

# THE LANGUAGE OF SUCCESS: AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANE RAMANATHAN, 2017 SPARKS OF EXCELLENCE AWARD RECIPIENT

By Amira Elkhateeb, Algonquin College

She packed her bag and followed her dreams across the globe, holding nothing but her aspirations and persistence to learn. She embraced life with a bold smile, open heart, and determined soul, learned psychology, and served in the military. Things weren't easy but her memory, as she mentioned, "is very selective" and able to edit all the negative feelings out and keep those memories which will sustain her throughout her journey of education. She is the inspirational Diane Ramanathan who was recently awarded the 2017 Sparks of Excellence Award, given every year by TESL Ontario to members who have gone above and beyond in their role as language instructors in Ontario. Diane took some time from her busy schedule to do the following interview.



**Amira Elkhateeb:** First, Congratulations on your award, tell us how was your feeling when you learned about it?

**Diane Ramanathan:** I was shocked that they nominated me and I was lucky and flattered that Dimitri Priven from Algonquin college and my manager at LINC Home study put down this application on my behalf, and then I was more surprised to win. It was amazing to see this support, not just in Ottawa but across the province and even across Canada and on social media. It is something that really made my year. It was a hard year for me and my family, so this really was a huge boon for us.

**AE:** When did you determine that teaching ESL would be your career path?

**DR:** I always liked teaching. I think I sort of just fell into it. I came to the ESL world in my late twenties, when I went abroad for many years, and came back in 2003, when I had my first baby, and that is when I started my research about teaching English in Canada. I found out about the LINC program then and realized that I needed to get accredited by TESL Ontario. I was living in Thunder Bay up north and I was pregnant so I wasn't really that mobile, and so I did the course online through the university of Saskatchewan. Shortly after, in 2005, I moved to Ottawa and have been here ever since. I have been lucky to have a number of different work capacities. We know it is a pretty tight field and Ottawa is not such a big city, so I got involved with TESL Ottawa right away. I was a member of the executive, but I gave some workshops to sort out the lay of the land and get my name out from there. I was able to get some different contracts and some part time work and here I am.

**AE:** What is your current title?

**DR:** I have numerous titles. I don't work full time. I teach in the TESL program in Algonquin college, and I am an online teacher with LINC home study, which is through the center of education and training in Mississauga. I'm also one of two community outreached coordinator for [tutella.ca](http://tutella.ca), and currently I am the president of TESL Ottawa.

**AE:** How can you consider all this as part-time work?

**DR:** TESL Ottawa is a volunteer position, and the other jobs are part-time, so together this is a full-time employment. But it allows me to be at home, because I have young kids, except when I come to Algonquin. Then I have to get dressed and come out. It is nice to see people face to face every now and then.

**AE:** What do you love most about being an ESL teacher?

**DR:** I like how it is very interactive in the classroom. When you are teaching language students, you can't be passive, and they have to be involved in learning. We get to know each other, and it is very collaborative, so I like the collaborative nature and the interactive nature of language teaching. It invigorates you.

**AE:** Is there anything you wish you had known before entering this field?

**DR:** I don't think so, because I think that the field is constantly evolving and changing in terms of what teachers have be able to achieve, in terms of students, in terms of work environment. So maybe there is maybe something that doesn't fit or something that you maybe don't really like, but in five, ten years it will be something different.

**AE:** Tell us about your experience of teaching abroad.

**DR:** I had done some training prior and then I wanted to travel. At that time in the nineties everybody was going abroad to teach English, like a way to fund travel. I have taught English in South Korea, Taiwan, Russian and Chili, all of them were awesome experiences. My first one was South Korea and I had no teaching qualifications. A friend of mine was going and I said, "Ok! I am coming too." So I just went, and I taught kids in a private language school. The teaching experience was ok, I learned, and I liked it, but I decided that my next job to be a better fit.

Then I came back to Canada and did the one-month CELTA course and I taught at a school for a summer. Then I went to Taiwan and this time I went there as a tourist without planning any employment. I picked a town and went to different schools, I went to the libraries and I looked at their curriculum. I talked with parents and then I was able to find work and was able to convert my tourism visa to a work visa. From there, I went to Russia, thinking that I want to move to adults. I found this job in Moscow, and I started doing workshops -that was required- by the school and things moved up. I became assistant director as well as being a teacher and I stayed there for a couple of years. Next, I moved to South America

with the same school that was in Moscow. They had just opened in Chile, so it was only private schools because I didn't have any education degree. I didn't even have a TESL certificate.

