Interview with Chris Joslin, English Language Officer at the British Council in Mexico [1]

NEVIN SIDERS, MEXTESOL [2]

MEXTESOL *Journal*: What does the British Council have to offer Mexico?

Chris Joslin: I am part of a team of over twelve people, Mexican and British, with a lot more experience in Mexico than I have. Six of these are based in Mexico City and six have a regional remit, three of them living in the cities of Mérida, Monterrey and Guadalajara, and another three around the Mexico City area who service the states in the middle of Mexico. Teacher training is our *forté*. I think British expertise is fairly well known, and Mexicans have developed and adapted our best practices to produce a very high quality training capacity here. My predecessor and this team have demonstrated this in developing a very close relationship, both with the Ministry of Education, the SEP, and the state universities.

Currently we are working on a three branch program. One branch concerns a range of programs which enable Mexican teachers in the universities to study for British language teacher training degrees here in Mexico. They can study either purely by distance, in the case of one of our Master's programs, or by attending two three-week modules each year, basically over a period of two and a half years; this enables Mexican teachers--without leaving Mexico--to get British qualification. This program ranges from diplomas through Bachelor's up to Master's degrees. Currently we're probably covering about 150 teachers nationwide in this way.

Secondly, we have a much bigger problem of certificates for overseas teachers of English awarded by the University of Cambridge, like the COTE. About 750 teachers throughout the country have been involved in this program over the last three years. Again, these are mainly from the state universities, and again, the support of SEP has been crucial in underpinning this program.

And then the third stream of our activity, with the SEP and the universities, is in advising on how to install and equip new self-access centers which all the state universities are setting up. As you know, the principle of self-directed learning is new in many countries; and even where countries *say* they have intro-

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duced it, some of the problems and benefits are not always well understood. So, we're really working very closely with the administrators of these centers at the beginning and with the teachers who will work with the students who use the centers, advising them on how best to incorporate this new resource into their own methodology, on how to prepare materials, how to set up pathways that students can follow through the materials, and how best to conduct the interviewing and counseling that has to go on in a very exciting pilot project.

And so, these three areas keep our team very busy. Most of the teacher training, which all of these programs involve, is done by our regional representatives, the six people that I talked about. Of course, for the British degree programs, the British universities send their own permanent lecturing staff here about twice a year to conduct courses. Our team here exists to support that, to provide the liaison, some moderating and observation, so that it becomes a coherent program. And, we offer as much help as possible to the individual students taking these courses.

M*J*: Which of the university-level institutions are you supporting?

Joslin: Well, in the Estado de México, for example, we would be working with the University in Toluca and then we would be with the University in Pachuca, and in Tlaxcala, and in Pueblo at the state universities. There's at least one university in every state that we're working with at the moment with the support of the SEP [*Secretaría de Educación Pública*].

M*J*: SEP public schools at the seventh-to-twelfth grade levels (*secundaria* and *preparatoria*) are implementing required foreign language courses in English and French. Is the Council lending any support to this effort?

Joslin: Yes, in a number of ways. Not with such a concerted national effort as the one I've described, but we have a parallel range of events which we open to all practicing teachers. We have about six regional conferences each year, and a big event, one of which was just held in Mexico City called the "Best of British"--in which we bring together all these sectors. So, we're certainly in contact with people at secondary level. In some of the courses, like the COTE courses that I mentioned at the state universities, we have had the participation of individual teachers who are involved both in the university and in the *prepa*, or even in the *secundaria*.

So, we've had contacts at the individual level. And we've run the odd, one-off, specialist seminar for *jefes de enseñanza* at both secondary and primary level. But, none of this has constituted an area of work quite as big as what we've been doing with the universities. Obviously, as the power to commit resources is being

increasingly decentralized, and developed in Mexico to the state level, it's much more complicated to arrange a national program at secondary or primary levels.

