

# A Call to Service

BY WILLIAM P. ANCKER

When I went to Georgetown University on October 9, 2003, to interview Dr. James Alatis, I have to admit that I was nervous. Although I had met him previously at an international TESOL convention (we were introduced by a mutual friend), I was sure that he wouldn't remember me. I was feeling a bit intimidated by what he had attained in the field of English language teaching. His long and distinguished career was filled with prestigious positions, dozens of publications, numerous international presentations, honors, and appointments—plus his decades of leadership in professional service.

If you read the introduction to the interview reprinted here, then you will understand the scope of this man's accomplishments. In addition to all that, he was a member of *English Teaching Forum's* Advisory Panel from 1987 to 1993! "Where did he find the time?" I wondered as I found my way to his Georgetown office. Once in his presence, I discovered that my anxiety had been unfounded. Alatis was very gracious, answering all my questions enthusiastically and telling some wonderful anecdotes. Our meeting went well, and I enjoyed myself immensely.

The resulting interview, originally published in 2004, deserves to be included in *Forum's* 50th anniversary celebration (where it might find a new and perhaps younger readership) because the accomplishments of Dr. Alatis have benefitted members of our profession around the world for decades.

It may seem terribly brazen, but in this introduction, I would like to compare the career of Dr. Alatis with my own. The first comparison is that Jim and I both have taught in our home country, the United States, and in other countries. International work experience is essential for anyone in the field of second/foreign language teaching. Second, Jim and I are both bilingual. Learning languages is important to being able to teach languages. Third, Jim and I have both held administrative positions. Administration is a pretty typical move up the career ladder for anyone who has been around schools for a while.

Fourth, and the most important parallel to me now, is professional service. In the interview, I asked Alatis, "What advice can you give to teachers?" In his answer he

said, “Provide service.” The contribution Jim Alatis made to the establishment and growth of the international association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL, based in Alexandria, Virginia) has had an ongoing global impact. His influence cannot be underestimated.

Throughout my career in English language teaching, I have worked with many professional organizations to hold national TESOL conferences and to provide teacher training, but until recently, I never actually served. About four years ago, a group of like-minded colleagues in New Mexico formed a professional TESOL association in our state. (New Mexico has a small population compared to other states, but it has a high percentage of residents who do not speak English.) Finally, for the first time in my career, I volunteered to provide service. Our association has grown slowly, providing training around the state and networking with an adult education organization. Although our impact is only local, I’m still inspired by the example of Jim Alatis.

I ran into Jim and his wife Penny several times at various TESOL conventions after that first one where I’d met him, and he always greeted me warmly. He was the one person at the event who knew more people than anyone else, probably hundreds of other convention goers, and yet he always remembered my name! I was delighted, even astonished, but in retrospect, I shouldn’t have been.

James Alatis truly is one of a kind, and I believe every member of the global English language teaching profession is in some way indebted to him. I encourage readers of *English Teaching Forum* to take his advice and get involved in professional service. But don’t wait as long as I did—and do think big the way Jim did!

.....●  
**WILLIAM P. ANCKER**, a former editor of *English Teaching Forum* (2000–2003), currently teaches English in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and is the founding president of NMTESOL. Previously, he served as a U.S. Department of State English Language Officer in Central America and Central Asia.

**“Competent teachers with non-discouraging personalities using non-defensive methods and techniques, who cherish their students and hold them in unconditional positive regard, are the best teachers.”**

**— James E. Alatis**