

Meet Rawia Hayik: 2017 TESOL Teacher of the Year

Interviewed by [Nancy Flores](#)



Rawia Hayik is the 2017 TESOL Teacher of the Year. She is a lecturer at Sakhnin College, Israel and a PhD graduate from Indiana University, USA. Prior to that, she taught English at Israeli-Arab public schools for 20 years. Her teaching experience also includes 10 years of instructing EFL professional development courses, 4 years of teacher education at Sakhnin College, and 3 years of teaching at the graduate level (Multicultural Literature) at Indiana University. Her teacher-research focuses on children's literature on social justice issues, critical literacy, participatory documentary photography, and the linguistic landscape.

TESOL's Nancy Flores asked Rawia a few questions about her teaching experiences and philosophies:

1. What made you want to become an English language teacher?

When I was in the fifth grade, I was slapped by my English teacher for mispronouncing a word. He hurt me tremendously and instilled enormous hatred towards the English language in my little heart. Ever since, I was determined to become an English teacher when growing up, but a different kind of teacher whose students would not suffer. The dream came true, and after graduating from college, I became an elementary school English teacher. During my 20 years of teaching, I worked laboriously to be the exact opposite of my cruel fifth-grade teacher. I treated my students with great respect and care, and tried to cater to their needs, interests, intelligences, and abilities.

2. You currently teach in Israel. How is teaching there different from teaching in other contexts?

Teaching Arab minority students living in a male-dominated Middle-Eastern society with conflicting religious groups, I have aspired to address these issues within my teaching context, using the English language as a springboard for challenging the culture of silence and promoting students' active participation in the learning process. My main goal, in addition to teaching English as a foreign language, is to provide my normally silenced minority students with productive ways to speak up, thus educating socially aware citizens who can act to transform their reality into a better one (Friere, 1970).

3. How important do you think your role as an English teacher is in your community?

As an English teacher and teacher educator, I view my role as essential in contributing to the community in various domains. I attempt to extend my teaching to issues relevant to students' lives and encourage them to take action for social change. For example, I used emancipatory stories to challenge our male-dominated society and invited students to

question traditional gender-positioning (see Hayik, 2015a, 2016, for further details). I tried to empower minority students through reading books like those by Rosa Parks and engaging them in critical dialogues over discrimination (see Hayik, 2011, 2012, 2015b). I tried to promote tolerance to different faiths by introducing religious-diversity books and raising students' awareness to differing beliefs/cultures (see Hayik, 2015c).



Reading aloud *Cat on the Mat* to EFL third graders.

As students became conscious of these problems, they decided to take action through, for instance, designing slogans and using them to protest against violence in the village streets, or writing letters-of-critique to politicians or authors of sexist stories. I also collaborated with different local schools on a project which encouraged students to document problems in their community and share their critique with an audience of influential figures at the end of the process. The audience listened to young students powerfully critiquing drawbacks

in their communities and promised to help solve these problems.

4. Please talk about your upcoming convention session, “Engaging EFL Writing Through Participatory Documentary Photography (PhotoVoice) Projects”

PhotoVoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) is a tool that invites students to capture photos of deficiencies in their reality, describe the problems in writing, and later share the photos and written accounts with the community, hoping for change. Inspired by critical literacy pedagogy (Friere, 1970; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015), this approach challenges teaching EFL as a set of linguistic skills and standards detached through offering students an empowering technique for relevant language use (Freeman & Freeman, 1998).

Aiming to connect the classroom to students' community, I, a teacher-educator and pedagogical advisor of 18 third-year EFL student-teachers, partnered with three Israeli-Arab elementary schools to implement PhotoVoice in the EFL classroom. After familiarizing the student-teachers with the PhotoVoice tool through reading and discussing several academic articles on the topic, they experimented with it through capturing photos of concerning issues and writing about them. The writing workshop principles (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994) were introduced to scaffold student-teachers' writing (and later teaching of writing). The second phase was applying PhotoVoice, alongside process writing elements, in students' practice-teaching contexts. Each student-teacher worked with a group of fifth- and sixth-grade EFL students, guiding them in photography, technology, and the writing process, and preparing them for the final presentations.

Children’s powerful presentations to political representatives, journalists, and parents at the end of the process (featured in the local news, e.g., [Mjdna](#) and [Elhmra](#)) demonstrate how creative and proficient EFL students can be when provided the chance to discuss issues pertinent to their lives and offered sufficient support. Sample student projects, examples showing their writing development at each stage, videotaped oral presentations, and student-teachers’ final reflections will be shared with the session audience.



A lesson planning session with Rawia’s college students.

This innovative way for improving literacy skills while promoting change has significant implications for practitioners and policymakers through fostering a more engaging approach to language education that connects literacy teaching with social action. It is especially important for minority students who are often offered limited opportunities to experience empowering pedagogies.

5. What advice would you give other TESOL professionals wanting to follow your footsteps?

One of the stories in my sixth-grade textbook was Gibran’s “The Ambitious Violet,” a story about a short violet who wished she could grow taller than her fellow violets in order to see the wider horizon, just like the neighboring tall roses. Mother Nature fulfilled her wish, but such desire became fatal as the angry wind broke the violet’s neck. Rejecting reality led to her deadly fate. I still remember my disappointment of the story ending at that time. Why would the violet perish for the mere fact that she aspired for a richer life? Throughout my life, I, a Middle-Eastern female, was inundated with similar educational messages promoting adhering to social prescriptions. Alongside restricting gender-related messages, my reality involved additional challenges of living in a country rife with conflicts between diverse cultural groups and faiths, especially for me as a minority (Christian-Arab among a Muslim-Arab majority) within a minority (Arab minority in a mostly-Jewish country). However, I have always felt empowered by the courageous violet and never deterred by the fatal punishment she received. After all, she died after quenching her thirst for change. She inspired me to challenge injustices and fight for a better life for myself and my students. Even though such alternative ways of teaching may be paved with hardships, it is worthwhile

to try. I advise other teachers following my footsteps to base their teaching on empowering pedagogies, deviating from following the prescribed textbooks, and rather providing their students with inspiring and challenging teaching experiences that nurture their and their students' inner ambitious violets.

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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.