

CONVERSATION WITH PAUL DAVIES *

We decided to interview Paul Davies because of his outstanding contributions to ESL in Mexico and because of the significance of his role in the history of MEXTESOL. Personally, however, what intrigued me most, prior to the interview, was Paul's immense popularity among his colleagues and students. Everyone I spoke to seemed to know him and respect him. I wanted to understand why.

I found Paul easy to talk to - a good listener who could discuss complex and controversial subjects with equanimity and intelligence. He remains comfortable in the presence of a journalist's tape recorder, circumstances that many otherwise candid people find threatening and inhibiting. Davies maintains his openness, his sense of humor, and his ability to answer tough questions straightforwardly and, very often, with penetrating insight. At first I thought the answer to my question was in his genuine and contagious commitment to his profession, or in the "enthusiasm" (a word he uses frequently) that he transmits. But in the course of our ninety-minute conversation I discovered that the "secret" of Paul Davies' popularity was more than commitment and "enthusiasm." It was remarkably simple. Here was a man who, conscious of all the trials and tribulations, nonetheless - above all and in spite of everything - modestly loved his work - teaching English.

D. H.

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"Like many people of my generation, I just drifted into English teaching"

WHAT FIRST BROUGHT YOU TO MEXICO, PAUL?

Romance. I met a girl in Spain, a Mexican girl.

AND YOU'VE BEEN HERE EVER SINCE?

Seventeen years, 18 coming up. Since 1965.

DID YOU HAVE A JOB OFFER WAITING WHEN YOU GOT HERE?

Oh, no. I came "on spec," as they say. I did find a job soon, at the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. I spent my first two years there; then nine years in Mexico City; a year away studying a Master's degree in England; then back to Puebla.

ONE OF THE FASCINATING THINGS ABOUT YOUR CAREER, PAUL, IS THAT YOU SEEM TO HAVE DONE A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING RELATED TO ENGLISH TEACHING.

A little bit of everything and a lot of some things. But yes, I've taught both in public and private schools at different levels; at the University in Puebla, at the UNAM. I've been mostly at the Anglo, but I did teach for two years in the public secondary school system.

I ALSO MEANT, BESIDES TEACHING, YOU'VE GONE OFF TO GRADUATE SCHOOL TWICE, ADMINISTERED A LANGUAGE CENTER, DONE A LOT OF TEACHER TRAINING, MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT. HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THE RANGE OF INTERESTS?

Curiosity, perhaps. Like many people of my generation, I just drifted into English teaching, with a college education but with no formal training in TESOL. I first wanted to become a really qualified teacher myself. I guess that's how I started getting involved in other activities.

"One problem is that people, and I'll include myself in this, who are not in close touch with the conditions of teachers in the provinces, are sent there as speakers."

WHAT HAD YOU STUDIED IN ENGLAND?

My degree was in Modern Language and Literature - English and Spanish. I first taught English in Spain - in Madrid - for two years.

DID YOU EXPERIENCE MUCH OF A CULTURAL SHOCK WHEN YOU FIRST CAME TO MEXICO?

No. No, not at all. I liked Mexico very much. Culture shock, in fact, is a kind of foreign concept to me. I've never felt anything like it. I made friends in Mexico very soon. With my students and, very soon indeed, with my colleagues at the University in Puebla. I was a bit disconcerted by the number of students in classes - over 100 - but in general I guess I'm fairly adaptable.

WHY DID YOU SWITCH FROM THE UNIVERSITY TO THE ANGLO?

I had to come to Mexico City to the Anglo several times, looking for a bit more training in language teaching. The Anglo atmosphere attracted me; it seemed to be an active place with a lot going on about teaching. But the final decision was partly because of problem in Puebla: the teachers hadn't been paid for four months.

WHAT WAS YOUR EARLY EXPERIENCE AT THE ANGLO IN MEXICO CITY LIKE?

Well, it bothered me a little to find myself in charge of teacher training courses with the relatively little experience I had. So I did two things. First, I decided I needed a more solid academic background. That led to a Master's at Reading University. In linguistics. And second, since most of my students were (or were to become) secondary school teachers, it seemed a bit presumptuous to prepare them for a situation I hadn't experienced myself. So I got into the public secondary school classroom as an ordinary teacher for a couple of years.

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WHAT ABOUT THE MASTER'S DEGREE? DID THAT MAKE A BETTER TEACHER OUT OF YOU?

