

A Conversation with Kevin Stein

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Kevin Stein is a member of the LiLT SIG, working at a private high school in Osaka. He brings a range of teaching experience to his writing on education and topics in ELT. His special interest is the use of stories in the language classroom. He's an active blogger on topics such as teaching, reading, and exploring the language classroom. You can find his writing in various places including regular blog posts over at his blog *The other things matter* (theotherthingsmatter.wordpress.com/). He is also a professional mentor at the International Teacher Development Institute (iDTi) professional development website itdi.pro/blog. Kevin can also be found via twitter: [@kevchanwow](https://twitter.com/kevchanwow).

TM: First off, could you tell us a little about what sparked your interest in writing?

KS: There's really not much of a story here. When I was 7 years old, I wrote a story and my teachers and my parents gave me a lot of praise. I enjoyed writing the story (which was about a goat that fell off a cruise ship) and the positive feedback I got made the whole writing-stories-thing seem like a pretty fun way to spend my free time. As I got older and read books that moved and challenged me, I wanted to do something similar and so I got a bit more serious about writing in general.

TM: How did writing begin to and how does it continue to influence your teaching?

KS: Because I love to write, I sometimes think that my students must also enjoy it. This, of course, is probably a terrible assumption on my part. Writing is time consuming and in a second language it can be difficult and anxiety-inducing. Fortunately, as I was learning Japanese, I also tried to do a lot of writing in Japanese as well. I started by writing *tanka*. The short form of a *tanka* poem was just about as much as I could handle. I was lucky to have a few of my *tanka* featured on a weekly NHK radio show as well. So once again it was a positive feedback

loop. Writing led to success which led to more writing. But when I write in Japanese, I still wrestle with every word, every sentence. So when I do writing activities in class, for example having students write haiku, or letters to a character in a story, I focus on what the student is trying to say (and manages to say) as opposed to simply the mechanics of the language they use. For me, writing in the classroom is one of the ways students can challenge themselves and become more aware of how rich language can be. Writing can and should be an exploration of potential. And perhaps more than that, writing is often a search for an answer to a question. It's open-ended enough that there is always room for a student's authentic voice.

TM: What is your interest in various types of literature, and how are you using it in your classes?

KS: I love all kinds of literature. I keep a book of poetry by my bed and like to read it before I go to sleep. Lately I've been reading *Leaves of Grass* and I'm just amazed by how much joy is there on the page. I use short poems with relatively easy to understand surfaces in my classes. Raymond Carver, Robert Creeley, and Tess Gallagher. There are some difficult vocabulary items that pop up in these poems, but they are also many identifiable situations my students can connect with. Sometimes I just have the students read a poem and leave it at that. Sometimes we work with the poems and take the often truncated language of a poem as a base to build longer, more fleshed out sentences. Sometimes we use it to explore cultural differences.

I also use a lot of short fiction in my classes. Grace Paley is one of my favorites. I also use Murakami Haruki's stories translated into English. My students especially liked "On seeing the 100% perfect girl one beautiful April morning.". And there's something about Murakami's sentences which have an especially English feel and flow to them. So when my students read the Japanese version, I think it also will positively impact their English abilities. In this issue I introduce some an activity I use to help my students work with and enjoy reading literary fiction. I find that if students have the time to find something special in a story, to make it their own, they very much enjoy working with these kinds of texts.

TM: Could you tell us a bit about your short fiction for EFL learners?

KS: About two years ago, my friend suggested I write a short story for my students. I think I had been complaining about the length of most of the stories for learners and how I would like to have a text which could be read and enjoyed multiple times within one class period. He just said, “So write one.” And I did. I have 9 stories now finished and up on my blog. Some of my friends have been kind enough to use them in their own classrooms. There is a teacher who works at an engineering university in France who uses one, a high school teacher in Korea, an adult EFL teacher in Brazil. And they not only use the stories, but send me their lesson plans and notes. So on top of producing materials for my students, I’ve gotten many excellent lesson plans and supplemental materials I can use in my classes. The stories themselves are all short, just around 500 words, and I try to make sure that at least 90% of the words fall within the General Service List. In addition, the stories, I hope, are grounded in character. I try and make sure that there is a real human at the heart of each story so that reading doesn’t just become a question of understanding the plot, but about getting to know a person.

TM: How do you think teachers who have never written before can start to use writing and literature in their classes?

KS: I would suggest that any teacher who does write for their students, make sure to listen to what the students have to say about the story. When a student doesn’t understand something on the page, you have a real chance to engage in a dialogue and find out where things went astray. Sometimes it is a problem in the writing, sometimes it is a problem in how the student is reading. Sometimes both. But because it is a teacher-written story, there is a lot of space to kind of tell the student, “hey, this is just a story I wrote. It’s not perfect. I think I probably tripped you up here.” I’ve found this to be one of the most beneficial aspects of using materials I wrote myself.

And as far as using literature in class, I recommend a teacher start by being open to what literature is and perhaps define it with a very small “I”. Poems by Shel Silverstein, or well-written scenes from a television drama. It’s all literature and it can be really accessible to the students. I also recommend using something you really love and know well. Finally, I think you have to decide when you use a text, are you focused on the meaning and how it ties in with the

structure and language, or are you primarily focused on the language itself. If you are using a poem or story to teach grammar, I think you are kind of doing a disservice to your students and the text itself. Playing with the language, looking at the text critically, helping students pick up on language and use it in different ways. All of these things work well when using a literature in the classroom. But picking apart the grammar pulls students out of the text, often before they have even got ankle deep into it. So my biggest recommendation is plan a series of activities which lets the students gradually move deeper and deeper into the text.

