

The *MEXTESOL Journal*: 2003-2010—Editorship of Ulrich Schrader

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Although I was Co-Editor and Editor of the *MEXTESOL Journal* (MJ) for approximately seven years (2003-2010), I must admit I have written only two mostly “forgettable” teaching tips articles for the *MEXTESOL Journal* (1987 and 1990). My previous editing experience had been a brief stint as the Editor of the *MEXTESOL Newsletter* in the very early 1990s. This was still in the cut-and-paste era. Cut as in “cut with scissors” and paste as in “affix papers together with sticky glue”. My typing skills on my personal Brothers typewriter improved a lot during that time.

JoAnn Miller formally took over the Editorship of the *MEXTESOL Journal* in 1992 and asked me to be the Associate Editor along with Elinore Duque as the Editorial Assistant. Around the same time, I was also asked by a group of passionate MEXTESOLers to help rescue MEXTESOL from the brink of bankruptcy and closure. Therefore, during the elections at the MEXTESOL Convention in Guadalajara in 1991 I became First Vice-President of the National MEXTESOL, under the leadership of President Barbara de los Reyes who was reluctant to take on the Presidency but acquiesced to peer pressure to help get MEXTESOL back into solvency and on the right track. The following year, I became President of MEXTESOL (for the period 1993-1994) and later served as President of the Mexico City Chapter. During most of this time, I was still on the Editorial Board of the *MEXTESOL Journal*.

Around 2000-2001, I stepped away from MEXTESOL governance, though I continued to be nominally on the *MEXTESOL Journal* Editorial Board. Unfortunately, this was another period of infrequent MJ activity because the leadership of the journal was in limbo, so to speak. The previous Editor had unexpectedly left the country and there was a vacuum which JoAnn Miller filled as Interim Editor for an issue in early 2002. That was only one of two *MEXTESOL Journal* issues published during that year. I should point out here that due to various factors the physical publication of the journal many times lagged significantly behind the work that actually had taken place in previous months, creating a gap in real-time publication dates. For those of you who remember, our complicated and arcane system of naming and numbering the issues of the MJ as Fall, Winter, Spring, and Summer, plus Volume and Issue Numbers made classification difficult; thus, the numerous and sometimes strange gaps you will find in the archive section of the current *MEXTESOL Journal* website.

At the end of 2002, Yamilett Martínez Briseño, the President of MEXTESOL at that time, asked me and Ma. Guadalupe Santos Espino of the Universidad de Guanajuato to be in charge of the *MEXTESOL Journal*. Coincidentally, this was in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon during the 2002 Convention. We said yes.

It was a slow start because it took us quite a while to get information and to get organized and to contact people willing to be readers for the next issue and to

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communicate with the authors about the pending articles they had submitted and to get new articles to publish!

In 2003 Guadalupe Santos and I were able to publish two issues of the journal and thereafter there were two issues each year for the next couple of years until Guadalupe decided to step down as co-editor and I became the sole Editor-in-Chief for a few more years.

The publishing goal for the *MEXTESOL Journal* had always been four issues a year, but, unfortunately, we were not able to meet that objective. Only 16 issues of the Journal, including Special Issues, were published during this period, 2003-2010.

In fact, we could call the first decade of the 2000s the Golden Decade of Special Issues, with almost one Special Issue published each year. These useful collections of articles centered on an important current topic at the time and focused on the state of ELT in Mexico (though not exclusively):

(Year, Title, Special Guest Editor/s)

2003, *Bilingualism and Bilingual Education in Mexico*, Patrick H. Smith

2004, *Teacher Education*, M. Martha Lengeling

2005, *Special CALL Issue*, JoAnn Miller

2006, *Critical Pedagogies*, María de los Ángeles Clemente

2007, *The Professionalization of ELT in Mexico: National and Local Perspectives*, Fátima Encinas, Paula Busseniers, and Nancy Keranen

2009, *Teaching English to Younger Learners*, Peter Sayer and Mario López Gopar

2010, *The Internet and Technology in EFL/ESL*, JoAnn Miller

What were some of the innovations in the MJ and in MEXTESOL related to the MJ that took place during those years (2003-2010)?

Many of the members of the temporarily inactive Editorial Board (2001-2002) agreed to participate again and JoAnn Miller accepted the position of Production Editor. Eventually the Editorial Board was expanded little by little.

