



Hands-on English

A periodical for teachers and tutors of adult English as a second language

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Difficult conditions

Over the years that we've been sending out *Hands-on English* to instructors in widely scattered adult ESL programs, we have had the impression that conditions in these programs were gradually improving. Could we be wrong about this? Recently we received this message:

"Our school efforts seem more daunting than ever with increased assessment and documentation and more mandates to accomplish the impossible. New personnel can't believe all the paperwork and longtimers are so discouraged that the energy levels are way down."

Too many mandates

The teachers in that program are pressured by more and more requirements they have to meet, but also no doubt by their own concern for the difficulties that the students face and the urgent need for students to learn English quickly. Yet they feel powerless to control the job.

Does this by any chance describe you? What can an instructor in this business do, when the job becomes overwhelming or discouraging? From experience, we can tell you that there are three main ways to deal with this kind of adversity—you can cope with it, you can try to change it, or you can take a new direction. The solution you choose depends largely on your own personality and strengths.

Coping, or just toughing it out. Some people are able to ignore what goes on outside the classroom and put all their focus and energies into their classroom teaching, keeping their attention primarily on the students themselves. Some of the most

effective teachers we know fit this category; they just don't let anything distract them from the craft of teaching language. Many of the innovative techniques that the ESL field has developed come from this type of focused educator.

Working to change the system. Some people enjoy picking a battle to fight and, in addition to their classroom teaching they work toward constructive change in education policy in their program, school district or state. We have many people like this in our field; they have a lot of energy and determination. They can unfortunately be susceptible to burn-out because the dual effort takes a superhuman amount of energy. We frankly admire these people.

Going on to something new. Some people, frustrated by their efforts to cope or to effect change, decide to take a new approach. They find a different way to serve students, such as starting their own school or learning service, applying for a grant to work on a separate project, going overseas. They might create materials, put up a website or even launch a publication (as we did!). Some of our colleagues in this category move into jobs in elementary or secondary schools, or even enroll in a degree program.

There is no doubt about it, teaching adult ESL is challenging for many reasons. We predict the pressures will continue to increase, in many cases. How individual teachers find the best, most effective niche depends on their own personality and personal strengths. But wouldn't it all be easier if we had networks to connect us? How can we accomplish this?

—the Editor. 