fully understand what the learner needs were. They [the German students] had English classes in the morning and then they did activities in the afternoon. The thing was, I didn’t know that they weren’t really trying to learn English. The goal was for them to have fun in English. I went to a forum and wrote, “I’ve never taught high school students from Germany.” I didn’t know what to do with these students so I posted, and the best answer that I got back right away was, “It’s not that they’re German. It’s that they’re in high school, and they’re 16 years old, and they’re on this kind of trip, and they’re in Florida. So here’s what we did: the next day, we played games that required you to say something in English…charades for example. Once we started doing those
kinds of things, it was a joy. Total turnaround. It’s an example of no matter how long you’ve taught, the best teacher figures out what cards they’ve been dealt. What is the best hand you can play given these cards? Why are they here? What are their needs? How much time do you have? Once I accepted the fact that sitting here and doing something with a native speaker of English in class for three hours…as long as there’s English being produced, it was fine.

**M:** How did you get involved in textbook writing?

**K:** Unlike the rest of my colleagues in third grade, I was really weird. I used to analyze the worksheets. I remember thinking, “This is not how you set up true/false questions…or this is not how you do matching.” I remember taking old manila folders the teacher had tossed out, go home and clean them up, and write rate builders. And that’s how I was so good in school in passing standardized tests, because I could anticipate the questions, because in my head and on paper, even in the sixth grade, I had written these questions. I know how to write, “*both a and b,*” or “*none of the above.*” I had done those myself.

In the first grad course at University of Southern Mississippi, we had to do a project. And my project was looking at a book that had been written in the audiolingual method, and I wrote a bunch of exercises to go with the first ten chapters of this book. I submitted my paper and when everybody else got their projects back, mine just had a piece of paper that said, “See me.” So I went to go see her [the professor] and she said, “We have to go get a letter to the editor forthwith.” She was talking about publishing these [exercises] into a textbook, and I had no clue.

So my first book was *English Structure Practices,* University of Michigan Press (1983), and that was a workbook of exercises that was to go with what at the time was the number one selling grammar book. It was called *English Sentence Structure.* And that was the first workbook...now I’m up to number 61 or 62. I love writing textbook materials. That was my big research area in my dissertation…on vocabulary activities.

**M:** What type of research are you doing now?

**K:** I’m more into corpus linguistics now. So within the exercises and within the lessons, in every book I write now, no sentence appears at random. If I need an example of present progressive…I need four examples…I don’t just write four things that pop into my head. I go search corpus linguistics and find out, “Well, what are the top four verbs that would occur in that verb tense?” I use COCA, and also do things like going through the Academic Word List. In a series I did with University of Michigan Press called *Clear Grammar,* almost every chapter has a vocabulary box in there. And it’s not words that appear in the story; it’s words that are 100% connected to that grammar point.
M: If you had any recommendations or advice for new teachers entering the ESL/EFL field, what would they be?

K: I think you would be very wise to go watch and observe as many teachers as you can. I don’t mean two or three; I mean spend time at a school and visit different teachers. I was lucky when I first started teaching; the place I taught in used audiolingual, and I’m happy that I actually got to see that method used a lot. I did student teaching, and my first three weeks was just watching classes. And you had to have a question that you reported back to your mentor teacher on. And the question that I had was, “How do you start the class?” So at the beginning of the class, the bell rings and now it’s 10:00. No one says—I hope—“open your book to page 45. Let’s do present perfect.” But there’s this little chit-chat thing, like, “Where’s Maria? Has anyone seen Maria?” And I didn’t know how to do that. I was at a loss. I had everything planned; I had written everything out. I really wanted to know when I watched these classes how people started the class. Another thing is that you really need to know something about the language of the students that you’re teaching. You don’t need to be fluent. For example, you should know if their language has articles or not. You should know about verb tense…if it has tenses or not. And if it does, does it come close to having our twelve verb tenses? The third thing is you have to know your own language very well. And you have to know much, much more than you’re ever going to teach. Never confuse what you know in your head with what you should turn and say to a student. That’s a skill.

References