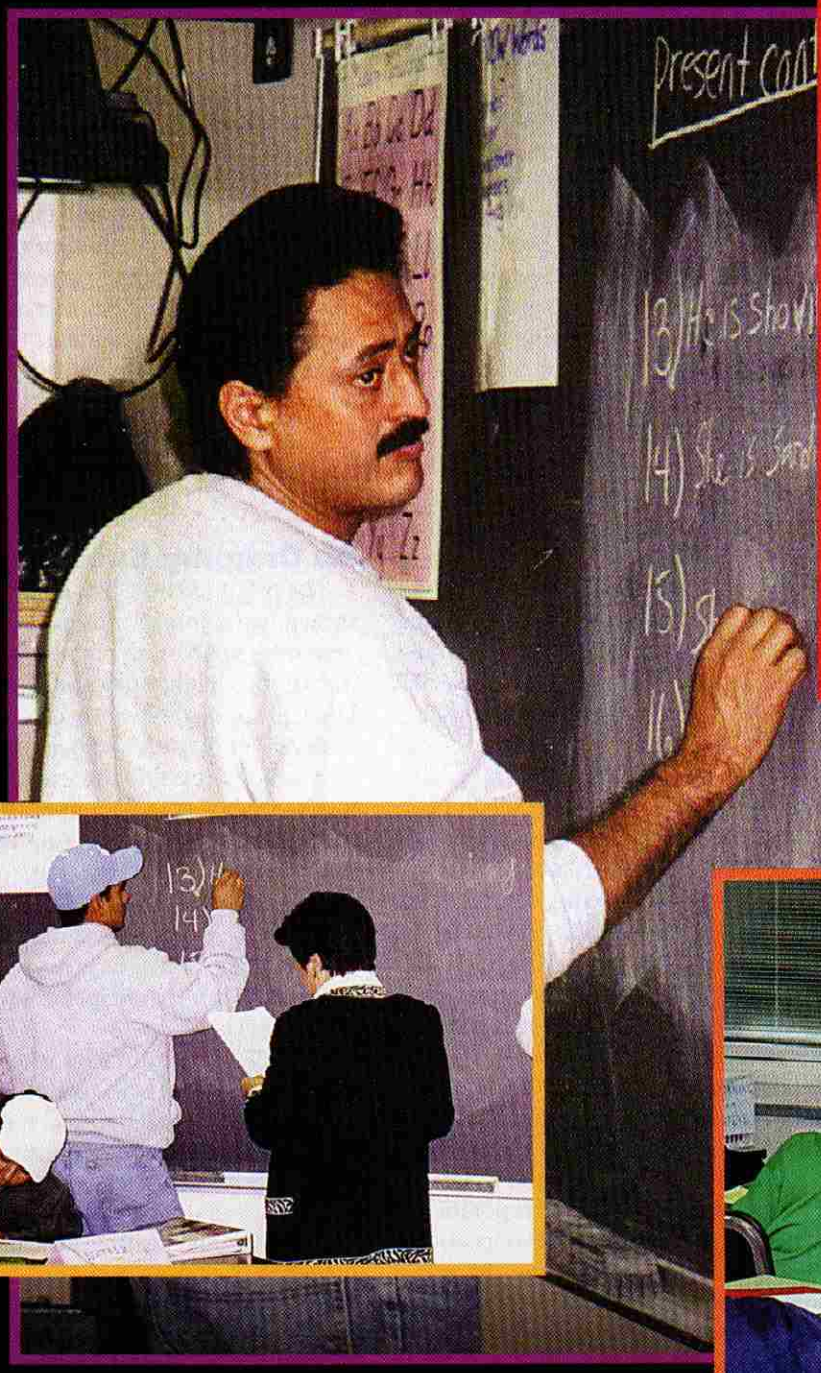
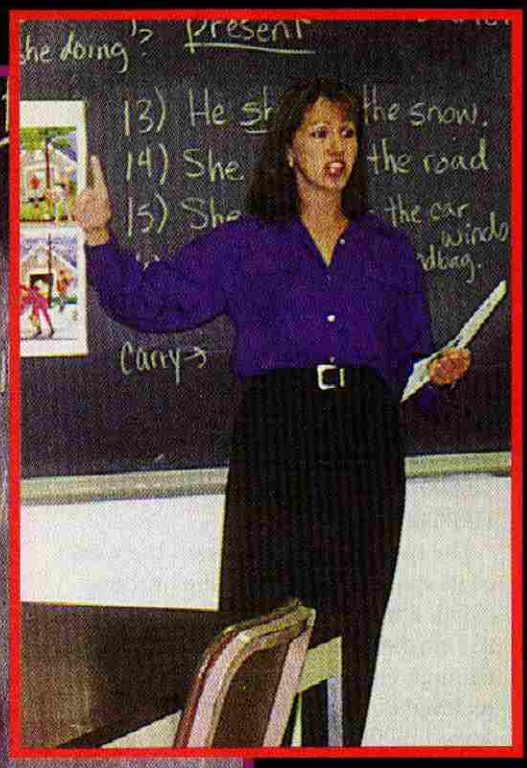
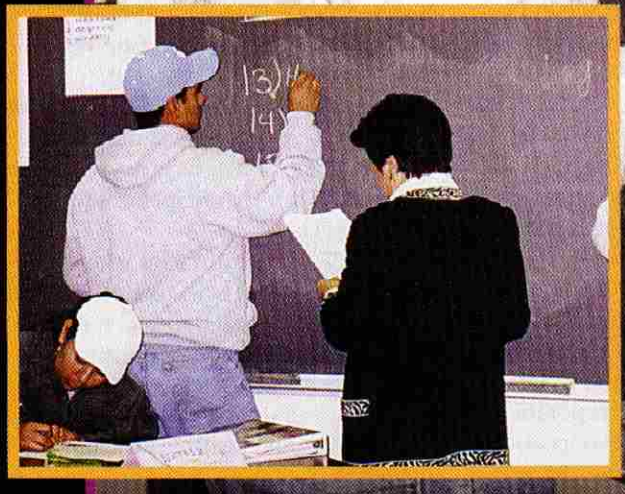
Fueling the Fire

