

A Retirement Conversation with Dr. James Hunter: Teaching, Curiosity, and a Life of Connection

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Summary: This article celebrates Dr. James Hunter's retirement after more than three decades of teaching in the English Language Center (ELC) and MA TESOL program at Gonzaga University. Since joining Gonzaga in 1994, he has directed the MA TESOL program, helped develop the Community, Culture, and Language program, and mentored generations of language educators while supporting multilingual students through community-based language programs. His scholarship includes two teacher's books, a book chapter, and 15 refereed articles published through prestigious venues such as System, ELT Journal, and WAESOL Educator.

Dr. James Hunter's retirement gathering was never meant to be a grand speech. In fact, that would not have been James's style. Those who know him know that he has always preferred to support others rather than make himself the center of attention. Therefore, in the spirit of James himself, we gathered for a roundtable conversation: colleagues, former students, and friends sitting together, asking questions, sharing memories, laughing, and reflecting on the many ways James has shaped Gonzaga University and the wider TESOL community.

What emerged from that conversation was more than a professional biography. It was a portrait of a teacher whose work has always been rooted in curiosity, humility, courage, and deep human connection.

What First Drew James to Teaching English and Working With Language Learners?

James described his entry into English language teaching with characteristic honesty and humor: he "kind of fell into it." As a young person interested in languages, he went to Fukuoka, Japan, during a gap year. There, almost by chance, he attended a speech contest at the YMCA and was asked whether he would like to teach English. At seventeen, James began teaching.

He was quick to admit that he was not, at first, the teacher he would later become. He remembered teaching in ways that now make him laugh and cringe. A turning point came when he watched Bridget teach. In her classroom, he saw something different: students interacting, laughing, playing games, and engaging with language in meaningful ways. He

realized that teaching could be joyful, creative, and deeply human. As he put it, once he discovered that teaching could be fun and interesting, he was "hooked."

That beginning reveals something central about James's career. He did not enter teaching as someone claiming to have all the answers. He entered as a learner. Throughout his career, that learner stance remained one of his greatest strengths. James became the kind of teacher who kept revising his assumptions, learning from his students, and asking what language education could become when grounded in relationships rather than performance.

How Did Living and Teaching Across Cultures Shape His Understanding of Language, Culture, and Education?

For James, cross-cultural experience was not about collecting impressive stories from around the world. It was about learning to recognize one's boundaries and prejudices and then working to move beyond them. He shared the example of teaching at a women's college in the United Arab Emirates, where several students wore niqabs and he could see only their eyes. At first, he wondered how he could connect with students when he could not see their faces. He later realized that this concern arose from his own assumptions. The connection happened: the students connected with him, and he connected with them.

That story captures James's pedagogy beautifully. He has always approached teaching with curiosity rather than certainty. He learned that connection does not require sameness. It requires attention, humility, and a willingness to let go of one's assumptions.

What Makes a Truly Great ESL Teacher?

A great ESL teacher is not simply someone who knows grammar, teaching methods, or theory. A great ESL teacher is someone who sees learners fully and creates the conditions in which they can grow.

James spoke about curiosity and courage. Curiosity means wanting to understand why a student challenges something, resists something, or asks a difficult question. Courage means being willing to release some control in the classroom and follow the conversation where it needs to go. He recalled moments when students challenged texts or ideas. Rather than treating their resistance as a failure, he treated it as the beginning of genuine learning.

One student described James as “not only a mentor, a professor, a professional, but just a good man,” adding that “the only thing bigger than his mind is his heart.” Another student remembered how James took her ideas seriously, even when she was only beginning to develop them. His colleague described his remarkable ability to sit with people, listen deeply, and bring many voices together.

How Has the Field of TESOL Changed During James's Career?

James first acknowledged the obvious: artificial intelligence is changing the world of language teaching and learning. However, he then turned to a larger and deeper historical shift.

Early in his career, James wrestled with the colonial legacy of English. He asked why he was teaching a language that had been used in many places to dominate, marginalize, and even erase other languages and cultures. That tension never disappeared, but the field changed. Over time, TESOL moved further away from the idea that English belongs only to so-called core English-speaking countries. The myth of the “native-speaker” teacher has been challenged and, in many ways, dismantled. English is now understood more fully as a global language shaped by the people and communities who use it.

James also reflected on the field's movement away from perfection as the goal of language learning. He challenged the idea that learners must reach a particular level of accuracy before they can do anything meaningful with a language. For him, that idea gets things backward. People become proficient in using language by using it. Language

learning is not merely preparation for communication; communication is the process through which language learning happens.

This belief has shaped James's teaching and work in the MA TESOL program. He has helped prepare teachers who understand that multilingual learners are not deficient versions of monolingual speakers. They are people with rich linguistic, cultural, and intellectual resources. Good teaching does not ask learners to leave those resources behind. It invites them to use those resources as part of learning.

What Changes Matter Most for the Next Generation of Teachers and Learners?

For James, the next generation of teachers must move away from rigid ideas about correctness, perfection, and authority. Teachers need knowledge, but that knowledge should be used to support learners, not to make them feel small. As James recalled through a humorous classroom memory, knowing grammar does not give a teacher permission to “lord it over” others. The purpose of expertise is not to prove how much we know; it is to help. So, do not teach from the need to prove yourself. Teach from the desire to support others. Help students discover what “sparks” them. Create classrooms where learners can take risks, ask questions, challenge assumptions, and use language for authentic purposes.

James also emphasized the importance of collective and collaborative learning. His vision of TESOL has never been individualistic. It has always been relational. Students, teachers, tutors, mentors, colleagues, and community partners all learn from one another. In the Gonzaga MA TESOL community, former ESL students become graduate students, graduate students become teachers, and teachers continue learning from the multilingual learners they serve. The boundaries between teacher and learner are real, but they are also porous. Everyone has something to teach, and everyone has something to learn.

What Is James Looking Forward to in Retirement?

James made it clear that retirement does not mean he is finished teaching. He and Bridget (James's wife) plan to move to England to be closer to their children and extended family. Even as he spoke about this next chapter, however, he was already imagining new forms of language and literacy work.

He described the community near Bradford, Yorkshire, where many families from Indian, Pakistani, Afghan, and other backgrounds live. He noted the need for community language and literacy support, not for assimilation, but to help people navigate life in that context.

In other words, James is not leaving the work. He is carrying it with him.

He also spoke enthusiastically about the possibility of future collaborative writing and research. Rather than writing alone, he seemed most energized by the idea of an edited collection or shared project that could capture what is distinctive about Gonzaga's approach to TESOL: the complex, relational, and deeply human connections among applied linguistics, language teaching, community engagement, and teacher education.

A Legacy of Hope, Humility, and Connection

Near the end of the gathering, his student Ethan Sams called James a "wall breaker." The phrase fits. James breaks walls between teacher and student, theory and practice, in-

stitution and person, and language and life. He helps people reconsider their assumptions and imagine more humane ways of teaching.

James Hunter's career reminds us that TESOL is not only about teaching English. It is about listening across differences. It is about honoring multilingual lives. It is about helping people find their voices while allowing their voices to change us. It is about curiosity, courage, humility, and love.

As James begins this new chapter, we celebrate not only his decades of teaching, mentoring, leadership, and service but also the countless lives he has touched and the many teachers, learners, and colleagues who will continue carrying his influence forward.



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