

Barbara Dick



Circa 1969, Schreiber, Ontario—Barbara Dick has just received her first teaching job. Class size might be a modern-day nightmare, but at the young age of 18 Barbara is to manage a class of 45 elementary students. She will tell you she learned with the guidance of others as the principal and staff supported the new teacher. Since then, Barbara has been paying it forward by helping newcomers adjust to their adopted country while teaching English as a Second Language.

Barbara transitioned to ESL in 1980 after a four-year stint teaching on various First Nation reserves in northern Manitoba before and after attending the University of Manitoba. She feels that the cultural experiences she was exposed to in the small town of Schreiber, with a large Italian population, and on the Pukatawagan, Cross Lake and Poplar River reserves, may have sparked her interest in teaching ESL. When she moved to Winnipeg after the Vietnamese boat people had made their way to Canada, she began teaching newly arrived adolescents within the school system, but later took on extra responsibility and taught a night school program for adults.

In Winnipeg Barbara found herself in a unique situation: she was the only one to teach both adults and their children, allowing her to witness the full circle of family dynamics. This led Barbara to develop a parenting curriculum as she observed the two sides of these families' struggles. The children were experiencing the emotional turmoil of their parents as they dealt with stresses such as unemployment; the adults were having difficulty understanding their children, who wanted to have English names and were ashamed of their parents' English.

Barbara has been teaching ESL for more than 30 years and Winnipeg wasn't her last experience with refugees. Her career offers proof that teaching ESL can go far beyond explaining nouns and verbs.

Sometimes the lesson to be learned is sensitivity. In 1999 Barbara moved to Belleville to be closer to her family. She had just finished working at an international school in Losotho and was ready to return home. She found a position in Trenton at the only refugee camp on Canadian soil to house asylum seekers from Kosovo. "We had a speaker from the Canadian Centre for Torture Treatment in Toronto come and advise the staff," Barbara remembers. "He told us to not teach the body parts separately, for example a picture of just an arm or a leg, but to always name the parts of the body on a complete picture. The reason was many of these refugees had seen their loved ones captured and their bodies mutilated by Serbs, and a picture of a single part could conjure up dreadful memories and flashbacks." Barbara maintains that her role went further than

teaching English; she had the role of healer, counsellor and friend, and she felt privileged to work with these students.

Once in eastern Ontario Barbara thought it important to reach out to other ESL educators in the area. That was when she discovered TESL Kingston. She has held several positions within the organization, including president from 2008-2014. Last April she was presented with the TESL Kingston Affiliate Service Award, which recognizes the vital contribution of volunteers who are instrumental in the success of their local group.

Now Barbara has officially retired; however, this doesn't mean she has finished teaching. Seeing the need in her community for an adult literacy class, she is still volunteering once a week. When Barbara is asked about the personal value of teaching ESL she responds, "I learn as much from them as they learn from me... ESL teachers understand the importance of diversity".



***Heather Hosick** is a writer and educator who has found her niche in teaching English as a second language. She began her career in Korea teaching ESL to children. Now she teaches ESL in Kingston to teenagers and adults. What she finds personally rewarding is hearing so many unique stories from across the globe. By speaking to ESL professionals in our area, she discovers the stories in our own community.*