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## Why I Give to TIRF — By Rosemary Orlando



Rosemary Orlando

Each month, I receive and read through *TIRF Today*. It serves as an encouraging reminder of all the good work being done behind the scenes within the Foundation throughout the year. In my teaching and travel in various countries, I meet so many deserving, dedicated, and driven English language teachers and researchers who would be thrilled to be given more opportunities if the funding were available to them. I give to TIRF because it is one small way to help nurture the possibilities of those who are working to improve the quality of English language teaching and learning worldwide.

There are times when people question whether helping a few teachers succeed is really making a difference, yet through the tireless efforts of Ryan Damerow and Kathi Bailey, the monthly newsletter

shines a light on the successes and achievements of those helped by TIRF. Each month, the message is clear that giving to The International Research Foundation for English Language Education *is* making a difference in people's lives and continues to do so.

I give to TIRF because it brings together students, teachers, researchers, and leaders in the world of English language teaching (ELT). The Doctoral Dissertation Grant money helps the awardees take the next steps on their journeys to leadership in the field. Being involved with TIRF introduces people to a network of like-minded individuals who are turning ideas into action and opening doors to those who otherwise might not be able to advance the field of ELT within their particular educational settings. The Foundation has stayed true to its purpose and mission. The funding provided by TIRF donors is instrumental in providing a pathway to leadership in English language education around the world.

## Interview with Dr. Weiwei Yang



Dr. Weiwei Yang

**Editor's note:** In this piece, *TIRF* Trustee MaryAnn Christison interviews [Weiwei Yang](#), who is a 2012 *TIRF Doctoral Dissertation Grant (DDG)* awardee.

### 1. Tell us a about yourself. Where are you now working and what does your position involve?

I have been an ESL/EFL teacher for about 10 years, and I also had the good fortune to be involved in ESL teacher education at the undergraduate level during my PhD studies. I recently accepted a position as an associate professor of English in the College of Foreign Languages at Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics in China. The position primarily involves teaching English and applied linguistics courses, advising MA students, and conducting research.

### 2. What did receiving the TIRF Doctoral Dissertation Grant mean to you?

The TIRF DDG award certainly helped me financially. It allowed me to travel to my research site, to hire assistants for essay rating, and to give conference presentations. On a personal level, the grant gave me so much professional encouragement and was an acknowledgement of my work. As a result of the grant, I felt even more accountable for the research I was doing. TIRF requires ongoing project reports, which helped me to stay focused and motivated me to think deeply about the implications and meaningfulness of my research.

### 3. What were the main findings of your study?

My study found that neither rhetorical task nor topic familiarity, as two cognitive complexity dimensions, had an effect on the L2-writing scores of college-level L2 writers. Neither of these dimensions had an effect on the accuracy and the fluency of college-level L2 writing, but argumentative essays were significantly

more complex in global syntactic complexity features than narrative and expository essays. And essays on the less familiar topic were significantly less complex in lexical features than essays on the more familiar topics. Further, the complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) features were found to explain roughly half of the variance in the writing scores across the tasks. Writing fluency as measured by essay length was the most important CAF predictor of scores for most tasks; lexical sophistication was, however, the most important predictor for the argumentative task. Finally, the "best" regression model was found to differ systematically across the task types in each dimension.

### 4. What did you think was the most important thing you learned about doing research in the process of completing your dissertation?

One important thing I learned during the course of completing my dissertation was not to be afraid of my data and of making changes to the originally proposed data analysis procedures. Because my study involved textual analysis and quantitative data analysis, I kept seeking better methods for these purposes than what I initially proposed. After collecting my data, I played with the data and with different analysis procedures. This process helped me to select better and more valid procedures. I did not simply use those previously reported in the literature but critiqued them with solid data in hand. I also consulted experts in the field on the related procedures to make sure that I was making good choices.

### 5. What are your plans for future research? How did your research influence them?

Because my study investigated several related questions, and I collected a large amount of data, I could not include all of it in my dissertation; therefore, I am currently preparing manuscripts based on my doctoral work.