Yes, although perhaps indirectly. There was no program in applied linguistics at Reading at the time, so I studied general linguistics, which was heavy on theory. Among my teachers were Wilkins, Crystal and Palmer. I enjoyed it very much. Being back in my own country for a year was good, although I don't suffer at all from nostalgia.

GETTING BACK TO SECONDARY SCHOOLS, WHERE YOU HAD YOUR DOSE OF DAILY EXPERIENCE, WHAT ARE THE MAJOR PROBLEMS THERE?

Well, it's a big area! There's more English teaching in secondary schools in Mexico than anywhere else. There are some excellent programs and some really bad ones in both public and private institutions. The Centro Escolar in Puebla, for example, is one privileged public school: video in all the classrooms, well-trained teachers, a library of simplified English books. But in other cases, again both public and private, it can be very difficult: large numbers of students, little cooperation from the Directors. I might add, although I know it's controversial, that in secondary schools I think less English teaching should be done. I think it's probably a mistake to have English as a compulsory subject.

WHERE SHOULD IT BE COMPULSORY?

Well, I think one has to explore possibilities. It has to be thought out more. Perhaps, even in secondary schools it could be compulsory the first year, as an introduction to studying languages in general. I don't know. But policy has to be thought through more carefully. As it stands, the results are very depressing. Of course, in fairness, the results of Spanish teaching in the United States or French in England are also very depressing.

"I'm concerned about the amount of English teaching which is done in Mexico and which is wasted effort. The problem is that there's too much of it."

GETTING BACK TO TEACHER TRAINING FOR A MOMENT, WHAT ABOUT PRE-SERVICE VS. IN-SERVICE TRAINING?

I think, generally speaking, pre-service training is very ambitious. Relatively few people complete it successfully. In some cases (not all) it's clearly not very effective. I won't specify with examples, but there are teachers who have certificates who are not proficient in English and are just not very good teachers. On the other hand, with in-service training, at least in my limited experience, there is a high degree of motivation and enthusiasm. I think that's very encouraging, although these programs probably only touch the tip of the iceberg.

WHAT SHOULD AN ENGLISH TEACHER KNOW? IS IT TRUE THAT MANY TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMS PUT TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON THEORY?

Yes! I think first and foremost the teacher should be as proficient as possible in the second language. The problem with theory, when you get to teaching methodology, is by presenting a broad spectrum of theoretical options, you can create conflicts, especially for the secondary teachers, who must conform in the real world to an official program.

YES, IN THE PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL SYSTEM, FOR EXAMPLE, WE'VE RECEIVED A MANDATE TO RETRAIN TEACHERS FOR ESP - READING COMPREHENSION. A LOT OF THEM ARE BAFFLED.

Uh-huh. With the recent emphasis on reading the argument is two-fold. First, "Let's be less ambitious and try to focus in on a more narrow objective." And second, "This is justified because our students need to learn reading more than anything else." I think, in general, this might be a mistake. For motivational reasons. I think it can be, in a very simple word, boring. The new high school

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program also contradicts the secondary program. We give them three years of general English and then suddenly that's all thrown away and reduced exclusively to English for reading. There's a certain incoherence there. And, as I say, to avoid boredom, the most efficient way to handle reading may not be by isolating the skill, but by combining it with others.

HOW DO YOU SEE MEXTESOL'S ROLE IN THE PROBLEMS WE'VE BEEN DISCUSSING? YOU'VE BEEN ACTIVE SINCE THE BEGINNING, HAVEN'T YOU?

I was a member of the Executive Committee that finally got the Constitution officially registered. So pretty much from the beginning, yes. But I can't take much credit for organizing it. I was parliamentarian at the time. I didn't really know what parliamentarians were supposed to do; so I wasn't particularly active at that point, really.

WHAT GOT YOU MORE INTERESTED?

MEXTESOL clearly seemed to be important in ESL in Mexico. The people who were most active in starting it, Mexicans and Americans largely, were extremely enthusiastic. And I think the development of MEXTESOL has clearly borne out their hopes. It's a bit chaotic in some senses, but I think it's done a great deal.

WAS TESOL INTERNATIONAL THE GUIDING MODEL AT FIRST?

Yes, I think to some extent it was taken as a model.

HOW HAS THE ASSOCIATION CHANGED OVER THE YEARS?

It's grown tremendously! From the beginning a lot of the members had come from public institutions, especially the secondary schools.