But we're very keen to make the expertise that we've been developing available more widely, if we can. And we have, as I say, one-off conferences and specialist courses of different types which we offer to teachers, basically, at any level. It is possible, that as time passes we may be increasingly involved at the secondary level.

Obviously, if you're trying to address a national problem (if it's perceived as being a problem) or a national requirement, for example that of making more and more Mexicans competent in English, then--if you want to make a quick, effective start--it's better to start where the size of the population you're dealing with is smaller, and where they can have a trickle-down effect (*Joslin spreads his hands out like two spiders reaching across a web*) on far more people, than it is to start where the pool is that much bigger. And I think the thinking of the SEP and the universities was actually very wise and far-sighted in this respect when they started off these programs with us.

Although the focus is on the universities, it is clear that the training is actually going to trickle down, because you have teachers in the universities who are involved in other areas. They will set up events in their regions which will bring in teachers from these other areas, until gradually awareness levels will build up, and I think, as more and more resources get committed at state level, there will be opportunities for states to know more precisely what kind of training they need and come to people like ourselves and others who offer this support.

M*J*: Do you, or would you, also offer services to private schools and institutes?

Joslin: Oh, yes! We don't restrict our attention to the state sector. But I think our overriding priority has been to assist the state system, by setting up of kind of national framework, which has given I think an impetus to the whole profession here.

Of course, the relationship between "public" and "private" is now more complicated than it was five or six years ago. You may find--certainly in other countries, and this may well be the future here--public entities contracting their work out to private ones, and obviously the very rigid split that there was between public and private no linger quite holds.

So, we're basically interested in working with anyone in the profession who shares our objective of trying to raise the quality of English teaching, the status of the teachers, their conditions, their possibilities for professional advancement, their security; all of these things we are interested in assisting, as well

as the final objective of improving the quality of English the students who are leaving school and entering the job market will be able to use in their careers.

So, although our emphasis has been in the state sector, obviously we're willing to work with partners from wherever they come to help improve the level of English teaching in Mexico.

M*J*: What are the periodicals of the British Council?

Joslin: Published from this office we have our British Council *Mexico Newsletter*. And then there's another newsletter, *Network News*, which is edited by Pat Grounds and published by the self-access team under the SEP project. And we also have newsletters and publications that come from England, and the head office, such as the *Literature Matters*, that I mentioned.

And if any of your readers are interested in seeing what these are like, I'd be very grateful if they'd write to us. We always need some evidence that there's a demand for the things that we are producing. And if people write in, then I can say, "Yes, we need to order more of these from London!"

I'd just like to add that the area of literature and literature teaching is one that's always interested me particularly. And I do think that particularly among the teaching force we do need to work to improve their access to and knowledge of some of the things that deepen their knowledge of the language. Now these may be partly cultural, may be to do with literature, may be to do with institutions in English-speaking countries. But I think teachers can't get by on just a very *high-protein* diet of methodology and language-focused reading. I think, to be confident in the class, they need to read widely. Otherwise, in the end, I think the kind of language model, perception of the language, that they eventually will offer their students is going to be a limited one.

That's a personal credo. So, I hope we in the Council will be able to offer, over the next year, events which can bring together teachers who'd like to know more about new approaches of teaching, shall we say, language or cultural material, or how using literature texts can help their language teaching; or how they can improve and deepen themselves as teachers by reading more, by finding out what is there that is coming out of Britain and the English-speaking countries; that it is interesting for them to read! Because, what's clear is that production, in English, is very varied and very lively, very rich at the moment. I think there's a lot of potential interest.

M*J*: Could you tell us a bit about yourself? Where have you served? What do you like?

Joslin: I was in Mexico between 1977 and 1979 as a teacher in the Anglo, so this is my second visit to Mexico and I'm very lucky to have this opportunity. I wasn't working for the council then. I was a, you know, humble English teacher. After I left Mexico, I went to Portugal, where I worked for the British Council Language Teaching Center, and at the same time I taught literature and basically, language, the interface if you like--at a Portuguese university for about four years.