**AE:** Many would advise us to not burn ourselves out as teachers by volunteering. What do you think about that?

**DR:** I am volunteering as TESL Ottawa president. It is a completely volunteer job. I don't need to find work but I do it because you feel that building these relationships helps in the form of my own teaching, but it also helps me down the road. If I need a job or I need a contract, things come my way, I feel, if you give it your time and energy, even if it is unpaid, it comes back to you. Building those connections in the community is very important and is very rewarding in different ways.

**AE:** You mentioned that you started using technology not long ago, but the fact is that technology is popping everywhere in your teaching path, how did you do that in such short time?

**DR:** I went to many workshops. Algonquin offered me those workshops with "Kahoot" and "Padlet". The first time I introduced them to a class, I told them, "I don't know what will happen but I am trying this for the first time. I may ask you to help me." I do this all the time. It is scary when you are the teacher and then things don't work, but I feel like it is nice to be collaborative to ask the students if you need help, and then you can jump in and both try. When I started working at "Tutella" I didn't know anything about technology. They were aware that I didn't, and they said, "that's ok! We can teach you." There are still many things that I try to do and don't work, so I ask students with some experience if they can help me. If not, let's move to something else, but we will try this again next week without fear.

**AE:** What's your advice to the new ESL Teacher?

**DR:** Embrace technology, build up those connections, whether by volunteering in classrooms or any capacity, go to events, hang out in the teacher's room if you are a supply teacher, and talk to all the people. Those connections help you to grow as a teacher and help you to find work.

**AE:** What is the biggest challenge that TESL should expect?

**DR:** Particularly in Ottawa it is the tight job market. And don't be afraid of PBLA or this new technology. Don't react like, "oh no! Now I have to learn something else," because you can always ask for help.

**AE:** Which part of teaching do you find most satisfying?

**DR:** The connections with my students, when my TESL students come back and tell me we got this job I remember one or two who got jobs while developing a curriculum that was

so wonderful for me or my LINC students when they are able to reach some goals, when they have a new understanding of an aspect of the Canadian life and they can share information about their new community I feel that I really touched those lives.

**AE:** Tell us about the Curriculum Development course that you are giving at Algonquin College.

**DR:** In the TESL program, I teach a couple of courses, but Curriculum is the most interesting. This is the fourth year that we're partnering with another organisation in Ottawa: three years with the Ottawa Carlton District Board and one year with the Ottawa Catholic School Board. We developed curriculum based on CLB levels for them and the students work very hard, and then we run it again for the part-time students in the spring, so they usually augment what the full-timers had done. It is a large real project, an actual one that you can apply.



I think the students like it because it gives them a full understanding of content-based instruction, task-based learning, the language benchmarks, and the curriculum especially this year's project. And then it is something that they can put in their resume, and get inspired if they want to go on as curriculum developers.

**AE:** How do you see the future of TESL?

**DR:** I think it is going to continue to evolve. As LINC teachers, we are dependant on government funding and newcomers who come, and the types of newcomers who come, not all of them need language for settlement. The program itself is developing with technology and PBLA and it continues evolving.

**AE:** What are things needed to enhance the field?



**DR:** I know there are a lot of developments in the LINC program, from task-based learning with the PBLA to making the language more applicable so that students can take language with them out of the class and use it. I hear a lot of stories from TESL students who go out for observations. They tell me how some teachers have lots of resources and other have less. So, making things even would be great.

**AE:** Do you have a message for your students in the TESL program, the future ESL teachers?

**DR:** Jump in with both feet and take all the opportunities on your way.

There is a proverb that is sometimes attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Some Pursue happiness, others create it." You can see how Diane was able to create her own happiness,

as she moved from a place to another learning, gaining experience, giving from her heart and time to serve her community, and paying attention to her family. She had the courage to choose her path and put success in her sights. She deserves the Sparks of Excellence Award and a special place in her colleagues' and students' hearts.