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I am also planning to use the data to answer some other questions, such as those that explore an examination of cohesive devices in the students' essays. Through the dissertation project, I discovered what I would like to research in the future. In particular, I am interested in examining the process of knowledge-making vs. knowledge-telling triggered by task types, the learners' engagement, and interactions with the different task types, and ultimately how these may affect the learners' L2 performance and development.

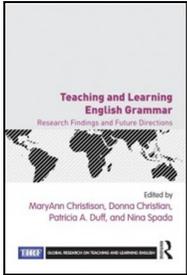
## 6. What advice would you give to students who are starting their doctoral studies?

I would suggest they take research methods courses. These courses can help new researchers better understand the types of research possible and help them focus on the research they would like to undertake in the future. In addition to taking courses in one's own department, look into other academic departments on campus (e.g., educational psychology) to see what courses they have to

offer. I found that taking several research method courses, both from my department and from educational psychology, was tremendously helpful for my dissertation work. I also recommend developing knowledge and skills for doing research and writing research papers, by actually engaging in research projects.

## 7. What would you say to someone who is considering donating to TIRF?

Please donate to TIRF! Your contributions mean so much to PhD candidates who are eager to finish their dissertation work in a timely manner and who need some level of financial support for their work. There are few places for new researchers in our field to seek financial support for their research. The portion of TIRF grant money that can be dedicated for conference travel and presentations allows PhD candidates to attend more conferences, share their work with the academic community, and get feedback. TIRF is doing very meaningful things to support and encourage PhD students in the field. These activities cannot be possible without the support of donors.



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**Kathleen Bailey,**  
Chair of TIRF

## TIRF Tidbits: Slidecast Now Available & DDG Update

### TESOL Panel Presentation Slidecast

Last month in *TIRF Today*, we promised to deliver a slidecast of TIRF's panel presentation at the TESOL 2015 International Convention and English Language Expo. We are pleased to share that the slidecast is now available both on our [YouTube channel](#) and [on our website](#).

As a reminder, the session was entitled "Building Bridges in Language Planning, Teacher Development, Research, and Assessment." Key issues in English language assessment, language planning and policy, mentoring researchers, and professional development for teachers were discussed by representatives of five different organizations.

### Chair's Report — The Seeds We Sow

I love April in California, partly because March and April are the only months when the hills are truly green, but also because my birthday is in April, so that usually means that I get to feel rather special for at least a few days of the month. I won't tell you how old I am, but I will tell you if you think of the decimal equivalent of two-thirds and round it off to two places beyond the decimal, you'll have a good idea. So, of course, it is a time for me to take stock of my life and think about what I'd like to do with the rest of it.

My dad (who will be 95 next month) sent me some money for my birthday with the express instructions that I buy something for myself that I wouldn't normally buy. I've been thinking about it and have come to a conclusion: I'm going to buy some fruit trees

to plant in a now-overgrown, weedy section of my yard. Citrus does well in this area, so I'm planning on getting a lemon, a lime, an orange, and a tangerine tree. This decision is an appropriate way to spend the money Dad gave me because he planted trees where my family lived when I was a child, so it seems like carrying on a family tradition.

Thinking about planting trees is also timely because last week was Earth Day. [According to its website](#), "Earth Day Network's year-round mission is to broaden, diversify and activate the environmental movement worldwide, through a combination of education, public policy, and consumer campaigns." It seems like planting trees fits with these goals.

And, of course, the idea of planting something that will (hopefully!) outlive me is a kind of strange comfort. I think of the possible families who might live in my house in the future, and of the children eating tangerines, free

from the tree and warmed by the sun.

Trying to run a foundation is rather like planting fruit trees. Interestingly, the principles of TIRF's mission are not too dissimilar from those of the Earth Day Network – both have their roots set in a worldwide focus with an emphasis on education and policy. The seeds of TIRF were planted in the mid-1990s and, over the years, pioneering Trustees and loyal supporters have enabled the Foundation to reach what we hope is only our early sapling state. We want TIRF to grow and flourish, and to bear fruit, long after the present Trustees have retired from Board service. We want the Foundation to be healthy year-round, and for others to care for it after we have gone. Most of all, we want the results to be nourishing for the many people we hope to impact.

*Kathi Bailey*