" . . . if tomorrow all foreign English professionals were to go home, Mexico would continue with a lot of successful language teaching. This might not have been true 10 or 20 years ago."

Recently more members have come in from the tertiary system - the Polytechnic and the universities. In that it's so much bigger now, it's grown up. So that if there was anything like a parent-child relationship in the early days, it's very much a grown-up child now, and it does a lot of its own things, and quite big things. By world standards. For example, the conventions here are larger in scale now than in most European countries.

IDEALLY, WHAT SHOULD MEXTESOL BE LIKE?

Perhaps, because of the wide diversity of professional interest of its membership, it should cater to the whole range of linguists, administrators, classroom teachers. Research concerns and grass-roots teaching - the things you actually do in the classroom, especially things you do in the classrooms in which it's difficult to teach English. I think MEXTESOL does cover that range fairly well.

ARE WE DOING ALL WE SHOULD IN "PROVINCIA"? OR ARE WE MEXICO CITY ORIENTED?

That's a difficult question. In the past, we definitely tried to do a great deal, but it depends on the resources available, too. Most members are concentrated in the capital, and the economic crisis may make increased contact with distant chapters difficult. One problem is that people, and I'll include myself in this, who are not in close touch with the conditions of teachers in the province, are sent there as speakers. What works for the UNAM or a bi-cultural center may not go over well with secondary teachers in Chiapas.

HOW COULD WE IMPROVE THE SITUATION?

Again, by rethinking. Perhaps by establishing better channels of communication with those people who could best mediate between Mexico City and the rest of the country.

"I think one's philosophy of teaching should to some extent be related to one's philosophy of life."

WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE AS PRESIDENT OF MEXTESOL IN 1980 LIKE?

I think for all of us who've done it, and who work elsewhere fulltime, it's really a lot of work in a very short period of time. The paid staff in the history of MEXTESOL has never been very permanent, so there's not much administrative continuity. In that sense it's very difficult. But at the level of meeting people, running seminars, helping others organize events, it was extremely satisfying.

WOULD YOU BE IN FAVOR THEN OF THE IDEA THAT'S BEEN TOSSED AROUND A LOT OF HIRING AN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AS TESOL HAS?

I think the post in itself is nothing unless you find the right person to fill it. And that's very difficult. As things stand, unless the right person suddenly appears, I think it's much better to muddle on the way we've been going - with a great deal of success at the level of exchange of ideas, teacher training and so on, and a great deal of mess at the level of administration.

WHAT ABOUT THE NATIONAL CONVENTION THE YEAR YOU WERE PRESIDENT?

There's always been a high element of success in the annual conventions, I think. In 1980 it wasn't a big financial success, but academically, and this is true of all the Conventions I've been to, I went to a great number of outstanding presentations. Other Conventions, like Oaxaca's, suffered from other kinds of problems - the tragic plane crash, transportation problems in general, etc. But still, a lot of people got a lot out of the Convention.

"In life and teaching, the route, or process, matters more than the destination."

SPEAKING OF OAXACA, * WERE YOU AWARE OF THE CONTROVERSY THERE AND THE BEGINNINGS OF AMMMLEX? **

Not really. I believe, although I'm honestly not sure, that AMMMLEX was formed to some extent because of some dissatisfaction with MEXTESOL and what it was doing. Which I think is fine!

WHY?

Well, although I'm not a member of AMMMLEX, many members of MEXTESOL belong to both organizations. AMMMLEX has, I understand, been quite successful in its own sphere. And I think this is excellent.

WHAT DID YOU THINK ABOUT THIS YEAR'S CONVENTION REFORMS IN THE MEXTESOL BYLAWS?

I think some of the reforms were very, very good. I thought the discussion, the different points of view, the nature of the General Assembly, was very healthy.

LET'S TALK ABOUT PAUL DAVIES, THE WRITER. YOU'RE CO-AUTHOR OF THE CONTEMPORARY SERIES, AREN'T YOU?

Just of "Book One." After that I didn't participate.

WHY DIDN'T YOU CONTINUE IN THE PROJECT?

Mainly because the group of authors was based in Mexico City. It involved a lot of travel from Puebla and leaving my family. And I

* 1979 MEXTESOL National Convention site.

** Asociación Mexicana de Maestros y Maestras de Lenguas Extranjeras.

like to be with my family. I'd rather talk about ACE (Active Context English) - a book I was more involved in, that's pretty much gone out of use. It was the first of quite a number of book-writing projects I've worked on, and I have very pleasant memories of it. It's not the best book - lots of mistakes, but it was born of a special kind of enthusiasm that existed in the Anglo back in 1966, '67, '68.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW, PAUL?

