

Voices from the Field

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Introduction

“Voices from the Field” is a feature article in INTESOL Journal, the aim of which is to introduce newcomers and new projects to the affiliates and members of INTESOL and to document what is happening “on the ground” in response to challenges and changing conditions. In Fall 2024 Dr. Undraa Maamuujav joined the faculty of the College of Education at Butler University.

Before Undraa even arrived at Butler, I, Susan, was already excited by what she brings to our community in terms of research, pedagogy, and resources and was eager to get her involved quickly in our professional network. Undraa graciously agreed to present her research at the 2024 INTESOL Conference and her work was warmly received by that audience.

This feature article will allow her the space to go into greater detail about who she is, what she brings, and what she sees on our shared horizon. Each section contains her thoughtful responses to my interview questions.

What is your current role? How did you get here?

I am currently a faculty member in the College of Education at Butler University in Indianapolis, where I teach First Year Seminar and preservice teacher education courses. Before joining Butler University and relocating to Indiana in the summer of 2024, I served as a research scientist in the School of Education at University of California, Irvine. There I worked on two federally funded writing projects—the Pathway to Academic Success and the WRITE (Writing Research to Improve Teaching and Evaluation) Center. Both projects focused on inservice teacher professional development training and research aimed at enhancing writing instruction at

the secondary level. So, my work centers on teaching, research, and the continuous improvement of education in the area of writing development and instruction at the secondary and postsecondary levels.

How did I get here? When I reflect on this question, I find it important to go all the way back to where my educational journey began—my hometown of Ulaangom, a small town in Uvs province, located in the remote western region of Mongolia. It was there that I completed my secondary education and developed my foundational literacy skills, all in my native language Mongolian. At the time, in that remote region of Mongolia, English was not taught in schools; the only foreign language offered was Russian. At the age 17, I left my hometown to attend university in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, where I majored in English and Education. I was an eager and enthusiastic young person who had just chosen to study and teach a language that was entirely new to me. So, when I was assigned to read Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* in its original, unabridged, non-translated form and write a literary explication during my first semester as an undergraduate, I was in over my head. I felt very much like, “Oops, what did I get myself into?” That first year of my undergraduate program was incredibly challenging, as I worked tirelessly to build my basic English proficiency skills as a second language learner. But it was this early struggle and the continuous challenge of learning to speak and write in a new language that sparked my interest and shaped my academic and professional career. Learning a new language, and writing in it, is an incredibly challenging yet tremendously rewarding experience. For me, it became a fascinating entry point into a career centered on language, literacy, and education.

Fast forward—after earning my BA in English and Education and MA in Linguistics from the University of the Humanities in Mongolia and teaching there for two years, I made yet

another big move. This time across the ocean to begin a whole new life. I came to the United States as a graduate student at California State University, Los Angeles, where I taught for over a decade upon completing an MA in TESOL. In 2017, I joined the University of California, Irvine as a composition instructor, and a year later, I started the Ph.D. program in Education. After nearly 15 years of teaching, I took a pause to focus on research in order to systematically examine writing instruction and development across diverse educational contexts. This transition laid the foundation for my current scholarship on equitable and evidence-based instructional practices to improve the writing skills of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

What opportunities are you discovering in your role? What has surprised you most about these opportunities? Where do these opportunities seem to be leading right now?

First and foremost, returning to teaching after several years of engaging in intensive research has been an amazing experience that allows me to use the classroom as a space for experimentation and inquiry. Devoting the past seven years of my life fully to research has helped me stretch my thinking, engage in inquiry at a deeper level, and systematically examine what works and what doesn't based on evidence. As a practitioner-oriented researcher, I have engaged in developing a range of instructional resources and studied how teachers in diverse educational settings implement them and whether they work in their contexts. Now, I have the opportunity to apply and refine those instructional resources in my own classroom. In a way, my classroom is like a lab where I experiment with different strategies and examine how students in my teaching context engage with these strategies and whether they work for them. This unique blend of teaching and research, as well as the ability to use my own classroom as a site to experiment and examine research-informed practice, has been one of the most exciting opportunities.

