

ESL stories

Compiled by Stefan Chiarantano

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Introduction

By Stefan Chiarantano

Several months ago, I put out an open call asking ESL/EFL teachers to send in stories about their ESL experience to be compiled in an e-book for all to enjoy. I had hoped to be inundated with submissions but alas I only received just a smattering, which are compiled in this pdf format. The guidelines were very general and individuals were encouraged to write about anything they liked from what they loved or disliked about their life in their host country to a cultural experience. Any style of writing from prose to humour to dialogue to poetry was also encouraged.

Here are the entries. I hope you enjoy these stories. If you have any comments or would like to post a story, please email me at:

ESLsubmissions@aol.com

A TEFL Experience

By Daniel Rogers

This is a brief extract of the diary I kept whilst living in *Racibórz*, a small town in the South-West of Poland. I only stayed there for four months as I managed to secure a job in Spain. Poland is a good place to start if you are new to teaching, and there are plenty of opportunities there for TEFL teachers. However, it is always good advice, I think, to do plenty of research on the place you are going to, beforehand. I only did 25 hours a week maximum but the pay was very reasonable. The director of the school fixed me up with accommodation in an apartment block on the outskirts of the town. At times, I felt very isolated, and the fact that the old lady living above me was a paranoid schizophrenic didn't help matters either...

Day 82 (Yes.. I really was counting the days!!)

.. It's snowing. I have abandoned any plans to venture outside, favouring the warmth of my flat. I have enough provisions, last Monday's copy of *The Times*, and of course *EuroNews*: the only TV station in English. Never before have I been so well informed of what's happening in the world.

Day 89

.. The woman upstairs is up to her usual tricks again: banging on the floor and tapping away on the pipes in some bizarre form of Morse code. Fresh snowfall has hindered any plans of travel today. I would like to see what the next town is like, but I'm afraid it'll be just as shit as this one.

Day 90

.. Ninety days in – that's the same amount of time I could have been held as a terrorist suspect if Tony Blair had had his way. The only terrorist here, though, is the woman upstairs. She has been banging on the floor again. Mind you, staying here for any length of time is enough to make anyone want to bang their head against something ..

Day 100

.. I in high spirits today, owe largely to the fact that I have two weeks left and the job in Spain is secured. The weather is awful but I couldn't care less. The loon upstairs waked me up early. How considerate of her it was to give me a wake-up call..

Day 104

.. one hell of a hangover. Got drunk with Andrzej and Jacek last night. Today is bright and clear – wish I could say the same about me ..

Day 110

.. Just lately, I have begun to question my motives for teaching English as a Foreign Language. It is a challenge I am willing to undertake yet one, which has no certain future. Having spent several years trying to carve out a living, find gainful employment and plan for the future, I have become indifferent, almost dissatisfied

with, to term loosely “modern life.” Rising house prices; increased competition for jobs.. I have subconsciously decided to say “bollocks to it” and venture off into the great, wide world, to explore, have new experiences. It is a qualitative lifestyle I seek ..

Day 113

.. All packed and ready to leave. A few almost-tearful farewells and I left the school after my last conversational class with Stan. I will miss his drawings – why he insisted on drawing me diagrams of geo-thermal conductors whilst I was teaching him conditional tenses, I’ll never know. I’ve managed to save over seven-hundred quid during my time here. Not bad. In Poland, I am a rich man, and I will return to the UK richer for the experience. Viva España ..

Rhymes and Crafts

By Sam

One of the most rewarding experiences I have had working in Spain was when I was called to give a teacher training course to a group of EFL teachers in Valencia. All the teachers were Spanish and were teaching primary children in different schools in and a round Valencia and as far as Alicante.

The title of the course, the **Use of Songs and Rhymes in an EFL Classroom for Primary Children** was very interesting and very new to me. Normally, when teacher trainers are called to do courses, they have to organise the whole course themselves and not very much help is given apart from books and material which can be borrowed from the library.

In Spain, primary teachers (unless things have changed) are given very little knowledge on popular rhymes during their training and

learning period at University something which surprised me enormously. The subject was therefore new to them however; they were keen to learn many of the different songs and rhymes that normally children are taught in England when they are very small.

I began by selecting those popular rhymes that I considered were suitable for an EFL class. The vocabulary had to be simple and at the same time very familiar to the children. New vocabulary had to be adequate so children could pick it up quickly.

I read and learnt many new things about popular rhymes above all the origins of rhymes. I found a very interesting book on the origins and history of rhymes, if I remember well it was an Oxford edition. Did you know for example that Ba Ba Black sheep was initially created to ridicule the monarchy of the time and is about the imposition of taxes? I taught different rhymes to the teachers explaining why they were composed in the first place or when they were created. This made the content of the course highly interesting.

