

Interview Between Peter Hubbard And Mextesol Journal^{1, 2}

Journal: Were you a founding member of MEXTESOL?

Hubbard: No, I wasn't. That must have been in about 1974, right? I was working in the *Anglo-Mexicano* in Guadalajara then. I arrived in the country in 1972 as a very green and inexperienced teacher of English. However, I was at the meeting when the Guadalajara chapter was founded. That must have been in 1975 and Leo Ortiz was elected the first chapter president. I later went off to the United Kingdom and completed my MA. Then I got a job in the Republic of Cyprus as Head of an English Department in an English language institute - a big one. Well, the biggest in the tiny Republic. My department started with about 500 students and we ended up with 1,500 students four years later, when I left and came back to Mexico. Then I worked in the *Anglo-Mexicano Centro* in Mexico City for 3 years, first as Head of the Intermediate Department and later as Head of Teacher Training.

Journal: Which was your first convention?

Hubbard: My first convention must have been the one in Guadalajara in 1981. Or was it 1980? I was later to be Academic Chair of the next Guadalajara Convention in 1984. By then, I had returned to Guadalajara and begun working with the University of Guadalajara.

Journal: Is that a private or a public university?

Hubbard: Yes, everyone gets confused about that. The *Universidad de Guadalajara* is the public or state university. The *Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara* is a private university. In fact, I think it was the first private university in Mexico. When I started working in the U. de G., there were over 200,000 students, if you included

¹ *Editor's Note:* This interview was planned by Nevio Siders and sent to Peter Hubbard as an e-mail. Peter then interviewed himself.

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the *prepa*³ students. They are trying to reduce the numbers now, so I don't know how many there are, but it's still a big university.

Journal: So, when you started there you went from the private to the public sector?

Hubbard: Yes, I did. And let me say that, having made the change, I don't think I could ever go back to working in the private sector, despite the low salaries here...

Journal: What makes you say that?

Hubbard: Don't misunderstand me. I am not criticizing private language operations. I have the greatest respect for them. It is a question of personal choice. My experience has been that students in the public sector have a totally different attitude. Somehow in private schools it is difficult to get away from the feeling that the students are clients and you are in their employ. This is certainly true in some of the private universities where I have carried out observations. Teachers have confirmed this, also. In the public schools, despite the poor conditions and the chaos, the students approach education as if it were an opportunity that they are lucky to have. And it is. I like working with these students. They stimulate me tremendously.

Journal: What kind of teaching do you do?

Hubbard: Almost exclusively teacher education, of one kind or another. I have specialized in that for the past 15 years or so. Ever since I began running a COPE (Certificate for Overseas Teachers of English) course in Cyprus. My first book arose out of that project. There were four of us and I proposed putting our experience into the form of a manual for teachers whose first language wasn't English. It seemed that nobody had thought of doing this before and soon we had two publishers disputing the rights to publish the book. It was published eventually by Oxford University Press and came out in 1983. A very thrilling moment for me. Surprisingly, it is still being used.

³ High school

Journal: What else have you published?

Hubbard: Just a series of textbooks. That was terribly hard work. All my spare time for four and a half years. I think writing textbooks is 90% creativity and only 10% expertise. They should get professional authors to generate most of the ideas and do the writing; and have the experts in language teaching produce the language exercises and exploitation. There are a lot of ex-language teachers around who think they are authors; and the result is simply mediocre writing and boring books. I won't mention any names!

Journal: Tell us about FEULE.

Hubbard: Yes, well, that was an idea I had when I attended the convention in Puebla in what 1985? Anyway, I noticed that the events organized by university people were attended by very few people, but they had great interest in talking to each other about their efforts and their programs. Later, when Martin Phillips, the English Language Officer of the British Council, was in Guadalajara together with a British colleague called Gill Sturtridge, we talked about it. And Gill mentioned an event in Britain that was exclusively for the purpose of exchanging information between university departments. I thought about it and decided that FEULE (*Foro de Especialistas Universitarios en Lenguas Extranjeras*), as it eventually turned out to be, should be an event and not an association, so as to avoid all the politics and bickering about money. So we had the first *Foro* in Guadalajara in 1986. There were about 60 people involved and the total budget for the event was 60,000 old pesos (60 new pesos). The only expense was the farewell cocktail—well, glasses of wine, actually. But from there it has gone on. We recently celebrated the 11th FEULE in Puerto Vallarta and we had about 360 people. What I like about FEULE is the atmosphere. FEULE is about cooperating rather than competing. It's always a friendly event and I think people make useful contacts there. The next one will be in Xalapa, by the way.

