

ROLE-PLAYING SUCCESS: How Catherine Mougalian Transforms ESOL at Ringling College

By Dr. Ryan Van Cleave | Portrait by Matthew Holler '11



For Catherine “Catt” Mougalian, teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) isn’t just about grammar and vocabulary—it’s about creating an environment where students thrive. A dedicated faculty member at Ringling College of Art and Design for over a decade, Catt has improved the ESOL program with her innovative use of immersive learning and role-playing techniques. Her passion and dedication continue to inspire both students and peers, reimagining the way English is taught.

A Journey to Transformative Teaching

Catt's journey to ESOL teaching began with a love for language and a knack for helping others. "I had dabbled in teaching and tutoring various subjects—Math, Spanish, English—but as soon as I started teaching at a small English institute in San Diego, I knew this is how I wanted to spend my career," she explained. "Working with students and seeing their skills progress and their confidence grow is so exciting to me, and I love being part of it."

Her teaching philosophy centers on a supportive environment, a critical component of language learning. "If students feel at ease in the classroom and with the language, they'll be more open to receiving feedback. They'll be able to turn their egos way down in order to laugh off silly mistakes and internalize corrections. Generally, the more this happens, the faster students learn."

Immersive Learning: A Game-Changer

Catt's approach took a bold turn when she incorporated the Reacting to the Past (RTTP) pedagogy into her courses. Inspired by Ringling Liberal Arts Program Director Dr. Stephanie Seketa, Catt read *Minds on Fire* by Marc Carnes, and other works, sparking an idea. "Both role-playing and content-based learning are big with ESOL pedagogy," she said. "RTTP is both of these things, kind of intensified."

Working closely with her Liberal Arts colleague Barb Kosanovich, Catt adapted the RTTP materials into a simplified, accessible format specifically tailored to Ringling College's ESOL students. She said, "I couldn't have done any of this without Barb. She dedicates so much time and expertise, meeting with me every week to ensure we're making the best possible experience for our students." Together, they developed an approach that resonates with the unique needs of ESOL learners.

In a typical immersive learning class, students transform into their roles. "The game begins when the students put on their character name tags," Catt explained. "That marks 'the arrival' of their characters and the beginning of the game." Students engage in group discussions, give presentations, and negotiate with peers to achieve their characters' goals—all in English. This structured play encourages students to step out of their comfort zones.

One particularly memorable moment stands out. A previously silent student astonished the class during an RTTP game by advocating for saving a church from destruction, complete with priceless artifacts and lives at stake. "Surprising everyone in the classroom, this student stood up, volunteered to speak, raised her voice confidently, and spoke her piece," Catt recalled. In the reflection assignment that followed, this student expressed that it was easier and far more fun to speak as a character than as themselves.

Catt knew she was on the right track with this new approach.

The Impact of Immersion

The results of these methods are undeniable. "Any engaging, concentrated English practice is going to improve students' language skills," Catt noted. While students may initially hesitate, their enthusiasm grows as they embrace their roles. And the group she has this year is very supportive of each other, with the more outspoken students continually encouraging the timid ones to participate more actively in discussions.

In addition to building confidence, students develop practical skills. Weekly conversations with tutors from the Student Learning Center complement the immersive activities, giving students additional opportunities to practice English in real-life contexts.

Recognition and Refinement

Innovative methods like these soon caught the attention of her peers, leading to Catt's recognition at the Faculty/Staff Appreciation event. "I was floored," she admitted. "We work with so many amazing faculty who are dedicated to the students and to their profession, that I cannot believe I was chosen out of the bunch. I was honored, of course, and I obviously felt very proud to have all the work I've done here over the past decade and more recognized."

Another of Catt's significant contributions was changing the ESOL Skills class into a for-credit course. "Our now for-credit English language class gives students a space and more purpose to learn the language in a focused manner," she explained. By prioritizing conversational and academic language use over traditional grammar drills, Catt and Barb have created a program that resonates with the real needs of students.



Learning and Growing

A commitment to professional development is another hallmark of Catt's teaching. She and Barb attended two influential conferences last year, including the Reacting to the Past Conference at Barnard College, where they deepened their understanding of role-playing pedagogy and explored ways to enhance its application. "We saw how games could succeed and how some games could fail based on participants' preparedness," she said. They also presented at the Northern New England TESOL Conference, sharing their insights on using RTTP in ESOL.

As she reflects on the success of RTTP, Catt is focused on further tailoring these methods to meet her students' evolving needs. "Fall 2024 was only our second semester using this pedagogy, and we're still refining it to make it more effective for our students," she said. Her advice to other educators is clear:

"It's a lot of work to get started, but...do it! Most students love it."

Through her dynamic teaching, Catt is leaving a lasting mark on her students, empowering them to communicate with confidence and creativity. Her thoughtful methods and dedication exemplify the best of Ringling College's faculty, inspiring both students and colleagues alike.

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