Another opportunity I have been excited about in my current role is the chance to design my own year-long writing and literacy curriculum for the First Year Seminar. Last year, I taught the course under the theme “*The Interplay of Self and Society*,” based on a curriculum I developed. In this year-long model, we begin by exploring the concept of self through personal and reflective writing, paired with rhetorical analysis of autobiographical texts and autoethnography. Engaging incoming first-year students in this kind of work holds significant value—it invites them to reflect on their lived experiences and creates opportunities to connect with one another on a deeper level. At the same time, it has challenged me to step into more creative and personal forms of writing, as I model, share, and write alongside my students. But what has surprised me most is the amount of courage it takes to write something that is deeply personal. To do this work authentically, you have to embrace both vulnerability and intellectual humility, and you have to be brave to share it publicly. Much of my own writing until now has been academic—peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, an academic book, and other scholarly work. So, engaging in personal writing has certainly been a significant challenge, but one that remains profoundly meaningful.

These opportunities are leading me toward a more integrated vision of teaching, research, and writing, bridging work that is both personally meaningful and academically rigorous. I have started working on two projects of personal significance: the first is writing a book based on my First Year Seminar curriculum and the second is an experiment-in-memoir project. This direction is pushing me to explore pedagogies that are not only research-informed but also human-centered. Looking ahead I envision my work expanding into the development of curricular models and instructional resources that align well with analytical, reflective, culturally responsive, and evidence-based writing practices.

What challenges are you discovering in your role? What are the implications of these challenges?

I feel a strong need to stay current and relevant, especially as the literacy landscape continues to rapidly evolve with advancements in technology, AI tools, and new forms of digital communication. The shifting context of education due to societal forces and technological change demands continuous learning to keep pace with emerging tools, to critically assess their pedagogical value and ethical implications, and to respond thoughtfully to the evolving needs, challenges, and expectations of students. At an individual level, this challenge pushes me to be more innovative and creative in my teaching and to design learning experiences that invite students to co-create, co-construct knowledge, and engage in experiential learning. It also means positioning students as active participants in the inquiry process, where they don't just consume information but contribute to knowledge-building in meaningful ways. Collectively, this challenge reinforces the need for ongoing professional development and interdisciplinary collaboration.

A much broader challenge—one that I believe many teachers and scholars are facing right now—is the effort it takes to stay focused and committed in the midst of overwhelming external forces and pressures. We are living and working in a time shaped by constant disruption, political polarization, social unrest, identity threats, climate anxiety, rapid technological change, and so on. These broader forces affect us directly and indirectly, emotionally and mentally, making it increasingly difficult to maintain the clarity, as well as the energy, needed to stay grounded in our teaching and scholarship. On top of these systemic challenges, we are also bombarded by day-to-day distractions—whether they are news headlines, social media feeds, family responsibilities, or institutional demands—that accumulate and create cognitive overload.

As educators, we are already in a demanding profession that requires deep intellectual engagement, emotional labor, and a high level of presence and care. With so much to process, it becomes easy to feel scattered, discouraged, and burned out. The sense of overwhelm we feel can deflate our energy and motivation, and at times, continuing the work can feel daunting. So, staying focused and committed isn't just a matter of self discipline; rather, it is a real challenge tied to the socio-political conditions under which we live.

The implications of these challenges can be far-reaching. The cognitive overload we encounter and accumulate over time can hinder our performance. It can diminish our capacity to be innovative. It can prevent us from meaningfully engaging with students and empowering them to learn and grow. Sustaining our passion can become increasingly difficult, especially if the broader system does not value or support the work we do. A visible and far-reaching consequence of these conditions, particularly at the secondary level, is the teacher shortage we are seeing across the country.

What trends or patterns in ELL K-12 or higher education enrollment have you observed?

Before I respond to this question, I would like to briefly comment on the term ELL (English Language Learners). I recognize that several terms are used interchangeably with ELL, including EL (English Learners), Multilingual Learners, Second Language Learners, among others. I also want to acknowledge that some educators and scholars view the term ELL as problematic due to its potential to convey a deficit-oriented perspective and to reinforce stigmatization and stereotypes associated with this student population. In recent years, I have observed a growing preference for the term Multilingual Learners of English (MLEs), particularly within the literacy scholarship and TESOL communities. I have adopted this terminology in my own research and writing, as it reflects the linguistic assets and cultural

wealth these students bring. It acknowledges that many of them use and have exposure to multiple languages across various communicative contexts, including home, local community, school, and other academic settings.