We ended the seasonally-named issues and simply identified each issue by volume and issue number. This eliminated the thorny problem of naming the issues according to season and the gaps-in-the-sequencing problem, but it did not solve the problem of the lack of a full set of four issues a year.

The first academic poster sessions at a MEXTESOL Convention were given at the convention in Morelia in 2004, academically supported by an article written by Ma. Guadalupe Santos Espino in Vol. 28, No. 1, Fall, 2004 of the *MEXTESOL Journal*: "Posters as a Resource for Learning and Research". Poster Sessions have been a staple of every MEXTESOL International Convention since then.

The *MEXTESOL Journal* Editorial Board (MJEB) continued to hold its annual meeting during these years. These meetings were the only times Editorial Board members could meet face-to-face and discuss issues related to the Journal. Those attending received a convention registration fee waiver in recognition of the voluntary work they carried out throughout the year. However, if they attended the convention they were required to be at the *MEXTESOL Journal* meeting and dinner.

We were able to give the members of the *MEXTESOL Journal* Editorial Board more recognition by having their names and institutional affiliations printed in the print programs of the MEXTESOL conventions, beginning with the 2005 Zacatecas Convention.

The *MEXTESOL Journal* "Writing and Publishing" panels which had begun at the 1999 convention in Mazatlán continued throughout this period.

The *MEXTESOL Journal* was also given more physical presence and recognition with the inclusion of a *MEXTESOL Journal* table in the exhibition area of the 2010 Convention in Cancún.

We continued with the policy of print journals but we always had major problems with finding the best and most effective and efficient way to put the paper journals into the hands of MEXTESOL members. Several different distribution schemes for the *MEXTESOL Journal* had been tried out over the years, including giving them to Chapter Presidents to distribute to their members at chapter events and/or delivering them personally to members at their homes, whenever this was feasible (which was frequently not the case). During our period 2003-2010, we continued with the distribution of the MJ through post office mailings. This was very frustrating for both MEXTESOL members who did not receive the paper issues in the mail for whatever reason, and also administratively for the MEXTESOL office staff. The bureaucratic paperwork of properly labeling and packing hundreds of journals according to official Mexican post office regulations and then carting them off physically to the specific post office that would receive them was always harrowing work and expensive, to say the least. After all that, it was disappointing and frustrating to receive back at the office a hundred or so returned journals because the mailing addresses were incorrect or incomplete or the member had moved, etc. On top of that, we had to deal with many annoyed MEXTESOL members complaining that they had not received their paper copies, even if they had not been returned to the National Office. This problem was not satisfactorily resolved until the *MEXTESOL Journal* decided on the controversial policy of going exclusively online.

The *MEXTESOL Journal* continued to be produced with the same covers of the previous years. We did not consider the design of the cover to be a major priority. However, eventually we did institute new covers (a simple blue cover and then a red cover) for just two print issues before the *MEXTESOL Journal* went paperless.

Another important innovation during our period was the development of the rubrics scheme for evaluating the articles that we received. We made these rubrics public for everyone—authors and Editorial Board Members—to base their work on.

Perhaps the major organizational accomplishment during this period was the completion of the *MEXTESOL Journal Operating Manual* in 2007, a project undertaken principally by Michelle Merritt, Karen Englander, Ma. Guadalupe Santos, and yours truly over the course of many months. The purpose of the document was to put some order into the workings of the *MEXTESOL Journal* and the Editorial Board and a system for rotating members on and off the board so that new members could participate. Of course, in the nine years since then, some changes have occurred as the dynamics of the Editorial Board and MJ have themselves changed. The *MEXTESOL Journal Operating Manual* now needs to be overhauled completely and updated.

After the Operating Manual was approved in 2007, Ma. Guadalupe Santos Espino decided to leave as Co-Editor, while I then continued to be the sole Editor during the transition period which followed. M. Martha Lengeling became the Associate Editor for Refereed Articles and Saul Santos became the Associate Editor for Non-refereed Articles, while JoAnn Miller continued to be the Production Editor.

During 2010 I decided to end my term as Editor-in-Chief of the *MEXTESOL Journal* and M. Martha Lengeling was elected by the Editorial Board to be the next Editor-in-Chief.

My MEXTESOL Journal Experience

What was my experience at the helm of the *MEXTESOL Journal* like during all those years? As you may suspect, there is no simple answer to this question.