Teaching. And writing. And running the Anglo in Puebla. Last year I did the course work for a Ph.D. in education at the London University Institute of Education, and now I'm working on my thesis. I've done the groundwork for classroom experimental studies on the first 100-150 hours of language learning. I'm looking for a methodology whose theory will stand up against Mexican classroom reality. I'm concerned that a lot of people begin to study a second language and then give up. I'm interested in why their expectations are frustrated. Since a majority give up early on, I'm studying first and second level courses - their materials and methodologies.

WHAT ARE THE OTHER PRIORITY CONCERNS IN MEXICAN TESOL TODAY?

I'm concerned about the amount of English teaching which is done in Mexico and which is wasted effort. The problem is that there's too much of it. I don't think everyone needs to know English, and besides, it is definitely not possible to teach everybody English. So I don't think it's either desirable or feasible. There are observable needs for English in work and study situations and in centers of higher education, although I'm not convinced by the statement that all advanced students need English, as though you can't study engineering or chemistry or business administration without studying English. I don't think that's true. Predicting needs is much harder than observing them. And predicting seems to dictate policy in secondary schools. They assume that everybody will need English someday.

DOES MEXICAN ESL STILL NEED TO RELY ON FOREIGN SPECIALISTS? IS OUR PROFESSION SELF-SUFFICIENT?

Yes. As a straight answer, yes. That's to say that if tomorrow all foreign English professionals were to go home, Mexico would continue with a lot of successful language teaching. This might not have been true 10 or 20 years ago. Especially in the universities, there is a movement toward more self-sufficiency. In the CELE (UNAM) for example, and in other institutions. I think this is good also.

PAUL, FORMER STUDENTS OF YOURS HAVE TOLD ME THAT YOU ARE THE PERFECT EXAMPLE OF A "BORN TEACHER." DO YOU THINK THAT CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS HAVE A VOCATION OR A SPECIAL APTITUDE FOR TEACHING?

I don't really believe in vocation, no. I think ordinary people can learn to be good teachers without any special aptitudes.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE A YOUNG PERSON WHO CAME TO YOU AND ASKED, "SHOULD I BECOME AN ENGLISH TEACHER?"

I'd say, "Try! Try it!" The first thing to do is go into a classroom and start teaching. Take a good course that involves lots of practice teaching and find out if it's for you.

DO YOU STILL FIND ANY TIME FOR ACTUAL CLASSROOM TEACHING?

Not that much. Right now I just have 10 hours a week in the classroom. Advanced and upper basic levels.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO TEACH BEST? DO YOU HAVE A PREFERENCE?

No. Anything. I like it all. I usually enjoy teaching a lot. Of course like everybody, occasionally I hate it. But yes, usually I enjoy teaching very much.

DO YOU HAVE A "PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING" ?

Well, I don't have a fully worked out philosophy of life, but I think one's philosophy of teaching should to some extent be related to one's philosophy of life. And I have a problem there, like lots of us do. On the one hand, one wants security, a static situation without risks or surprises - a haven. But, on the other hand, one wants to explore and take risks. In life itself there is no utopia, no ideal situation where you can rest and stay forever and ever. And in teaching too, you need guidelines and some sense of security, but you mustn't turn that into a prison, even if it's a beautifully furnished prison. You've got to explore and take risks. I don't think we'll ever discover an ideal utopian methodology we can settle into forever. So we need the balance: principles (or security) and exploration, or adventure, as well. Change is good in itself in that it recharges the batteries of enthusiasm. In life and teaching, the route, or process, matters more than the destination. Of course, some routes are clearly mistaken, but for me, what matters most is the enthusiasm of the traveller.

WHAT IS PAUL DAVIES' FUTURE ROUTE? WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS?

To continue working in Puebla. Maybe I'm a rat deserting a sinking ship, but I've no desire to return to Mexico City. I like living in Puebla. To continue being involved in teacher training; to finish my dissertation; to continue writing. I've recently completed a book on methodology, written in Spanish, which I found a very interesting project. The challenge there, again, was to bridge the gap between methodological principles and local conditions - between classroom reality and pedagogical or linguistic theory.

AND WILL YOU CONTINUE TO PARTICIPATE IN MEXTESOL?

Oh, of course. Most certainly.