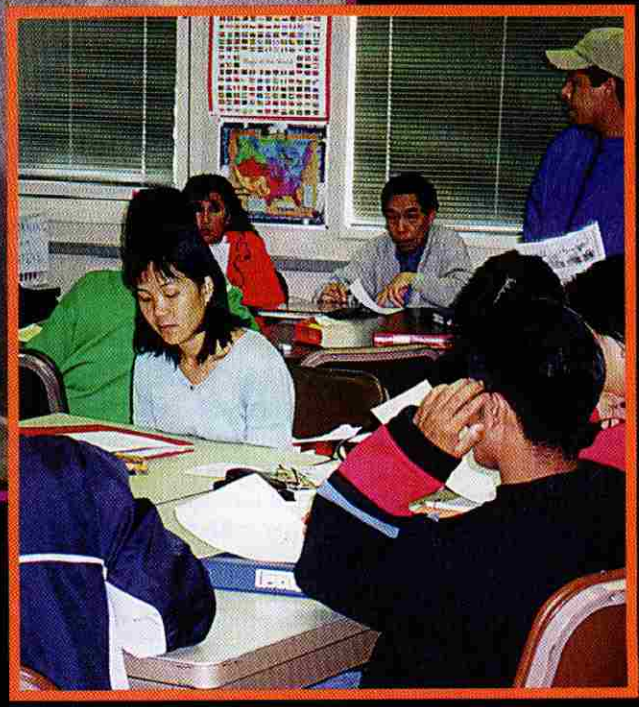
"Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire."

