

Interview with Dr. Kenneth “Mike” Jenson, English Language Programs Officer ¹

T. NEVIN SIDERS V., MEXTESOL ²

MEXTESOL Journal: What does the English Programs Office offer to English teachers in Mexico?

Jenson: Mainly in my own opinion, I think one of the best things that my office has to offer--especially if funds are continually cut--is the *English Teaching Forum* magazine. It's one of the best things we have to offer English teachers, because the magazine comes out four times a year, full of practical classroom ideas for teachers. Your average teacher can read this magazine and get ideas and take them right into the classroom.

That's sort of a constant, no matter who comes and goes, because the English Language Officer, like myself, is usually in Mexico only for two years, maybe three years, so we're coming and going.

The other main thing my office offers is consultations for institutions, for universities, for the Secretary of Education offices and any kind of organization involved in English language programs. For example, in my few months here (I've only been here four months) I've already worked with two state Secretary of Education offices on curriculum evaluation, curriculum design, and curriculum development for their English language programs for the state. And I've also worked with a couple of university English departments evaluating and designing, mainly evaluating the present curriculum. It's a lot!

My predecessors did a great deal more in the way of actual methodology seminars for classroom teachers, so that's another service my office has offered to Mexican teachers of English. I've done some of that also, but I'm trying to aim at a higher level, a more programmatic level, because there is only one of me and there are 31 state Secretary of Education offices having schools and having English teachers. So I'm trying to aim at a level

¹Dr. Kenneth Jenson can be reached at the Benjamin Franklin Library, Londres 16, 2^o Piso, Colonia Juarez, 06600 Mexico, D. F. Tel. 211-0043, ext. 3566.

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where we will have an effect, so to speak, which trickles down to the classroom teacher, eventually. In addition to offering seminars given by me, we can also bring American academic specialists, English teaching specialists, to do work on a two-week program to a four-week program for Mexican institutions--usually universities and some that are state Secretaries of Education... Very often it is an intensive classroom methodology seminar, but we are also planning to bring in someone to help several state secretaries to do an intensive two or three weeks on curriculum design, curriculum development, curriculum seminar. This is in addition to the kind of program that I don't have time to do myself.

What else do we do? The most common question I get is: "Don't you have any scholarships for me to study in America?" And the answer: "No, sorry." There are scholarships available in some select cases, but they don't come through my office, they come through the International Institute of Education (IIE) which also has its offices on the same floor, the second floor, of the Benjamin Franklin Library. I do sometimes have occasion to nominate English teachers, but more often actually trainers of English teachers, to go on short programs in the United States, anywhere from ten days to four weeks, to do a seminar, to travel around and see different U.S. institutions, but I have never had access to actual scholarships to go and study there.

The other major thing we do now in Mexico is that we have available some subsidized materials printed for the United States Information Agency at a very reasonable price. These are supplementary materials--they are not course materials, they are not class books--but they are small books to help the teacher get ideas for teaching conversation, for teaching writing, for classroom activities, learner-centered activities, some reading materials, and of course some American cultural materials. These materials are very inexpensive, ranging from one peso--not a dollar!--but one new peso, up to probably 15 pesos. Our top price item is a set of six cassettes of American songs (they are really international songs) for teaching English. And they cost 65 pesos. I think that is an actual service we can offer. We can't give these materials away, but we can make them available for very reasonable prices. They are available in my office or people can order them. You get the order form, you send it by fax, we can mail it to them, send them by bus, or whatever.

What else does my office offer? Mainly, when people ask me what I do, I say that I'm a consultant. I don't teach English. In fact we just changed

our names from “English Teaching Officers” to “English Language Officers,” because we never taught English, we simply consult and advise and help local teachers--the local Mexican teachers--teach English.

MJ: I have two questions about what you’ve said so far. You mentioned the State Secretaries of Education and government programs would you also be willing to, give advice to private schools, private language institutes?

Jenson: That’s actually a dilemma for our offices in general around the world. Being a government office ourselves, we think our first target, the first ones we should help, should be our host government offices. But, in general: “Yes,” we are willing to try and help and consult with anyone who’s teaching English in the country. I know my predecessors in Mexico have worked with private universities and with private schools so, yes, we are available. But if it comes down to it and we don’t have time to do both, I think our unofficial policy is official Mexican government offices are those that we try to help first. I don’t think I personally have worked with any private universities yet, but that’s certainly not out of the question, on the question of private institutes.

