

Introducing Shannon Tanghe: 2016 TESOL Teacher of the Year

Interviewed by [Nancy Flores](#)

Shannon Tanghe is the 2016 TESOL Teacher of the Year. Her teaching career began with a kindergarten in Cairo, Egypt, and a primary school in Georgetown, Guyana. She was then drawn to Korea by an opportunity to volunteer at a children’s English summer camp, which turned in 15 years of teaching English and English teacher education in South Korea, where she currently teaches in a graduate school of TESOL.

An advocate of the phrase “think global, act local,” Shannon strives to stay active in both international and local TESOL organizations. She is a member of international organizations including TESOL and IAWE (International Association of World Englishes), as well as local national organizations including Korean TESOL, KATE (Korean Association of Teachers of English), ALAK (Applied Linguistics Association of Korea), and KAME (Korean Association of Multicultural Education). She has also served on the Committee for Integration of Multiculturalism into Korean Public Middle Schools.

After being invited to deliver a workshop for English teachers, through word of mouth recommendations, she has since given more than 10 other invited workshops and lectures on English teacher training all around Korea. Additionally, she has presented more than 25 times at conferences around the world.

TESOL’s Nancy Flores asked Shannon a few questions about her teaching experiences and philosophies:

What made you want to become an English language teacher?

As a child, I grew up in a small farming community in rural Minnesota in the United States. I began the journey toward becoming a teacher majoring in elementary education in a small, liberal arts college in rural Minnesota. Perhaps it was my rural, close-to-home experiences that led me to seek out more global experiences in teaching, including Egypt, Guyana, and South Korea.

I feel fortunate to be involved in English language teaching, which offers opportunities to combine the things I love—developing personal relationships with learners in a way that helps both teacher and learner to have reciprocal roles—where both learn and grow together. I have always been interested in teaching and the longer I teach, the more I enjoy it.

You started your career by teaching children but later decided to teach adults. Why did you make that career change?

I love teaching children, and being involved in teaching adults and specifically teacher education is amazing. I originally majored in elementary education, and then while I was teaching elementary students, I had the opportunity to lead some workshops for elementary teachers and I fell in love with teaching teachers. I have found teachers to be the most passionate, eager, and willing students. It sounds cliché, but I really do love going to work each day. Hearing and

sharing different classroom situations and educational ideas and seeing different perspectives from teachers with diverse life and teaching experiences is exciting and invigorates me and my teaching.

You have said you are an advocate of the phrase “think global, act local.” How does that phrase apply to your everyday teaching?

In much of the world, and English language education is no exception, there is a tendency to follow popular trends, sometimes without considering whether these really are the best for a particular situation. Being aware of global ideas and theories related to teaching English is certainly valuable and strengthens teachers’ understandings. But even more valuable is the contextualized experiences teachers bring into their individual classroom. Valuing these local community and classroom experiences leads to insights that allow teachers to understand and embrace their own classrooms, creating spaces to effectively teach as people without this understanding may not be able to.

I consider myself a critical pedagogue and try to incorporate elements of critical pedagogies in my daily teaching, to encourage students to question the world and seek out possibilities for transformative action. In particular, I try to create opportunities for learners to become aware of some of the prominent theories and ideas in the field, but then to customize them and think about “What does that mean for me and my students right here (in Korea)?” and how that can (or perhaps cannot) be practically applied to their own particular teaching contexts. I try to challenge learners to think about what they already know, the experiences and insights they bring into their classrooms and then draw on these understandings to influence their classroom actions. I believe this is valuable because if this process is utilized, then the way one teaches actually informs the theory, rather than a one-way reliance on theory to inform their teaching practices.

How have you collaborated with teachers from other classrooms? Would you say that enabling those partnerships has been beneficial for your students and yourself as a teacher?

Absolutely! Since completing my dissertation on collaborative coteaching, I have become even more interested in the possibilities that exist within teacher collaboration. I have come to see collaboration as being central to education. As the world continues to become more globalized, teacher education programs have a responsibility to be up to date, and effective collaborations and internationalizing teacher education programs are great ways to keep educators at the forefront of this globally interconnected world.

In English language classes, I strive to create opportunities to transfer classroom content beyond the classroom, through introducing critical issues and international collaborations. I have created several partnerships with teachers in other classes around the world (United States, Korea, Turkey, and China) and regularly engage in telecollaboration projects to broaden students’ perspectives and offer chances for authentic international dialogues. The class partners with another class and students in small international groups connect through Skype, email, or social networking sites to investigate various topics (for example, English education, linguistic landscapes, English media portrayals), sharing and comparing the local and international

contexts. Students sometimes interview one another, or complete a project where partners read separate texts, share insights with international partners, and then cooperate to create individual context-specific pedagogical activities allowing each of the group members to apply the insights in their own classrooms.

Interclass collaborations between teachers also allow opportunities to better understand particularities of their own teaching contexts through articulating it to someone in a very different context and to cooperate with other international educators. Students have reported the international collaboration both enhanced their intercultural competences and stimulated perspective transformations.

I believe collaborating with other teachers can be one of the most effective forms of professional development. At the local level, I often coteach with other faculty members within the TESOL department at my university. It is valuable to see how others approach and facilitate classes, and coteaching allows opportunities and spaces to experiment with new things in the classroom. Whether coteaching with faculty members within our department, or engaging in international collaborations, I have found these collaborations invaluable in informing my own teaching. Furthermore, I believe teachers and students alike benefit from the collaboration. The collaborations are generally very well received by students, with most reflecting positively on the experience, often identifying increased intercultural competencies and increased interests in English education in different contexts.

You currently teach in South Korea. How is teaching there different from teaching in other contexts?

There is a strong focus on English education in Korea as many see proficiency in the English language as crucial to staying competitive at the global level. For high school and university students, high scores on English exams are often needed to get into desired universities and then to secure a job at top-tier companies. Both the Korean government and individual citizens continue to invest heavily—investing significant time, money, and resources in English education in Korea.

In Korea, teaching is considered a stable and well-respected job. Teachers have to pass a very difficult exam in order to be allowed to teach in the public school system, so difficult that only around 5% pass the elementary school teacher exam! Those who go into teaching really are at the top of their classes and take education seriously. The teachers I have met in my classes have been fantastic and a genuine pleasure to work with, warmly welcoming me into their classrooms and lives.

You have acquired a lot of experience not only in English language teaching but also by teaching to different cultures and settings. What advice would you give other TESOL professionals wanting to follow your footsteps?

For teachers in any context, and especially when encountering new or unfamiliar settings, being open-minded and open to new ideas is key. I think it is paramount to first consider what the learners need and then how you as a teacher can provide opportunities that may help learners to

meet their needs. Being open to and willing to try and accept new ideas may allow possibilities that you would not have imagined.

What would you say is one of the most rewarding aspects of being a teacher educator?

Being a teacher educator is amazing. Seeing and hearing teachers' diverse experiences in their classes and lives is truly refreshing. Everyone brings in different perspectives into the classroom so that every day, we are all learning and growing together. I am fortunate to be a part of a strong community of TESOLites—the people I work with are amazing. Fellow faculty members and students alike continually inspire me to be a better teacher.

Nancy Flores is the membership coordinator at TESOL International Association. She has been with the association for 8 years and helps to assist members and manage membership-related projects. Originally from Honduras, Flores is a fluent Spanish speaker and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from George Mason University.