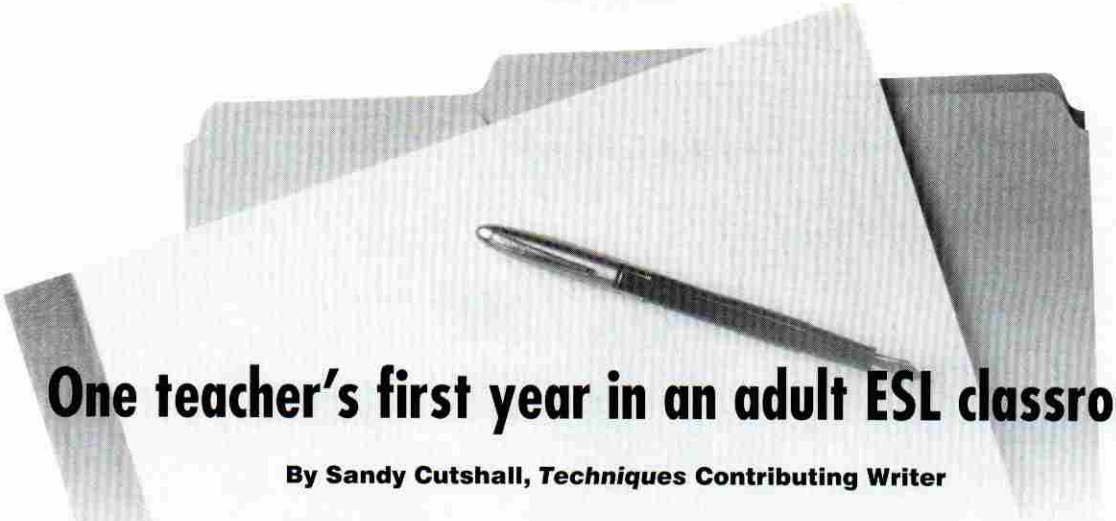
—William Butler Yeats











One teacher's first year in an adult ESL classroom

By Sandy Cutshall, *Techniques* Contributing Writer

The 1981 movie "Stripes" begins with one of the main characters working as a teacher in a night class filled with adults who barely speak a word of English. The man is at a loss and makes greatest progress by teaching the group to sing along with the nonsense chorus "Da-doo, run-run-run. Da-doo, run-run."

The goofball comedy suggests that this job—teaching English to adults—is a frustrating dead-end which drives the character to enlist in the army.

Twenty years since that movie hit the screens, I find I am the one standing before a group of adult students who know perhaps only a little more English than the class in the movie. Yet I haven't entertained any thoughts of heading off to boot camp. In fact, working with my students over the past year has been one of the most engaging experiences I've had.

Teacher! Teacher!

Sometimes when class is over, this word rings in my ears: "Teacher! Teacher! Teacher!"

The room is empty, but I can still hear my students' voices—broken English with Spanish, Chinese and other accents—calling me over to look at their papers, answer their questions, explain, remind, be silly and laugh, or simply do whatever I can do to help them learn.

I feel lucky to offer them knowledge that has the potential of changing their lives. And I feel honored to hold the title of "Teacher," although I'm not always sure I deserve it.

Last fall, I began teaching English two nights a week at the Mountain View-Los Altos (MVLA) Adult School in Mountain View, California. It was a co-teaching arrangement where another instructor and I would share a four-night class for beginning low students.

At that time, I had enrolled in a credential program through UC-Berkeley and met the qualifications to receive a preliminary adult education credential in California. I approached the MVLA adult school to see if I could substitute teach and gain some classroom experience. Very quickly, the opportunity arose to teach a class twice a week. They asked, and I said yes.

And just like that, I became "Teacher!"

A Growing Need

One thing I've found is that this job never feels irrelevant or unnecessary. Whether or not I do it as well as it can be done, I'm always aware that my students want and need to know more every day. And there's no shortage of teaching content; the subject matter is virtually everything.

In addition to the two evenings a week last year, I taught an additional five mornings per week during the summer. Now I'm co-teaching two different classes, which adds up to about 13 hours teaching (two mornings and two evenings) each week.

The majority of English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) instructors in California are hired on a part-time basis. In my experience, most of them are motivated to give the same level of quality and commitment as a full-time teacher. However, most part-time teachers are likely to also be juggling a non-teaching job or perhaps teaching at as many as three different locations.

Teaching ESL is extremely rewarding and can be quite challenging. The most negative thing I can say about it is the amount of unpaid time that is required to do the job properly. Teachers aren't paid to plan lessons, but of course we must. We're also not paid to complete paperwork, but it has to be done.

If a person were to do this job for the money only, I'm sure he or she would quickly move on to another career. However, I've yet to meet anyone who is in teaching for material gains. The tough part is seeing good teachers who aren't able to make ends meet at the same time the state suffers from a teaching shortage.