I certainly grew as a professional and on a personal level as well. To say the least, I honed my editing and proofreading skills and learned a lot of nuances about the English language: vocabulary, grammar, collocations, the use of synonyms, coherence and cohesion, academic writing conventions, etc. A paper dictionary and a grammar book were always by my side and I frequently had to consult colleagues about some details since the reference books didn't always provide convincing specific answers. Language learning is definitely a lifelong process!

I like to think that after my *MEXTESOL Journal* experience I have also become a better writer in general. I pay attention more to how I say what I want to say and try to use "clarity" and "completeness" as my two main guiding principles. I must say though, I am probably too verbose and this is my greatest writing weakness. I like to play with words and use some unconventional and perhaps colorful words and expressions in my writing to perhaps because my readers to grab that paper or virtual dictionary and look up and learn a new word. A teacher's work is never done!

As an editor, in contrast to being an English teacher of writing say, you need to be more precise and accurate and perhaps more ruthless in the changes you propose in a manuscript. Yes, you need to respect the author's professional self-esteem and yes, it is important for the author to express her or his own voice in the writing, but it is also more important that the message be understood by most of the target audience, the *MEXTESOL Journal* readership, primarily. This involves the dual strands of writing: organizational planning, coherence and cohesion on the one hand, and grammatical and word-usage accuracy on the other, not to mention the mechanical aspects of writing (spelling and punctuation). For me, a writer needs to write in a way that provides a logical progression from start to finish that clearly gets the reader to understand the purpose of the article. If the conditions for this final reader understanding of the document are not there, then why bother to write (and publish)?

Even in simple email correspondence, I find it useful and above all time-saving when making (and receiving) a request for action, that the original requesting message include all of the possible information the receiver of the message needs in order to provide an informed prompt response. If these resources are not provided, the simple initial request becomes a chain of further emails and possible procrastination by all parties is the result. Help your reader by providing all the information s/he needs in order to understand the document and/or in order to take action!

When I read some so-called academic online articles from “unknown” or dubious sources, I am sometimes amazed at how poorly they are written and wonder how they could ever have gotten through the publication process. I suppose the process is similar to that of thesis and dissertation advisors who are overwhelmed with lengthy and poorly written student work and provide only cursory feedback regarding language use and even regarding the important issues of coherency and organizational patterns. The sad thing is that students often walk away with the idea that their writing is good (and correct) because the “teacher” did not “correct” or even comment on the work. “*El que calla, otorga*” (If nothing is said, then you assume approval). Sometimes it seems that quantity (as well as convenience and time pressure) wins out over quality.

Very disappointing for me has been the discovery that English teachers whose L1 is English can sometimes write just as incomprehensibly in English as do some English teachers who are in the process of learning the language. Having a Ph.D. (even in a field related to English or English teaching) does not guarantee having a good command of the language, and this is a shame, especially for an English teacher. For someone who is learning the language, more consideration and leeway can be given, but sloppy work produced by an English teacher whose L1 is English is largely inexcusable. Fortunately, this problem does have a solution.

So, English teachers who are still in the process of learning the language (actually, that is all of us, no matter if English is your L1 or L2) should not be discouraged from writing an academic article in English. The more you do it, the better you get at it (this is the solution I alluded to previously); the main obstacle is that you have to sit down and start, persist, and eventually finish, and do your work carefully. Even then check everything again before submitting your work. Of course, this applies to employment situations (in English or Spanish or whatever language) as well as to academic publishing! Little by little you will develop your own style and voice that will be acceptable within the range of established academic writing conventions. Practice makes perfect but only if you add new things with each attempt or experiment with different ideas, approaches, techniques, and useful aspects of the feedback you have received (whether from others or your own self-reflective feedback). If you continue to do the same old thing, practice will only make permanent your ingrained “bad habits” and your language proficiency and your writing can become fossilized.

Being an editor is also an enlightening experience in terms of dealing with authors and collaboratively coming up with a final polished article. No article is perfect (including this one)!

Each revision reveals and suggests something new that was not considered previously, a new word or even grammatical structure that can better express the intended idea. Eventually, though, one has to draw the line and say, “this is it; this is the best I can do”, and submit/publish the document. Of course, this is also true for artists (painters, sculptors), as well as composers and musicians. In fact, this principle applies to all human endeavors. However, it is necessary to be sure you have done the best that you can and not just say “*ahí se va*” (“that’ll do”). This latter attitude leads to mediocrity, which is not appropriate for serious academic work and publishing; nor for any personal accomplishment you may wish to pursue.