Journal: You don't regard FEULE as a rival to MEXTESOL?

Hubbard: Not in the least. It is totally different. FEULE is an event, not an association. It is strictly non-commercial. It is for all languages,

not just English. And it is for university teachers and researchers, whereas MEXTESOL is for teachers in all types of institution. There is practically no overlap of functions. And I certainly have continued to support MEXTESOL, as you know. I've given presentations at every single convention, except for one when I was out of the country. I've published numerous articles in this Journal. And I'm also on the editorial board. So I don't see any conflict between the two.

Journal: So what is your present interest?

Hubbard: What's my current obsession? Distance education and the open *licenciatura*⁴ in English language teaching I am getting going. I've been working on this for a year now and I'm totally wrapped up in it. The response we've had has been tremendous and there is a lot of interest in it, which is extremely gratifying. Let me tell you something. I'm a pioneer at heart. I like to get new projects going. Once they're working smoothly I tend to lose interest. This happened with the teacher training project in Cyprus. Then with the book project. Then, after a somewhat dull three years in Mexico City, there was the project of setting up the original *licenciatura* in Guadalajara. I jumped at the chance. In fact, when I got to Guadalajara, I proposed to the *Comisión de Educación* that we set up an open *licenciatura*. They debated briefly between themselves and declared that the University couldn't do that because it had never been done before. Imagine! No innovations are possible. History is a book with the same page repeated endlessly. However, we did settle for a regular "*licenciatura escolarizada*". But that didn't happen for a few years, because when I arrived I found there wasn't sufficient academic infrastructure to start a *licenciatura*. In fact, I found myself being appointed Director of what came to be known as CIDLE (*Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo en Lenguas Extranjeras*) six months after I arrived. So I got deeply involved in administration and setting up a new department.

Journal: But the *licenciatura* did get started?

⁴ Undergraduate degree.

Hubbard: Yes, indeed. It opened its doors in 1987, after two years of hard work working with staff from the Centre for Applied Language Studies of the University of Reading, in England, a link supported by the British Council. They really got us working and made us think. But the result was positive. I am still impressed by the quality of our graduates. And I still enjoy teaching a class in the *licenciatura*.

Journal: What about the open *licenciatura*?

Hubbard: Well, as I mentioned earlier, I had always had this idea of offering a *licenciatura* to people who were working full time but lacked a degree. What happened was that they changed the *Ley Orgánica* of the *Universidad de Guadalajara* to make credit systems possible. At the same, a small unit began operations in the area of open or continuous education. So, in 1992, I proposed that we offer an open version of our *Licenciatura en la Docencia de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera* (LIDILE). We worked on putting together a proposal for this and eventually it was accepted. But there were long bureaucratic delays and it wasn't until 1996 that we were able to open our doors to students. The response was quite exceptional. In the space of one year, we already have 130 students studying in the LIMSÉDILE. I'm sorry about the name. It's not what we wanted, but it stands for *Licenciatura Modular Semi-Escolarizada en la Docencia de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera*. Rather a mouthful, I'm afraid. We now have students from almost all the states of the Mexican Republic. Naturally, I don't want to give the impression that everything is going absolutely wonderfully. We have lots of problems. We are now in a period of evaluation and reform of the basic systems of the program. But indications are that, when students manage to cope with the new mode of learning, it works very well indeed. And, more important, I think that graduates emerging from the program will be excellent. Now this is not going to happen overnight. It will be a fairly long process and require a lot of effort on all sides. But it will happen. I expect to have our first graduates in less than three years. Perhaps more important, I am beginning to recognize the tremendous significance of distance and open education as a new liberating force in education worldwide.

Journal: I can't help noticing that in several of your articles in the *Journal* in the past few years that you have a marked tendency to criticize institutions, even including the SEP².

