



Matina Katseli Interviews Adrian Underhill, Plenary Speaker of the TESOL Greece 38th Annual International Convention



M. Katseli

Hello Adrian! First of all, thank you for this interview. TESOL Greece is happy to have you for our 38th Convention. I feel that our members would like to know a few things about you before they hear you share your knowledge and expertise in the field of pronunciation. So,

here we go!

Who is Adrian Underhill? If TESOL Greece members should know two things about you as a person, what would those be?

I'm interested in complexity in the human world and in the natural world around us, and in trying to see the patterns in complex settings, including in schools and classrooms! Also, and it may be connected, I play jazz and in fact have a jazz band that plays in pubs and bars and at weddings in Hastings, where I live.

You are widely known for your work in pronunciation. What urged you to delve into that field?

I found that our methodology did not deal well with pronunciation. It emphasized repetition, but you cannot repeat your way out of a muscular habit, which is the habit of your mother tongue established from the beginning. Somehow you have to get behind that muscular habit. So you have to reconnect with the muscles that make the difference. 'Sounds obvious doesn't it, but our methodology does not do that. I was lucky to find some radical alternative approaches which showed me how I could do this, and I built on that. Learning pronunciation is more physical than cognitive, more like learning dance than learning grammar.

Are there any other areas of ELT of equal interest to you?

I think I can honestly say that I'm interested in and curious about anything that involves humans learning, or failing to learn, and how we can help or interfere in that process.

Do you have any experience with Greek learners of English? If so, which aspect of the pronunciation of the English language do you think can be of great difficulty to them and why?

Yes, I have experience with Greek learners, and of course it is possible to identify sounds which are different across the two languages. But that is not the real challenge, which is to reconnect with the pronunciation muscles so that you liberate yourself from the grip of the mother tongue set of sounds, and then you become free to create all the new sounds you need for words or connected speech. Of course not suddenly, overnight, but when you approach it from this physical angle the whole thing becomes simpler and more possible, and more fun.

What about native or non-native teachers of English? Can they teach pronunciation equally efficiently?

Any teacher who knows what they are doing in their mouth, not through theoretical or descriptive knowledge but through direct contact with the muscles that make the sounds, can help another person to learn. It makes no difference whether they are native speakers or not, or what their accent is.

Is there such thing as 'perfect' pronunciation?

Yes, and in our case it means comfortable, confident intelligibility, whether speaking or listening.



A. Underhill

Proprioception and good Pronunciation. Can the latter exist without the former?

To change your pronunciation in the direction you want you need to (re-) develop your proprioception. This simply refers to the internal sensation of which muscles are doing what, and how strongly. It does not require naming, but it requires sensing. If I, a European want to learn to samba I have to contact muscles in my body and ask them to do something different from before, to get behind the habit of my usual dance movements. It's the same with pronunciation.

Can technology (such as apps) be helpful to students, when learning English pronunciation?

Apps can be helpful if they provide learners with insight and practice. Just repetition on its own is not very helpful. As I said, you cannot repeat your way out of a habit.

Some teachers do not bother with pronunciation unless it affects meaning. To what extent do you agree with that?

All lessons are pronunciation lessons from start to finish. It does not make any difference whether you teach pronunciation or not. If you don't teach it your students learn the new language, but with the pronunciation of their mother tongue. If you do teach it, the students have the chance to learn the new language with its new pronunciation as part of the same piece of learning.

Some teachers teach so many hours a day that there is little, if any, time to plan. Do you have any practical advice for them?

This is terrible, and difficult for them and their students. You either have to change your job, or the way you teach, preferably both. There are ways of

teaching which get the energy and inspiration and engagement from relationship, from interaction as a community, from allowing more improvisation and spontaneity, in just the way that a good conversation does not follow a plan, but engages all speakers nevertheless. How to do it? It requires interest and application, but it is possible. And the students pass their exams too!

Closing and having in mind the theme of the next TG Convention, 'Keeping it practical', what would our members expect to hear from you?

They will find an invitation to engage the natural processes of learning through playfulness, challenge, discovery. Then of course there is the question: "How can I develop that in my classes?" And that is possible too for anyone who is curious and interested enough. Well, in my plenary talk at the TESOL Greece Convention in March I will explore exactly this, how to develop our natural capacity for spontaneity and improvisation to make students' learning energy and our teaching energy go further, be more effective and more fun. Improvisation of the right sort, creative and spontaneous embellishment that tracks the attention of the learners and the energy movements of the moment, within the context of the planned lesson, leads to a state of flow and engagement in our classes. It draws out peoples' inherent desire to experience themselves as successful participants in learning. Teachers already know this because they improvise already in the nooks and crannies of every lesson every day. But the big problem is that our methodology does not recognise this or value it, so we do not talk about improvisation in teaching, so we never get better at it. We never prize it as the super skill of motivational learning. This can easily be changed.

