

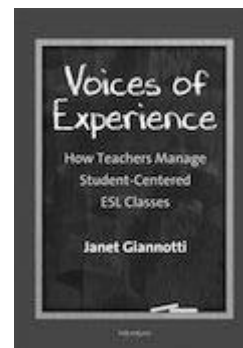
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Voices of Experience: How Teachers Manage Student-Centered ESL Classes

Author: Janet Giannotti (2015)

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224 pages	978-0-472-03614-1	\$26.00 USD



I first came across Janet Giannotti's *Voices of Experience* while completing my MA TESOL program and teaching as a teacher-in-training. Despite my efforts to perform observations of experienced colleagues' classes and speak with them informally about how they ran their classes, I too often found that busy schedules and life intervened. In *Voices of Experience*, I not only discovered a wide-variety of helpful tips and tricks on effective classroom management from experienced TESOL professionals but also, crucially, valuable insights into the thought processes that inform an experienced teacher's in-class decisions. As such, the book became a meaningful part of my professional development, something that holds true to this day.

The compendium of voices collected in *Voices of Experience* come from three sources. First, Giannotti, while still imagining what shape her eventual book might take, gave several conference presentations and teacher training workshops on the topic of classroom management and used the conversations that followed, in person and online, to further investigate her colleagues' insights. After, Giannotti designed and distributed a lengthy 45-item survey about classroom management to 80 ESL professionals, most of whom were her colleagues at Northern Virginia Community College. Then Giannotti, who has 38 years of ESL teaching experience, used her voice to illuminate, reflect on, and organize the other voices in the text, resulting in a very readable, practical guide to 21st century classroom management.

The book contains five units: *The Classroom Environment*, *Lesson Planning*, *Pair and Group Work*, *Classroom Interactions*, and *Classroom Trouble Spots*. These units are organized around the five sections of her teacher survey and, in turn, are further divided into two or

three chapters that expand on survey responses. As a result, the book does not need to be read sequentially. Instead, a curious teacher can open the book to any unit or chapter that seems the most relevant or useful when trouble-shooting a class. For instance, a teacher who wants to know more about creating a healthy classroom environment could turn to Unit 1, which Giannotti begins by reflecting on some challenging classroom realities, such as the fact that many students start a class expecting to have a relationship with their teacher but "... they probably do not come to an ESL class expecting to develop relationships with their peers" (p. 4). Giannotti also elaborates on how "learner-centered" does not mean allowing students to run the show; rather, it entails a balancing act between teacher-led instruction and small group and pair work. Such straightforward reflections on the actual realities behind running a classroom can be found throughout *Voices of Experience*.

Chapter 1 of Unit 1 covers "Setting the Tone in the Classroom." The chapter begins by displaying the results of Giannotti's related survey question in a bar graph form. To the question, "How important is it to you to set the tone in your first class meeting?," 66% of respondents said "very important," 32% responded "I usually let the first week or so set the tone," and 2% stated "Not so important; I usually let the class personalities emerge" (p. 5). After commenting on these findings, Giannotti discusses strategies behind successfully using icebreakers and learning student names. To further illustrate the thought processes of the ESL professionals she surveyed and spoke with, she strategically places several quote boxes throughout each chapter and expands on these quotes and survey findings with her own insights. One such quote box in Chapter 1 reads: "I always make sure the icebreaker activity uses the skills in the class title. For example, students do a reading and writing activity for a reading and writing class. I always make sure the activity involves communicating with their classmates and sharing that information with the entire class" (p. 9). This helpful reminder, along with Giannotti's following commentary throughout the chapter, reinforces the message that Communicative Language Teaching means providing students with opportunities to communicate meaningful messages, even during an icebreaker and even on the first day of class.

Unit 1 continues with Chapter 2, "Class Rules," which covers such topics as communicating the rules, following the golden-rule (treating others as you want to be treated), and engaging with the controversy surrounding English-only classroom policies. The unit then ends, like each unit, with a *Making Connections* section that offers numerous helpful suggestions for ways a teacher could use the book for reflection and discussion. In the book's introduction, Giannotti gives some helpful advice for how advanced and novice practitioners might approach the *Making Connections* section differently. Giannotti makes it clear that teachers at different levels of experience might use of the book for different purposes. While some might value the book as a tool for self-reflection, others might simply search for exciting teaching ideas to try out in their classes. A key strength of the book is that its emphasis on spurring both self-reflection and inspiration does not feel imbalanced.

Voices of Experience contains a multitude of teaching ideas capable of sparking your imagination in your own classroom. Some ideas are funny, such as the way one teacher handles cellphones ringing in class: "usually the perpetrator brings food" (p. 15). Other

ideas make you pause and wonder why you had never heard that one before, such as beginning the semester with a syllabus speed dating activity or using i-Pads in class to record student presentations so they can later watch and critique themselves as a means of getting more out of the activity.

On this technological note, one area in which I found myself wanting more from the text was in regards to technology in the classroom. Much discussion occurs about phones ringing in class or being used to photograph or record lessons, but the phones as tools section misses many promising ways phones can be turned on in class in order to engage students. The myriads of apps, websites, and gizmos out there which can be adapted for language classroom use are beyond the scope of this book, but nevertheless I would have appreciated more weight given to technology given the often important role it plays in our students' lives and our own.

Ultimately, the moments in which the book inspires you to reflect on your own teaching practices are perhaps the most valuable. One such instance is Giannotti's explanation of the many-sided pitfalls of an information gap exercise. There are always those two students who wind up looking at each other's papers! Giannotti argues that all ESL teachers should try out an information gap activity from a student's perspective. Several times throughout her book Giannotti similarly encourages her teacher readers to actually do some of the activities they use in class in order to see them from a student's point of view. The practical wisdom of doing so seems obvious. Students cannot be expected to not get confused if their teachers get confused by the same activities. Yet, how many teachers have actually tried doing an information gap exercise in order to see exactly how, when, where, and why it might challenge students?

Having finished my MA TESOL program and started full-time teaching, I can continue to attest to how successfully *Voices of Experience* appeals to both teachers-in-training and experienced TESOL professionals. Colleagues in both areas with whom I have shared the book have all reported finding their own ways to benefit from it, which supports Giannotti's observation that, "Everyone wants a glimpse into how other teachers conduct their classes" (p. iv). I can attest to this truism, and having the book handy, along with encouraging colleagues to read the text themselves, has exposed me to many diverse "voices of experience," strengthening my practice as a reflective, aspiring TESOL professional as a result.

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