In the K-12 educational context, MLEs have been a growing student population. According to the most recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (updated in May 2024), the percentage of public K-12 students identified as English Learners increased from 9.4% (approximately 4.6 million students) in Fall 2011 to 10.6% (about 5.3 million students) in Fall 2021 (NCES, 2024). While I haven't seen the most current enrollment statistics at a national level, I am curious about how the current social and political conditions, especially those affecting immigrant communities, are influencing enrollment trends among this student population at the K-12 level.

In higher education in the United States, MLEs represent a diverse student population that includes international students, undocumented students, US-born language-minority students, and immigrant students. Enrollment trends among these groups can vary significantly depending on factors such as the state, the type of institutions (e.g., community college vs. research university), and even whether the programs are at undergraduate or graduate level. Within the TESOL community, a particularly concerning trend I have observed has been the substantial decline in enrollment—especially among international students—in pre-collegiate Intensive English Programs (IEPs). This decline has led many university-based IEPs to either close or undergo significant restructuring. A far-reaching consequence of this trend is a parallel decline in enrollment in graduate-level TESOL programs. This raises serious concerns about the future of the field and the preparation of educators equipped to teach multilingual learners.

What are some promising practices you have observed, championed, or brought about in your context? Why are these promising practices so promising?

Some promising practices I have studied and championed are based on the cognitive strategies approach to teaching reading and writing, as well as to disciplinary literacy and critical thinking. This curricular approach, developed by my advisor Carol Booth Olson, is based on decades of research, refinement, and successful implementation. It has been tested across diverse educational contexts and shown to be effective in improving students' writing through several large-scale randomized controlled trial (RCT) studies. The most recent study (Olson et al, 2025) on the use of the cognitive strategies approach, which was published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, involved 4136 students in Grades 7-11 and 174 teachers across 46 schools in seven U.S. states. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic during the study's implementation, the results demonstrated a statistically significant positive impact on students' overall writing quality, as well as improvements in specific dimensions of writing such as content, productivity, structure, stance, and language conventions.

Cognitive strategies refer to “acts of mind” such as planning and goal setting, making connections, forming interpretations, reflecting and relating, and evaluating—metacognitive strategies and mental processes that skilled readers and writers use to construct meaning (Olson, 2011). These strategies enable deeper engagement with texts, promote analytical thinking, and help learners make meaning through close reading and analytical writing. Teaching these strategies explicitly to MLEs enhances their understanding of how language is used to construct meaning and then apply this knowledge and the strategies in their own writing. When MLEs are provided with structured opportunities to practice these strategies, they not only develop stronger

reading and writing skills but also cultivate critical thinking and a more nuanced awareness of language and authorial craft.

The strength of this approach and its accompanying instructional practices lies in its time-tested, evidence-based, and theory-driven foundation, as well as its adaptability across diverse instructional contexts. Its demonstrated effectiveness with diverse student populations, particularly MLEs, makes it a promising and scalable model for improving writing, reading, and literacy outcomes.

What state and/or federal policies are uppermost on your mind these days? Why? What do you wish policymakers knew about the impact of these policies on families, teachers and students?

As someone who is relatively new to Indiana, I am in a period of observation and learning when it comes to the state-level education initiatives, policies, and decision making processes that relate to students and communities we serve. I view this as an ongoing opportunity to deepen my understanding of the state's educational landscape. At the same time, what is uppermost on my mind these days are changes and developments at the federal level, particularly those policies that have direct impact on higher education, teacher preparation programs, and K-12 students our aspiring educators will be working with. Programs and funding decisions such as Federal Student Aid, Title III of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program, and Adult Education Act are of particular importance. These federal programs and initiatives play a crucial role in supporting students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds and communities.

I wish policy makers fully recognized the tangible, day-to-day impact these policies have on the lives of students, families, and educators—particularly those in under-resourced

communities. For many students and families, programs like Federal Student Aid and Pell Grants can mean whether to pursue college or forgo higher education due to financial hardship. And for K-12 students, especially those from historically marginalized groups, funding and programs like ESEA Title III shape the quality of instruction they receive and the resources available in their schools. The policy decisions around these programs and their funding directly affect students' futures, family stability, and educators' ability to make a meaningful difference, so considering this human element and the long-term implications seems necessary.