However, the teachers wanted something else, something that could make the children remember the rhymes in a meaningful way and didn't just want to teach the mere recitation of the songs in the class, after all a cassette would do that job, so I decided to be creative and began to think about craft activities and lots of other interesting writing activities children would enjoy doing with each new rhyme. It took me a while and a lot of effort but I came up with new ideas like implementing role plays, for example in the case of Humpty Dumpty, where all the class could participate creating the idea of classroom theatre. Using the vocabulary which would appear in the rhymes, I created different and enjoyable writing activities that children would enjoy doing. The craft activities were suitable to do in the classroom and the material easy to get hold of. The teachers first did all the craft activities during the course themselves. They loved these ideas so I compiled them onto a colour CD for teachers to print off the lessons as they required them.

I believe the teachers really valued my teaching experience and the knowledge I gave them. I was very pleased with the response and especially pleased that I had learnt so much from the course and at the same time was able to transmit my knowledge in a creative way allowing even the children to benefit from the ideas I passed onto the teachers.

Teachers enjoyed carrying out the craft activities during the course and found it very relaxing. There was an excellent teaching/learning environment throughout the course.

I've made my own website for EFL teachers after this wonderful teaching experience. It's called www.rhymesandcrafts.com Please visit it and if you want the material I gave on the course just contact me at rhymesandcrafts@gmail.com

Bye for now,
Sam (EFL teacher Spain)

Gaijin Teachers

By Stefan Chiarantano

I read with interest an article by Robert Fulford titled "A Canadian Journalist in Japan". He said that "certain Westerners visiting Japan develop an attitude that's unlike anything I've seen elsewhere in the world: against all reason, against all common sense, foreigners rather resent the presence of other foreigners. To a Westerner walking the streets of Tokyo, other Westerners look like alien intruders - in a dimly understood way, they spoil the picture."

It got me thinking. There was something annoying about many of the gaijin teachers I met in Japan. Let me explain. I knew this fellow who

was always telling me how much better things were in Japan in the late 80s when he had come over. He had been wined and dined by his students, was paid handsomely just for being a native speaker, and could set his own hours. Now, he was making 1,500 yen an hour, having to really teach, and had to abide by a working schedule. He was bitter and in a way, he seemed a tragic figure. He had missed out on opportunities and had nothing substantial to show for his years in the country. Although he would have qualified for permanent residence, he didn't even bother applying for it nor was he working on a three-year work visa.

Then, there are the gaijin teachers who because they have been in the country for a few years consider themselves experts on things Japanese. They lord their knowledge over you with a holier than thou attitude. "I have been here for 3 years." "I have been here for 7." "I know better." When in reality they know nothing! They act elitist and are a pain in the butt. Living and working in another country doesn't make one an expert on its laws, customs and its people. It does give you though some insight and understanding. I have learned that the Japanese are complex and cannot be easily pigeonholed.

Then there are the gaijin teachers who continue to work in the country but don't want to be there. I have met them in bars. They complain about the country yet continue to stay. What a pity! They don't know how good they have it. If they can't stand the heat, they should get out of the kitchen. Let someone else have the opportunity of teaching in Japan.

Then, there are the JETS. They are brought over by the Japanese government at great government expense to work in the school system and are given deferential treatment. They are put on a pedestal. What they need is a good kick in the derriere to put them in their proper place. They go around telling everyone they meet "I'm

a JET." It's their mantra. It's their pronouncement to the world that they are special and a cut above all other English teachers.

Finally, I have come across English teachers who overstate their qualifications and experience. Once, I listened with astonishment when an English teacher informed a student that Greece consisted only of islands. I corrected him, and told him and his student that Greece does have a mainland. I have seen this type of behaviour before, gaijin teachers feeding the Japanese misinformation.

Mind you, I have come across many wonderful gaijin teachers. However, they tend to be hard to find!

PET PEEVES

by Dawn Severenuk

The ESL textbook we use in class is called "Cutting Edge" but the material is purely traditional: Talk about yourself. Tell us a story about... What would you do if...

It's the second class after the Cynical Weasel and the Class Meanie drop out, leaving Icíar, Gaspar, Remedios and Santiago, four Spanish civil servants, none of whom are particularly adept at English. The classes are arguably mandatory, even though none of these four will ever use English in their jobs. Television in Spain, even here in Madrid, is never in English. They don't listen to songs

with English lyrics and their exposure to English speakers has been limited to their English teachers, who they see twice a week.

They're all interested, but gun-shy. Why even try to learn English any more, especially after twenty years of failure?

Because Human Resources and the Spanish government have decreed, using European Union funds for language learning, that these four must gain some kind of competence in spoken and written English. That's why. So I am trying to teach them, to be cutting edge. Or at least different and vaguely interesting, so that they damn well learn something by the end of the year.