That brings up an interesting question on private institutes. I have been consulted by SEP, by the Federal Secretary of Education’s office, on how they go about, how they can go about, and how they should, set standards for private schools. Because of course most private schools should be or already are licensed, approved and accredited by SEP. And I think they must be working on this because I’ve just had a woman in my office recently asking about accreditations and standardization. It’s a very difficult, complicated problem because if you are going to set standards and give accreditation, you have to have not only a list of standards, you have to have people who go out and enforce them and check them, it’s quite a complicated process. But I think is a good sign that SEP is thinking about this and at least trying to register them.

That’s what I found in Poland. There were hundreds of private, just individuals, or schools teaching English. But there was *no* way to know what their standard was, if it was good or it wasn’t good. And the Ministry of Education in Poland hadn’t done anything to face that problem of how to accredit someone.

MJ: You previously mentioned you could arrange for consultants to offer seminars for Mexican institutions, do these consultants come from the United States? What are the expenses for their Mexican hosts?

Jenson: Anything we do like that, we do on the basis of cost sharing. We usually ask the host institution to indeed be the host, to provide room and board--to provide their food and a place to stay while they're here. My office, or the Washington office, pays the international air fare, their honorarium, which is actually very modest, and other incidental costs, but we do ask the host to be the host. It doesn't have to be a luxury hotel, yet we don't really want to put them in a barren dormitory room--but a place where they can prepare their lectures, rest comfortably and quietly, so they can do their work, because this is very intensive! They're usually working four hours a day in front of the group, and then four hours a day in consultation and individual discussions. So far most Mexican institutions have not found that a burden.

I do have to set up a two-week program for anyone who comes. For example one week in one institution, one week in another, to justify the international airfare and transportation. That's really no problem. And I might say that many American academics are quite eager to cooperate and work with the United States Information Agency, because they know we do quality work and it is good for their resumes and their prestige, and most are willing to work for one quarter or one eighth of the honorarium, or fee, they would normally get if they worked in the U.S. or a developed country and ask for their normal fees. For example one prominent academic asks about 800 dollars a lecture, and they will come, they work for about 100 dollars a day, plus their expenses of course. I think I mentioned that second, because after our *English Teaching Forum* and my work, then that's one of the best services we can bring. Not just top names, I think often people want *the* name in English teaching, but we can bring some of the best teacher trainers and the best people in the field, even if they're not a name like Jack Richards or Krashen, or someone like that.

MJ: Well, let's move on to: Who are you? Where have you been? What countries have you served in? What areas of English teaching do you enjoy most?

Jenson: First of all, where have I served? I've been in English as a second language all of my career. I went off to the territory of New Guinea way

back when, with a B.A. degree, and inadvertently got into teaching English as a second language, not even knowing what that meant at that time, and more or less stayed in this field ever since. The largest part of my career was spent in Indonesia, where I taught English and trained English teachers. I only joined the United States Information Agency in 1988, so this is a relatively new aspect of teaching English as a foreign or second language for me. And I guess I do like the classroom, like classroom teaching, but I find this position is very stimulating, and very challenging. And I think the thing I like most about it is I have so many opportunities to meet so many different people. And so when I'm sometimes frustrated by the problems of living overseas and moving around the world, and then I go off and meet this really great group of English teachers in Monterrey or Chiapas or Veracruz, I'm reminded of why I joined this particular organization.

When I was more in the classroom and doing actual teacher training, one of my specialties, one of my favorite fields, was psycholinguistics. And I used to think that was my "specialty." Now in my kind of work, we have to be more general and willing and able to do a number of different topics. Since I've come to Mexico I've been concentrating on curriculum design and curriculum development because that's so in demand, there's such a need here.

MJ: "Psycholinguistics" means a lot of different things to different people...

Jenson: Yes, I guess in our field it would come back down to "second language acquisition"; the whole process of how a learner acquires a second language, a foreign language. In fact, I did a doctoral dissertation on university level individual students learning English as a foreign language, and traced their developments back in the days when the trend was doing morpheme counts and that kind of thing. Now I wonder why we did such tedious kinds of work--but it was interesting, especially since I followed 12 individual students, personally and carefully, for a period of over two years. I really felt I learned a lot about how they learned English as a foreign language--learned a lot about them personally--we became dear friends after two years of listening to them speak English, analyzing their English in the second language acquisition process. That's all sort of out of style now, especially morpheme counts, but I think it is still important to try to realize and know how we are as learners--as I try to learn some Spanish--and how our students actually learn. Just last Saturday I went to a presentation by Rebecca Oxford on learner strategies, learner styles. It's all about how do

we go about learning, how do we learn, what are the processes, what are the things that help us to learn.