I also think that sustained support across all levels—federal, state, and institutional—is vital in addressing the existing disparities, fostering equitable educational outcomes, and ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have the tools, resources, and support they need to succeed. Effective and equitable educational outcomes for all students must remain a shared responsibility across the education ecosystem. Without the collective effort, systemic inequities will persist and continue to limit the potential of too many learners, especially those from marginalized and underserved communities.

What is something of which you are particularly proud of that connects to your role, your work, your organization?

Throughout my career, I have had the privilege of working with many outstanding educators, researchers, scholars, and teachers across various contexts—individuals who are deeply committed to advancing education, improving instruction, and making meaningful difference in the lives of students. Working alongside these dedicated and compassionate professionals has shaped my professional career and personal growth in a profound way. Their passion and persistence have inspired me and motivated me to keep going, to persist in times of uncertainty, and to find the courage to face and overcome challenges. The collective effort is

energizing and is what drives progress in education and society. I am proud to be part of this shared commitment—commitment to advance education, improve lives, and serve communities. I am proud that I have persisted and am persisting despite many challenges I have faced along the way. I am proud that I am contributing to the collective effort in my own small but meaningful ways. And I am proud that I am fulfilling my individual responsibility to help build a better future for our children and generations to come.

If you could wave a magic wand, what would you wish for refugees, for ELLs, for their families, and/or their teachers? Why?

This is a difficult question—difficult because the challenges facing refugees, MLEs, and their families, as well as immigrants and migrants more broadly, are deeply rooted in persistent stereotypes, lack of empathy, structural barriers, and systemic exclusion. So, I feel that there is no simple solution or magic fix. Addressing the issues and threats these communities face calls for a shift in mindset, greater empathy, and a willingness to see the world through the eyes of others. Many individuals from these communities have already endured significant hardship and have taken immense risks in leaving behind everything to rebuild a whole new life. Many of them have fled violence and instability in search of safety, opportunity, and survival. I wish that their strengths and resilience were recognized and honored, that their languages, cultures, and contributions were valued in our schools and society, and that they were not met with additional and unnecessary barriers but with compassion and support. I wish that teachers working with students from these communities were provided with the support and resources they need to help them thrive.

Conclusion

The INTESOL community is indeed enriched by Undraa's presence and her contributions. You are encouraged to get to know her, to seek out opportunities to benefit from her insights and to engage with the recommended teaching tools she has developed (links and references provided below). You will find her a deeply committed educator, a delightful colleague, and a generous thought partner.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Susan R. Adams, PhD., is Professor of Education in the College of Education, Butler University. A former ESL teacher and instructional coach, her work is featured in such publications as *Theory into Practice*, *English Journal*, *The New Educator*, *TESOL Journal*, and the *Currere Exchange Journal*. She is the co-editor of *Exploring Meaningful and Sustainable Intentional Learning Communities for P-20 Educators* (2024) and co-author of *Race and Pedagogy: Creating Collaboration for Teacher Transformations* (2016).

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Recommended Teaching Resources

- [Language Support Guidebook: Language Enrichment for Multilingual Learners of English](#)
An open educational resource developed in collaboration between the Pathway to Academic Success Project and the ELL Team of the Council of the Great City Schools
- [Academic Linguaging and Historical Thinking: Cultivating Students Language Skills for Argument Writing](#) by Undarmaa Maamuujav and Jacob Steiss
An upcoming book focused on helping preservice and inservice teachers learn how to integrate academic language skills with argument writing instruction
- [Conducting a National Expansion of Text-based Argument Writing Intervention for Secondary Students Using a Cognitive Strategies Approach](#) by Olson, C.B and colleagues
A research article that reports findings from a multisite cluster randomized controlled trial designed to scale up an existing successful professional development program that uses cognitive strategies approach to text-based argument writing.
- [Strategies for Writing to Learn in the Content Areas: A Teacher Resource and Guide](#)
An open educational resource developed by the Pathway to Academic Success Project Team at University of California, Irvine
- [Writing Instruction Across the Disciplines: Evidence-based Practices in Grades 6-12](#) Edited by Steve Graham, Carol Booth Olson, Tanya Baker, Huy Chung, Undarmaa Maamuujav, and Jacob Steiss
An upcoming book that translates the best current research on adolescent writing instruction into teacher-friendly practices that are easy to implement in today's diverse classrooms.