Today's section seems straightforward: Write about your first... DVD. Boyfriend/girlfriend. Day at college or work. Outfit you bought for yourself. Pet. Time you travelled abroad or by yourself. It seems straightforward enough when they all decide to write about first pets.

Paper out, pens ready, heads down, they crouch over their nut-u-BOOK-es, absorbed in storytelling, which they're very gradually getting better at. Ten minutes of scribbling, erasing. ("¡Down! How say cachorro en ingliss?" "¿Y mancha? What is mancha in ingliss?")

I bring out the squishy miniature football we use to control speaking in English. Ah, what the hell. If they mess this up like they mess up some of the other writing assignments, there's only another, what, five weeks of classes?

I toss the football to Remedios. She's the stereotypical middle-aged Spanish woman given to fighting the aging process with every fibre of her being (and every Euro in her wallet). Her cachorro was called Morito (which translates as "Little Moor" but is closer in intention to "Black Boy" or "Sambo")

"How say? POA-pee?"

No. PUH-pee. Sounds like "cup".

The inappropriately-named POA-pee was a Spaniel who lived to the ripe old age of sixteen.

Then, over to Icíar, a Basque head banger with a passion for purple blouses and an infectious giggle. Another puppy: Pulgas ("Fleas", or "Fleabag") was a Golden Lab with a fear of staircases. Lived to seventeen. Then the ball goes over to Gaspar.

Gaspar, pobre Gaspar. He's the class's hanging chad, the Great White Hope. Taciturn, self-conscious, he left school at twelve to become a botones, an errand boy for the Post Office, to support his family. At fifty-three, he's the head stationery guy. He's got a thirteen-year-old son he doesn't understand, a marvellous memory for individual words in English and a hangdog look that intensifies every time he has to say something in English. Gaspar stares down at his paper and starts to speak in a voice so soft that even Remedios, who's sitting right beside him, has to tell him to speak up.

POA-pee? No. It was a rabbit given to him on his birthday, June 15th. Many Spaniards don't pronounce the "s" sound of plural

nouns: it takes a bit before the class realizes that this wasn't a one-time rabbit, but a series of them. Some were soft and cuddly, one had sharp teeth and an attitude problem, but all of them were fluffy and cute and, with alarming regularity, would appear in the paella Gaspar's father cooked to celebrate the holiday for the Assumption of the Virgin on August 15th.

How many rabbits, Gaspar?

He starts counting on his fingers: Seven. Seven revoked rabbits, seven double-duty rabbits: birthday present AND celebratory meal. Given that Spain's food industry was literally blown to bits by the Civil War, a rabbit was a valuable commodity in a protein-poor nation.

Gaspar smiles wanly and hands the ball to Santiago.

A chicken.

A what?

Santiago looks at me like I'm daft and tucks his hands into his armpits. "You know! Brak-brak-brak-brak-brak!!!!"

Icár looks at Santiago. "But where you lived? You in a flat lived, ¿no?"

"Yeah. We call her Manchita. Like on your clothes, you know?" Little Stain. He points to his eye. "White here but everywhere else black."

Remedios: "But was how big the flat?"

Santiago does some quick mental math: “Forty square metres, I think? Two bedrooms.” Santiago is the middle child of five.

“How say cariñoso in English? Affectionate, yeah. Was very affectionate and loved when people visited.” Hands out of his armpits, arms outstretched, he stands up and lumbers towards Remedios. “New person visits, Manchita running!”

The others can’t hide the guilty grins on their faces: Traditional Valencian paellas use chicken as well as rabbit meat.

“How old when died?”

Santiago shrugs. “Dunno. She broke leg behind sofa once so she couldn’t walk. We taught how to fly.”

You what, Santi?

“Yeah! Here, me, this side of sofa, my brother Alvaro there.” He takes the ball and lobs it underhand to Gaspar. “Whoop! Whoop! Back and fort, back and fort and after two hours, Manchita flies! My mudder was cabreá (pissed off)! Feathers everywhere! But Manchita flies.”

“How long did you have Manchita in your house?”

“One year. Too big from eating the garbage, so we gave her to my uncle.”

“She finished [ended up] in paella?”

Remedios laughs so hard that rivulets of eye shadow and mascara run down her cheeks, jaggig every so often when she

hiccups. Icíar gives herself hiccups, too. Gaspar tries to stifle his laughter and goes red with the effort. Santiago just grins and shrugs.

“Next time, it’s boyfriends or girlfriends! No more pets.”

We now have four classes left. The thought has crossed my mind that we should go for paella for the last class. Seafood paella. Squid, mussels and shrimp make pretty lamentable pets.