And after that I went to China, where I worked on a large textbook project. We were designing course books for Chinese university students in English. This was a massive project; a theme-based course covering about forty different subject areas. It was a fascinating experience.

M*J*: What were those "subject areas"?

Joslin: Well, basically, they were over things like foreign trade, the environment, travel, sports. Basically areas the Chinese curriculum designers thought their students would need to be able to interact with foreigners.

And then, after that I joined the Council as a career officer. And, in working with the Council since 1987, I've had four different posts. My first one was in London, where for two years I worked in the Literature Department of the Council. This was very much in line with my own particular interests, and I ran two of our conferences there. The main one was "Literature Teaching Overseas", which is held in Oxford every Easter, and that brings together those people who teach literature and those people who teach language, and helps them to see that they have things to learn from each other. And we brought in quite a lot of new methodologies derived from applied linguistics and TEFL, we brought them to bear on the teaching of literature. And the other conference was on critical theory, which was more or less a one-off, but extremely popular at the time. It brought together a lot of people who were curious to know how you could bring deconstructional, reader-response theory to work on the literature that they were teaching to mainly non-native speakers of English. So that was also interesting.

While I was there, I had a marvelous boss, Dr. Harvey Wood, and he made me first editor of the new newsletter, *Literature Matters*. This is now an extremely useful publication that the Council produces about three or four times a year, bringing people overseas up-to-date on literary developments, new publications, and developments of interest to teachers of literature in English.

After that I've had three overseers postings as English Language Officer. Three years, first of all, in Nigeria, where I was largely involved with university programs in English for Academic Purposes. Obviously, English is the official language in Nigeria, although it's a multi-lingual country, very complex linguistically. And it's a fascinating country to work in because of the contact with the fascinating writers that Nigeria has produced and keeps on producing. So literature was still an interesting part of my job there.

Then I went to Peru, where I was for just under two years. Our main involvement there was with the secondary schools through the Ministry of Education. Basically, following up a textbook writing project.

M*J*: What ages are covered in "secondary" in Peru?

Joslin: Well, basically the twelve- to fifteen-year-olds. We'd produced some new materials, a course called *Express English*, with the backing of the Overseas Development Administration, which is the aid wing of the British government. And, while I was there, the main thrust of the work was trying to set up a network of teacher training seminars, so that teachers would know how to use these new materials. After two years of Peru, I came here in August.

M*J*: You seem to be very interested in literature and I see a quote by poet Emily Dickinson on your wall...

Joslin: Which I didn't put up! (*chuckles)*

M*J*: ...and who are some of your favorite authors or periods?

Joslin: It's one of those awfully impossible.... Well, two things, I have some very old-fashioned tastes, and then also some fairly wide, modern ones. When I was in the Literature Department, I had the fortune to have access to the Booker Prize submissions list--after the result had been announced--which were *all* the books sent by *all* the British publishers to the prose adjucating committee of the Booker Prize, which is probably Britain's most prestigious literary prize. And the shelves were *filled* with books by authors you'd heard of, and first novelists, and people you'd never heard of, and will probably never hear of again! And as I had a long train journey to work, I read voraciously! I don't think I've read so much as during the two years of that job. And what struck me was how amazingly high the overall standard of creativity, and of style actually was in a wide range of very different kinds of writing.