Instruction for adults in ESL has increased in California from approximately 176,000 students in 1988 to 459,000 in 1995. By the year 2020, the California population over age 18 is projected to increase by 75 percent, and immigrants will comprise 59 percent of the total state population. Many non-English speakers are new immigrants, however some immigrants have lived here for many years, and some non-English speakers were born in the U.S.

Before I started teaching ESL, I had a few jobs where I worked closely with individuals—mostly young Latinos—who resembled much of my student population. I felt firsthand their frustration in trying to communicate in the workplace in English. I saw clearly what a barrier it was to not speak the primary language of where you live.

California is the most diverse state in the country, with no majority ethnic group. Very few native-born Americans are fluent in a second language. Yet I've heard people say (sometimes impatiently) of immigrants, "Why don't they just learn English?"

Over the past year, I've gained enormous respect for adults who enroll in ESL classes and make language learning a priority. They attend classes that meet 12 to 15 hours a week; meanwhile most of them are working full-time, and

some have more than one job. They are parents and grandparents, often supporting families in their home countries. Very few are well off financially; most are not. They are struggling to get by in the most expensive area of the country and studying English as a path to a better life.

I'd like to believe I would be this driven in the same circumstances. Certainly not everyone would.

True Diversity

William Butler Yeats said, "Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire."

Teaching adults, I have felt less responsibility for lighting the fire than for adding fuel to keep it going. This means I don't have to do much to motivate my students to learn English; that part is already done when they walk into my class. What I have to do is present them opportunities for learning and allow them to experience success.

In so many ways, teaching English at an adult school is a unique experience. In what other environment could one have students from wildly divergent backgrounds, ages and life experiences?

In just three classes over the span of one year, my students have come from Bolivia, Brazil, China, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Italy, Iran, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Peru, Russia, Thailand, the Ukraine, Vietnam and perhaps even some countries I've forgotten.

On a recent day in class, I was working with students who spoke four different languages: Spanish, Chinese, Japanese and Thai. Normally I encourage the students to speak only in English, but after we read a story together we were discussing how to say the verb "to yawn" in all their languages. Students wrote the words on the board, and it was a helpful reminder for everyone—especially the teacher—to reflect on the struggle of learning a new language which, for some, is even written in a completely different alphabet.

Watching the students become friendly with others from different backgrounds is exciting. One of the best parts is that, when unable to fall back into the safety of a common native language, they are forced to practice English, and they find out that they *can* communicate with others.

I can't imagine any other setting where you would have such a wide variance in student age and education. A number of my students are still teenagers, barely past high school. Others are senior citizens—some well into their 70s!

When students indicate how much education they have had in their home countries, it varies from virtually none to graduate degrees. I've had students who were basically illiterate in their own language and others who were doctors or engineers—all studying in the same class.

These differences can be what make these classes so interesting, and also what makes this kind of teaching so challenging.