Editors dealing with authors (and vice versa) is a human enterprise involving diplomacy; some authors become indignant that their work is not considered immediately perfect. They do not take kindly to any criticism. On the other hand, some authors are devastated by the feedback and criticism their work receives. They take it personally and do not want to continue producing anything; not even trying. This, of course, is also the wrong approach or rather, result. An author needs to be open to suggestions for improving an article, and to the extent that revisions and continuous feedback are necessary and provided, the author should be grateful for this learning experience that others are providing him/her. Mentoring or coaching has always been a part of the publication process with the *MEXTESOL Journal*. I remember spending hours working through articles with suggestions on how they could be improved and sending the comments to the author. The author basically has two follow-up choices: reject and ignore the suggestions and forget about publishing the article, at least with this particular journal; or, carefully read through the suggestions and improve the article and submit it for another round of feedback and revision until a final acceptable article has been produced.

From the point of view of the struggling author, the author should be appreciative of the fact that someone is spending a considerable amount of expert time reading your article and trying to help you achieve your goal of publishing. This is not easy for an editor or reviewer to do, and an author should follow-up as best s/he can to produce a good piece of writing. Sometimes during my mentoring periods, I have felt that I spent more time reading, revising, checking, suggesting and generally providing feedback, than perhaps the author spent in writing the article in the first place! This is all worth it if the author is appreciative and finally comes up with a good piece of writing. It is not worth the editor's or reviewer's effort if the author just discards or ignores the feedback and the writing/publishing process is truncated. This possible outcome leaves the editor or reviewer frustrated and disappointed and with a feeling that the time spent on reviewing and revising the article was a waste of time, which is not fair to the editor or reviewer. This is exactly the same as how English teachers (as most of you reading this are) feel when they have put great effort into a lesson plan or into a specific activity or into providing extensive feedback on students' work, and then nothing happens.

So as a tip, recognize the help (time, effort, money—if that is the case—thinking, and encouragement that someone invests in getting you to accomplish your goal). There is always room for improvement for all concerned.

Many times, it is true, correctness is in the eye of the beholder. There are, of course, some variations to how one can express an idea. But some things are clearly right or wrong.

This is at both levels of professional academic writing: the conceptual basis, the research, the logic behind what is being stated and then also at the level of language use and form, the latter definitely less important than the former, but not to be entirely neglected in a professional publication of English language teachers!

The dilemma of the author's voice and style has already been mentioned. We also need to be aware of differences, albeit small, between British and American English. The key here is usually consistency and not moving back and forth willy-nilly from one variety to the other in the same text.

Our computers now provide us with lots of resources and even automatic mechanical indicators to help us polish our writing, in any language. Spellcheck and other programs that signal possible irregularities in writing are available to both the writer and the editor/reviewer. The writer needs to check all marked (in red or green) words, phrases and sections to be sure s/he is aware of and makes a conscious decision regarding the use of a particular form in a specific instance (especially if the computer automatically signals this possible error). The writer should do all of this before submitting the document for publication. It should not be the job of the editor/reviewer to correct simple errors that were already recognized and marked by the computer. This shows a lack of diligence and courtesy toward the person who is receiving the document, especially if s/he is being asked to improve it.

As a reader (editor/reviewer), you always have to read everything (including this brief article!) with a grain of salt and consider the author and his/her purposes, etc. and take it from there. Make your own decisions about the content, the validity of the statements you read (and hear). Do not accept what you read or hear without using your critical thinking skills which become sharper with each use. I say this from the point of view of an editor or reviewer, from that of a teacher and from that of an individual who wants to make an informed contribution to the world.

My *MEXTESOL Journal* years, 2003-2010, were at times difficult and I always felt that I was swamped with an overwhelming number of articles at various stages of revision to check once again. No article ever got through the process without making some changes. That's the reality of professional academic publishing in a serious publication such as the *MEXTESOL Journal*.

On the one hand it is your professional development responsibility as a professional English teacher to share with other ELT colleagues your insights into language teaching and learning and your experience inside and outside the classroom and, on the other hand, to improve your own language skills so that you can effectively communicate with both your students and your colleagues in speaking and writing so that you will be able to make a difference in someone else's life.

Continue to write in English, be open to learning more, be careful, be precise, share your experiences through publishing academic articles and eventually you too, can become an editor, maybe even of the *MEXTESOL Journal*.