MJ: That's what JoAnn Miller spoke about at our workshop last Saturday; we analyzed our own learning styles.

Jenson: Ah, she (Oxford) was asking us to analyze ourselves, about what kind of learner you are, what kind of worker you are. Sometimes I don't think that my styles are suited to an administrative, bureaucratic position in the office! But it's part of my job. And then I get out and work with teachers, it all sort of evens out.

My current interest--if I have any focus to this job which requires me to be all things to all people and do all kinds of things, I'm convinced we all have to become aware of and to become literate in the use of computers and especially with the Internet, or being "on line." So, I'm trying to learn as much as I can about on-line access, using a computer, using e-mail, using Internet, for both keeping in communication with other people and of course the almost mind boggling research tool that the Internet can be, get into it and make use of everything available. So I would say that's kind of my current investigation, current focus--not reading books on psycholinguistics.

MJ: What is the first thing that our members, teachers and administrators, can do so that their school acquires a modem and subscribes to e-mail systems? Where do they go?

Jenson: Internet started really with the academic research community, period. So, generally in Europe and the U.S.A., the first source and the first access to Internet was through the university, period. So in theory anyone who has access or is working in the university should have access to Internet! But, as with most things, the English department and the language department, are the last ones to know about it, the last ones to get access. Just like in the U.S., the English department got the cast off computers from physics and math, and when the computers were not good enough for them anymore, they gave them to the English department! The language department! So I think its the same way in much of the world of Internet. There hardly exists a university campus in the world that does not have Internet connection. It is simply: Does the language department, do English teachers, have access? The first thing to do is to go bug the administrators and the comput-

er people, the systems people, and say “Are you on Internet? Do you have access to Internet?” “Of course!” And then you say, “I have to get on this! How do I get on this?” And then there will be a lot of wishy-washy, non-answers and a lot of this and putting you off, but you have to be persistent!

Ten years ago in the U.S., I moved into this English department. They didn’t even have word processors! They didn’t know what they were, but there--just like you said--there was a terminal sitting in the corner that no English teacher knew anything about. They didn’t even know what it did. It was just something they put there. So a lot of it is: the English teachers’ lack of information. They are unaware; they have a fear of technology. And then I started using this word processor in the corner, and then when all the other English teachers finally saw that it might be useful, unfortunately in one year I had little access to the *one* terminal we had in the English department--because everybody was using it. So a lot of it is this idea: we don’t know what’s available or maybe we’re a little afraid of it, but we simply we have to inquire and ask.

I think I’m not wrong in saying, probably every university campus has somebody on that campus who has access to Internet already. Maybe not in San Cristóbal de las Casas, in Chiapas, because I was there recently, but in Tuxtla Gutiérrez indeed the main campus has Internet.

Mainly, how do you get it to your building or to your office? Even UNAM-CELE (the Foreign Language Center), definitely still does not have access to Internet at this time. Meanwhile UNAM is actually *selling* accounts to the rest of Mexico on the Internet, but their own divisions, the CELE didn’t have access but they are getting it, and they may have it now. I spent four months in USIS Mexico trying to get on in order to get an account. So a lot of it is just lack of knowledge, lack of concern, people maybe don’t know all the benefits of the Internet and e-mail. Just the communications alone, with e-mail, it’s just incredible.

I’ve been off-line now since I left Poland, which reminds me, in Poland I had Internet, was on Internet for years! I left Poland, and then I sort of went into this black void. Got to Mexico City: “Don’t we have Internet? Don’t we have e-mail?” “Oh no! We are working on it.” Finally, about a month ago it was up and running. So the idea is to ask around, ask your colleges, ask your people, your colleagues in computer science, ask the people in math and science, they’re probably on Internet.

MJ: How about for people not at universities?

Jenson: It gets more problematic. Like I said, even USIS (U.S. Information Service) has had trouble getting to Internet, so I can imagine how much more difficult is for a private high school or even just a regular elementary school. That's when they may have to go to a commercial provider like Compuserve, or in Mexico there's something called S.P.I.N., (I'm not sure what the letters stand for,) and that you do have to pay for. It's so much for hook up, (I don't remember how much it is,) and then so much for a month, for a certain number of hours. And of course for that, you have to have not only your personal computer, you'll have to have a modem, which is the device which lets your computer talk, via phone line, to all the others computers in the world. So it is an investment. If you have the computer then you have to invest, say, a hundred U.S. dollars in a modem, and then maybe thirty to forty dollars to subscribe, and then ten dollars a month to have access to the Internet. But for a school or for a institution it is probably not an overwhelming cost--for an individual it might be.