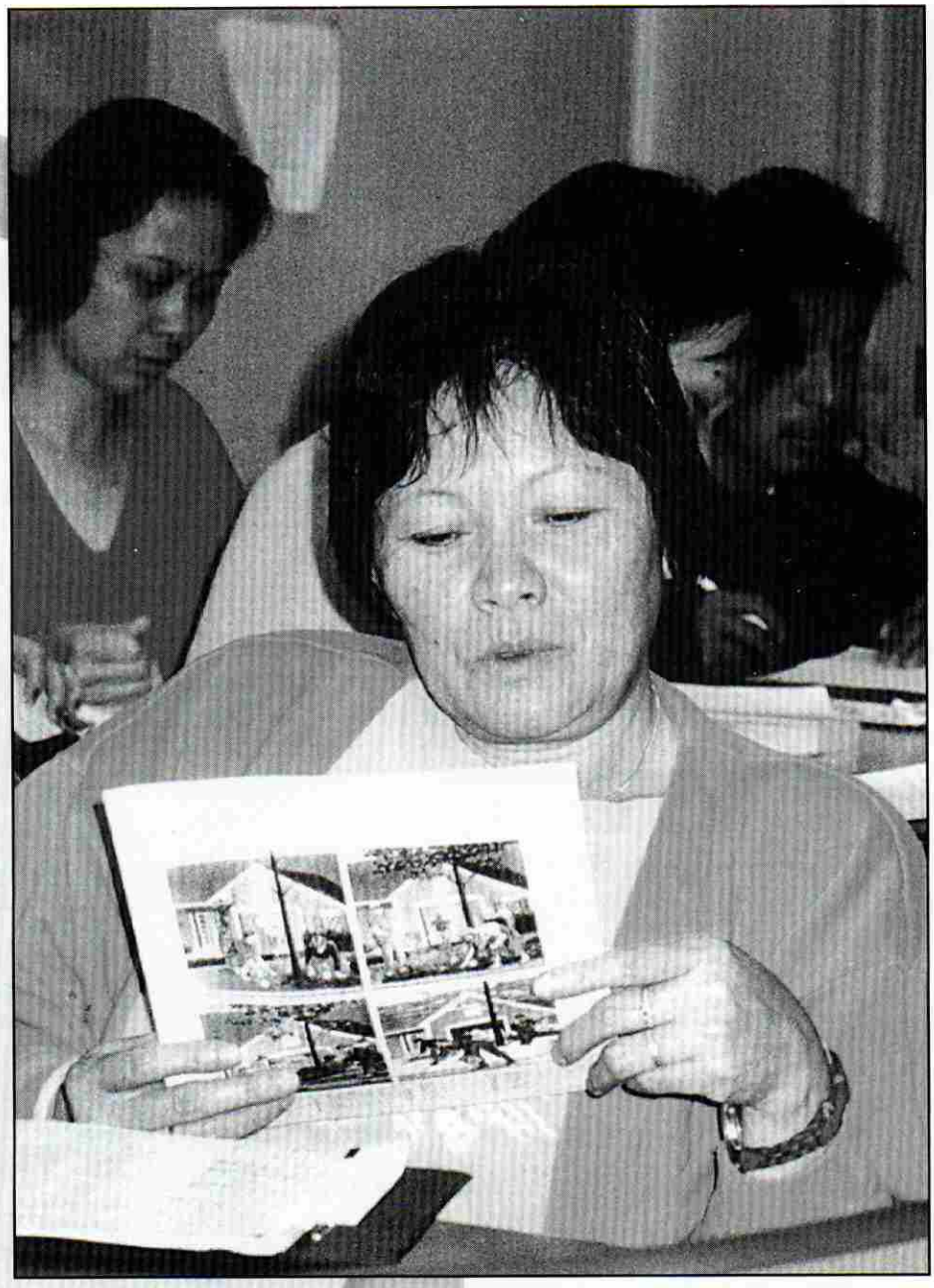
It's Not Kid Stuff

There are many ways that teaching adults is different from working in the K-12 system, or a college or community college. For one thing, the makeup of my class changes every single session. Although I keep 45 to 50 students on the rolls, I will average 28 to 35 students attending at any given time. Some students come to every class; others attend once or twice a week, and still others drop in once every few weeks.

Class lasts for three hours, but many students come in late or leave early, frequently coming from or going to work. It's necessary for me to be flexible and understanding about this, even though it means I won't see the same group of students for the same amount of time from one class to the next.

"How many languages are there in the world? How about five billion! Each of us talks, listens, and thinks in his/her own special language that has been shaped by our culture, experiences, profession, personality, mores and attitudes. The chances of us meeting someone else who talks the exact same language is pretty remote."

—Source unknown



Obviously, trying to base my teaching on previously taught material is a real challenge. I design most lessons to stand alone or else include a lot of review for those who were not there. My co-teachers and I use different books and materials, but we try to stay on the same general topics without repeating one another.

Even though classes officially begin in September and run though a normal school year, few students will spend the whole year in our class. At least two or three times during the year, a group of students will move up to the next level class. Others may advance at other times as is appropriate.

Adult ESL classes have open enrollment, which means that at any time during the year I may have one, two or 10 new students show up for their first day of English class! While much of the class has been around for months and is ready to tackle the lesson on present continuous tense, the new student is stuck when I ask "What's your address?"

This level of confusion is part of what you sign on for when you get involved in adult language education, and I've tried to take most of it in stride. At the beginning, I try to make students feel welcome and help them see that it's okay to listen and not understand everything at first. It can be overwhelming, and it seems to help them if I smile and laugh a lot.

Come to think of it, that seems to help me, too.