Hubbard: Yes, I am critical. I have got into trouble again and again because I am outspoken about situations that seem to me to need reform. Well, what's "trouble"? I suppose for most people "trouble" means losing their job. I haven't lost mine yet, and, if I did because of expressing my views, well I wouldn't want to continue working under a regime of censorship. No, I think it is the responsibility of people in universities to criticize. If they don't do it, who will? It is a fact that the word *critico* in Mexico has negative connotations. It implies that someone is trying to do a hatchet job on someone else. This may be the case sometimes, but I think we should consider that, in most universities in Europe and the US, criticism is what academics do for a living. They criticize each other, the government and public systems. They criticize literature, the press and foreign governments. I think universities exist in order to re-examine life and institutions as we know it, together with schools of thought and the attitudes of the average man in the street, and try to get things into perspective. Why? Well, university academics have that most valuable of all commodities: time. Time to sit and think about things that go on around us. Most people don't have time to sit and think. I'm not saying that we should do people's thinking for them, but I do think that we need to prod them from time to time to question what seems familiar and normal. For example, most parents think that the earlier children begin studying a language, the better they will learn it; that very small groups of two or three are ideal for learning conditions; that the teacher should be a native speaker, so that students will acquire a native accent; that learning a language consists primarily of learning grammar... And so on and so forth... What they don't realize is that most of these questions are hotly disputed or indeed discredited. We continually see advertisements that encourage people to believe that they can "master" a language in six weeks, by using some miraculous method. Who will stop this ruthless ex-

² *Secretaría de Educación Pública*

ploitation of the public but academics who criticize existing institutions and procedures?

Journal: But is it wise to criticize government policy on education?

Hubbard: No, it probably isn't. But I believe it's necessary. I don't think the government pays much attention to criticism anyway. Look, the SEP have as much as admitted by their deeds, rather than by words, that previous policies of teaching English in the public sector have failed. They have implemented programs of self-access in public universities as a means of circumventing the lack of teacher competence. In the State of Aguascalientes they have initiated a self-access program in the secondary schools and are apparently now about to introduce something similar into the primary schools. More important, they are finding ways of avoiding their own channels of training and sending teachers to the *Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes* for up-dating. Primary school English teaching projects are beginning in several states. I, personally, am not 100% convinced that these have been well thought out. But the important point is that the SEP are aware that reform is necessary. Consider this: most teachers of English in public schools teach their classes in Spanish. This sets certain limitations, wouldn't you say, on what students can learn. And it also has implications for the training the teachers received at the Normal Superior where they studied and obtained their *licenciatura*.

Journal: What about private schools?

Hubbard: I'm afraid that private schools also need to be criticized. Let me first say that the teaching of English has improved enormously in private schools in the last ten years. Teachers now have a good command of English and some training in methodology. Students are now emerging from private schools who are capable of holding a fluent conversation in English and reading an English language newspaper. Unfortunately, not all students come out so well. The problem seems to be that private schools are directed by people who have very traditional views about education. They believe that "good" classes are those in which pupils have their heads down in a book and silence reigns. How can you teach English actively under those conditions? They also believe that English is the least

important subject in the curriculum. So we still have some way to go even in the private schools.

Journal: I can't help asking why you chose to live in Mexico when you see so much around you to criticize.

Hubbard: Fair enough. Let me put the record straight. I love this country. It is my country by adoption. I have now lived here for almost half my life up to this point. This is not perversity, it is dedication. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. Mexican people in general are kind-hearted and generous; they care about their children, their families and the quality of life. They work in order to live; they do not live in order to work. I love the culture; I love the climate; I love the food; I love the mountains, the desert plains and the beaches. What can I say? I love Mexico. But I also recognize that Mexico suffers from what I can only call a mafia tendency. The extended family system in Mexico is a small and innocent mafia of a sort. But we have mafias in politics, mafias in religion, mafias in industry and mafias in education. Mafias in general are destructive. They are based on principles of selfishness and destruction. Most of Mexico's ills can be traced to mafia-like operations of one kind or another. In general, mafias deny the rights of the individual and free expression. What we need is more free speech and communication. This is happening more and more everyday.

Journal: Are we moving forward, then?

Hubbard: Absolutely. We have made lots of progress. Things are changing all the time. We may become frustrated because the changes don't happen as fast as we would like, but they are happening. I am an optimist. I see a bright future over the horizon.

Journal: Well, thank you very much.

⁹ *Editor's Note:* Do you know anyone who you would like to see interviewed in the *Journal*? Just send The Editor an e-mail (mextesj@servidor.unam.mx) or a fax (525-550-0622) with the person's name and how to get in touch with them. We will get in contact with them personally.