Now, from that list, I could pick out names like Craig McDougall, Jim Crace, Jenni Diski, Jeanette Winterson; those are just four from off the top of my head who wrote extremely powerful and immediately impressing and very eloquent, elegant books. And I think all of them have gone on to establish their reputations since. You would also find odd novels by people who had primarily made their reputations as academics, like the New Zealand critic C. K. Stead, for example, or those who play with the academic mode like Julian Barnes or long-established writers who continue to write challengingly, like Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark. It was a real ragbag of every kind of writing under the sun and I just read it voraciously cover to cover, and I'd be hard out to say just who my actual favourites are, other than I find, both in poetry and fiction, that what has come out of Ireland and Scotland, and has continued to come out over the last ten years, seems to be the kind of thing that attracts me personally. There are certain traditional lyric strengths and strengths of story-telling which--one has to be careful of falling into this hackneyed stereotyping of racial characteristics--but somebody like George Makay Brown from the Orkneys has this particular, I think, "Celtic" story-telling gift, which I find very attractive. And to read any of his books is pure pleasure. Whereas, again he was, I think on the same Booker short list as James Kelman, who won last year, who writes in a style I think most people would find very difficult and some very unattractive, but he's boldly experimental and is digging away at some of the most painful areas of British experience.

All of this, without mentioning of course the overseas writers, if I can use that word. Ben Okri, for example, is a Nigerian who now really writes in Britain and is part of the British literary scene. His *Famished Road*, of course, won the Booker prize two or three years ago and I read it fresh from Nigeria.

Anyway, I think those two years were a real period of luxury for me in terms of readings from which it's very difficult to pick out actual favorites. If I were to start looking back into the "classics", then I suppose my tastes are very conventional... They would be Shakespeare, Keats, Byron, Hardy, Dickens--who is still a writer for Mexico City and all big cities--and even people like Samuel Johnson, all the famous "dead white males". This century I would think of Edwin Muir and Robert Graves and William Golding as in a sense of classics, if in minor keys. I think I have very conservative tastes on the one hand, and very free tastes on the other. And [there is] nobody that I'm reading *exclusively* at the moment.

M*J*: What do you think of the word that is going around here in Mexico that the "whole language" approach is going out of fashion in Europe and that a movement is toward more structured, grammar-centered teaching?

Joslin: Of course, there are fashions in language teaching and there are key topics at all the conferences. But, what we're describing now, is a teaching industry, if one can use that work, that's so enormous and so varied that I think it would be very difficult to say that there were one or even two trends which are predominant. I think there's always been, among some people, strong reservations about the "whole language" teaching approach or an excessive reliance on authentic materials. But I don't think the insights that this kind of teaching has brought are going to go away. And I think it's always rather the case that the intelligent teacher forms individual conclusions on what is appropriate for the situation that teacher is working in and makes a selection of methodologies that the teacher thinks is appropriate. And I think publishers, who are one other important factor in this equation, also will always be keen to offer distinct approaches to teachers. I think teachers have to make their own minds up about the balance they want to strike in their own classes.

I was actually involved in the production of a course using, or purporting to be using, authentic materials as it rationale, this Chinese textbook project I've described to you. I *know* that the very concept of "authentic materials" can be manipulated, and I know that there are all sorts of practical difficulties in actually collecting these and presenting them! There are problems of copyright, which is something we mustn't run away from. There are problems of distorting the original message of the author in some cases. And there are problems of actually getting the amount of text you need onto a page in the textbook because you're bound to make a selection.

I think the more interesting question is: What is the future of the textbook? I think competent teachers have never been the slaves of textbooks, and competent teachers have always been capable of doing good teaching even using badly designed textbooks. I'm not above saying that there are no difficult materials, but I think a really good teacher can rise above poor material.

And one thing that's always interested me, is to try and move away from the dependence of the teacher on a particular course book, and one of the conclusions I drew from working on this textbook project was that it was time to develop databases of material which teachers could pick from and adapt, i. e., that instead of having courses in your class, you would have access to banks of materials produced by teams who might be physically separated. These texts can be called down when you need them, electronically adapted, printed off, used in class, and entered back into the databank. It is a shame that for political and economic reasons it hasn't been achieved more widely than it has. It is something that may now start to develop here in Mexico. Some of the things that have been done with out self-access project might point in that direction.

M*J*: Thank you.