

SUMA BALAGOPAL

The spark that keeps on shining

By Monique Melbourne, Humber College

(If you would like to publish a profile of or interview with a teacher, please [contact the editor.](#))

A lot of the good things that have happened in Suma Balagopal's life happened by chance. Becoming an ESL teacher was no exception. The marketing professional was working in the corporate world for many years but found that she missed meeting and interacting with people without a financial agenda. So when she immigrated to Canada, she wanted a career that married her love of working with people with her interest in English (she completed her Bachelor's in English Language and Literature). She tried ESL "for fun" and found that it was a natural fit for her. More than a decade later, she's an established, well-respected and liked educator in her profession.

Sparks of Excellence Award

In 2014, Suma was honoured with the Sparks of Excellence Award by TESL Ontario, the professional association in Ontario for teachers of English as a Second Language. Each year, two Sparks of Excellence Awards (n.d.) are presented by TESL Ontario to members who provide an exceptional educational experience for their students or who take on a leadership/mentoring role for their colleagues and student teachers. Suma was nominated because she embodies the qualities of an awardee and met the requirements of being a TESL Ontario member in good standing, being involved in the ESL profession for a minimum of three years, and showing extraordinary commitment that exceeded the expectations of her employment. "I felt grateful, honored, and fortunate to receive the award," recounts Suma on being one of the 2014 recipients of the Award. "It is a great feeling to have my work acknowledged and celebrated." But she was quick to add that success comes in different forms. "However, I do believe that one teacher's excellence would look very different from another teacher's excellence."

A graduate of the TESL program at Humber College, Suma started teaching a multi-level LINC classroom at Caledon Community Services in 2007. Less than a year later, she was promoted to teaching full-time, a position she still holds. Suma was praised by TESL Ontario for her collaborative and practical teaching style that motivates each learner to excel and helps in the transition to their new country. "She has managed to take teaching and learning to a whole new level, using all available teaching technologies and methods to

her advantage. To her, nothing sounds sweeter than listening to the success stories of the learners in her class.... She opens her bag of tricks to get her learners to view English as a fun filled journey to the achievement of their goals” (“Suma-Balagopal”, n.d.).

This drive to help her students succeed is one of the most rewarding aspects of being an ESL teacher. Suma’s dedication has resulted in her students excelling and even winning grand prizes at the ESL Week Contest, an annual creativity contest organised by TESL Ontario, at one point being grand prize winners three years in a row. These students have consistently highlighted Suma’s passion and positivity and have even given her the nickname “horse whisperer”. She got this name after a particular group of students watched the movie *The Horse Whisperer* and compared the success of her students at ESL Week Contest with the success of the horses trained by the horse whisperer. Suma credits these ESL activities for helping to build the confidence of her learners and their integration into Canadian society.

However, the success stories are not without challenges. Some of the challenges Suma face are common to many LINC centres: meeting funder’s requirements of numbers quota, and vastly different proficiency levels and age groups in one class. For Suma, keeping her class entertaining is her biggest challenge. “One of the things that teachers have to do in free language classes is to entertain, so that the students are motivated enough to return to classes and try harder at achieving their goals while having a great time. I have spoken to many successful students, and most of them point to the fact that they remember the laughter the most in the language class. Creating those opportunities to laugh and reduce the ‘affective filter’ is not a cakewalk.”

Since winning the Sparks of Excellence Award three years ago, Suma continues to meet the needs of her students at Caledon Community Services through her exceptional track record. As an immigrant to Canada, her personal experiences help her to connect with her students because she understands what they are going through. She is also the lead teacher for the implementation of portfolio-based language assessment (PBLA) at her centre and she has mentored a number of students while preparing others for the citizenship test on a voluntary basis. She helps her former students to make connections in the community to receive support, look for employment or even start their own business. In addition, Suma is an active member of TESL Ontario, presenting at several of their annual conferences and she has been the Facebook Manager of the Social Media Content Committee since 2013. In that role, she plans and executes the social media strategy for TESL Ontario as well as designing and facilitating presentations and technology labs to increase members’ knowledge of social media. “I have learnt so much in that role. I have also had a great time testing out teaching material developed by colleagues. One of them that really worked for me is the ‘Dictation Triptychs.’” Dictation Triptychs, as described by creator Joseph Ng, an ESL teacher, are “three parallel conversations appropriately composed and gapped to Canadian Language Benchmark descriptors to help learners improve through four-skill dictation jigsaw activities” (Palmer, 2016). This teaching technique incorporates pragmatics of speech, cultural practices, pronunciation of words and numbers, punctuation

marks, and other features in written and spoken English. Suma, along with Joseph and Hala Bastawros, presented on the topic *PBLA and formulaic chunks through Dictation Triptychs* in 2016 at the annual TESL Ontario Conference.

OCELT Designation

Recently, TESL Ontario introduced their professional designation for accredited members in good standing. Ontario Certified English Language Teacher, or OCELT aims to improve the reputation and respect of the TESL profession and recognises the knowledge, skills, integrity, high quality and ongoing professional development of certified ESL teachers who are members (for more, see Serles & Townsend, this issue).

Suma believes that OCELT could help the ESL profession gain consistency. “I do hope the designation helps with bringing about some degree of consistency in the conditions and opportunities for employment for ESL professionals. I do not think it has any effect on the career of my colleagues or myself. But I hope there will be positive effects in the future.”

She is thankful for the support she has received at Caledon Community Services, noting in a previous interview that they have played a large part in her success. “Their focus on newcomers, the support that I receive and the trust that they have shown in me has all worked together to make this happen.”

Suma has warm words of welcome for teachers new to the ESL profession. “The field of ESL is a mixed bag of memorable experiences, learning and meaning. Welcome aboard!”

References

Palmer, P. (2016). Joseph Ng - ESL teacher and author of dictation triptychs. *Teacher to Teacherpreneur*. Retrieved from <https://www.teacherpreneur.ca/blog/joseph-ng-esl-teacher-and-author-of-dictation-triptychs>

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Author Bio

Monique Melbourne is a recent graduate of Humber College with a postgraduate certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language. She has worked as a copywriter, copyeditor and proofreader for various publications before entering the field of ESL teaching. She is currently a language assistant at the Writing Centre at Humber College.