TM: Over at your blog, *The Other Things Matter* you've become quite involved in the online community of teachers in EFL. What's the story so far with your blog and what future plans do you have for that?

KS: When I started blogging about 2 years ago, I was primarily looking for a way to explore what I was learning as I studied for my dipTESOL and make more sense of how my studies aligned (or didn't) with what I was doing in my classes. As I posted, I explored other ELT blogs. I ended up finding a core group of teachers who were doing very different things from myself, but whose ideas of teaching and blogging seemed similar to my own. I left comments on their blogs and very naturally we became engaged in an ongoing dialogue. From there I was invited to write some guest posts on the iTDi blog and it kind of just blossomed from there. Now I have a very close group of teachers who I can bounce ideas off, who I can ask for recommendations around materials, and will help me sort out issues as they arise in my classes. So for me, blogging was a way to explore my own class, but it eventually became a key component in building my professional learning network.

TM: Amongst other roles as professional mentor, you've been involved in the professional development work done over at iTDi also. Can you tell us about your experiences with the team at iTDi?

KS: Well, my connection with iTDi started through my blog. Then I got to know Chuck Sandy, Barbara Sakamoto and Steven Herder and what they were trying to do, which is basically connect up any English teacher interested in professional development and make sure they had

the chance, regardless of money or Internet connection speed, to grow as a teacher. I myself was, and still am, trying to develop as a teacher and realized that the more voices I exposed myself to, the better the chance that I would be able to figure out how to be a better teacher. And that's exactly what has happened. As I've learned a bit more about how teachers hold their classes in Brazil or Indonesia, I've been challenged to think about what language teaching is all about. Bumping up against all of these ideas has helped me grow as a teacher. To help give back, I've become a mentor and hopefully I've been able to provide some ideas and directions so that other teachers have new ways to look at their own teaching.

TM: What kinds of things do you think teachers can learn from blogging and communicating online?

KS: I probably am going to come off as kind of evangelical here, but I think that there comes a point in every teacher's development when they have to move beyond their immediate school setting in order to really keep growing. This used to mean joining JALT and attending conferences. But now, it's possible to attend webinars, virtual conferences, and even teaching chats on Twitter and build a professional learning network with nothing more than a bit of time and an internet connection. The most important thing a teacher can get from plugging into this network is to simply find out all the other ways English is being taught around the world. Hearing genuine teaching voices and being exposed to other teachers' ideas about teaching is crucial to being able to rethink what you are doing in your own classroom. For a reflective teacher who is trying to understand what they are doing in their own classroom, the value of making connections with other teachers can't be overstated.

TM: What advice can you offer members of the LiLT SIG who are interested in writing, blogging and communicating with their international colleagues?

KS: Come and join iTDi <itdi.pro/blog>. It's free. They have amazing webinars by people like Scott Thornbury, John Fanselow, Shelly Sanchez Terrel, and Penny Ur. Most of all, the teachers in iTDi are incredibly curious and supportive. They want to know what you are doing in your classes and share what they are doing as well. I also recommend #ELTchat <eltchat.org> a

regular Twitter chat focused on one topic proposed and voted on by chat members. You don't have to join anything, just look for the #ELTchat hashtags and join in the conversation. Finally, even if you don't blog, I really recommend checking out ELT blogs, leaving comments and getting involved in the conversations that are going on. There are blogs focused on materials and lesson plans (I highly recommend Sandy Millin's blog sandymillin.wordpress.com/ and Rachael Roberts' ELT-Resourceful <http://elt-resourceful.com/>), various guests posts from teaching all over the world (Barbara Sakamoto's Teaching Village teachingvillage.org/), reflective practices (Michael Griffin's ELT Rants, Reviews, and Reflections eltrantsreviewsreflections.wordpress.com/ and Josette LeBlanc) and almost any other aspect of teaching you can imagine.

TM: Finally, what are your 2014 plans as far as teaching and writing?

KS: 2014 is the year I am hoping to complete a book of short fiction for language learners. The book will also contain thorough lesson plans and class reflections on how each of the stories was used as well as student reactions. I'm in discussion with a publisher now and there is some talk that if it works out, it could be a series in which teachers who are writing stories for their own classes can then submit to the next book in the series. I really do think that there are all kinds of fantastic literary materials being produced by teachers and that it would be a great idea to share these stories with a larger audience. As far as teaching goes, the education group I work for is going to be opening an American style high school. Students will be taking 20 hours of English classes a week. I am very excited about this. I've always found that working in Japan, it's always a struggle to keep expectations for student development in line with the limited amount of in- and out-of-class exposure learners will get to English. 20 hours a week of class time seems about just the right amount to see the kinds of gains that I know my students are capable of. And of course, I will be spending a good chunk of my planning time finding just the right kind of literature to use during class to help make that dream of progress a reality.

TM: Thanks so much Kevin. Good luck with your projects, and we look forward to reading more from you soon.