One of the things that is provided on Internet and e-mail are discussion groups, and there is a discussion group called TESL-L. And I just finally got hooked up with it, and this is where seven thousand people around the world subscribe, and you send one message and all seven thousand people get the message in just a few seconds. TESL-L is a list serve so there are (I'm guessing) seven thousand people on this list serve. I put just one message that the list serve distributes to everybody around the world, I mean literally around the world, China, Thailand, Russia. And the discussions recently have been on using this international e-mail as not simply a pen-pal device, which of course is very good because a student of English in Mexico City could be writing letters in English or little notes on the e-mail back and forth to a learner anywhere in the world! In Prague, in Moscow, even in China, certainly in all of the so-called western world. So, there's been a discussion going on, back and forth, everybody giving their ideas, about how to use the Internet, e-mail, and how to use e-mail and the pen-pal concept for teaching English in the classroom, and of course, as an extraordinary motivator. Because you think, "I can correspond with a student in Australia, a native English speaker, in English!" And so this is great motivator for the Mexico student, to learn English and to use English, and it's real communication.

That's just one way that we know Internet can be very useful. My own real interest in it, although I love to correspond and keep up with people, is as literally a reference library at your fingertips. You can find any information on any topic anywhere in the world, practically. When somebody wants some information about a specific topic, maybe the Benjamin Franklin Library here (which is right down the hall from my office) doesn't have it, but what they do is they get on their interconnections and they can have the information here, depending upon the nature of it, maybe within hours, certainly within a day. They can have the full text of president Clinton's most recent speech within hours, right here in Mexico City. Of course for the English student that's not the interesting thing, but I'm thinking for teachers, they can have access to just unlimited information. For example, last night, just to waste time, I was reading the weather report from Chung Mai University *gopher* systems (for people who don't know, "go for" is a term they use for "searching," "going for something," and to be funny people say it so that it sounds like the little animal); it just happened to be on the menu so there's the weather from May 3, 1995, in Chung Mai! It's sort of a trivial, silly thing, but that's how instantaneous it can be. And this was coming from Chung Mai, Thailand, not from Mexico City or from Washington D.C. If I had had time to dig around more I may have found about the state of their English teaching program in Chung Mai University, Thailand.

MJ: Is *English Teaching Forum* magazine available electronically?

Jenson: Yes, it is available on-line. Our office has actually set up an EFL *gopher* which has, among other things, the text of *English Teaching Forum* on it. It's a very new *gopher*, so I'm not sure what all's in it yet. They're just building it. And frankly, I haven't accessed it myself, yet.

MJ: How does the classroom teacher look for aids in everyday teaching of, say, modals, for example? When I have to teach it tomorrow?

Jenson: I'm not sure that it's on that particular *gopher* right now, on EFL, but there would be a particular *gopher* for a particular topic. And that's what we hope to fill this EFL *gopher* with, information like that. Right now, you probably have to go into some of the magazine or periodical *gophers*, and then search for your topic, on modals and different kinds of modals.

But then again, that's for the teacher. This TESL-L list serve bulletin board is very good, because another recent discussion they've been having on there is all about the different uses of "shall" and "will," which of course, for most Americans is a moot point, but in many parts of the world it's still a big issue. So everybody from all over the world has been putting in their opinion, their assessment or their judgment on the uses of "shall" and "will." I'm sure that if a teacher has his link he can get it; he can go into the TESL-L message and say, "Can somebody please help me to teach the different concepts of the modal?" And people will respond with actual magazine articles or books, or often they like to, of course, respond with their own opinion: "This is how I see it;" or "This is how I teach it." Of course that would take a number of days to get the *chat* back and forth. And if you need something instantly, you're probably going to have to go to a major university like University of California Berkeley, which makes its complete library catalogue available, and then certain items you can go into and call up and actually get the text on your screen, it's similar with periodicals.

There are a number of services, and the problem that I'm trying to study now is: "What are these specific *gophers*? What are these specific things that we as English teachers can call on, and say 'Here I can get an answer.'" It is a bit intimidating to go into the University of Berkeley library catalogue and start looking.

MJ: You should make a list of these *gophers*.

Jenson: Right, then make them available--in the MEXTESOL Newsletter! Like last night, I have an account from the Tec de Monterrey, and they had a screen, a little menu item, where you can ask them to give you all the *gophers* in the world! Press the button and--it was page one of one hundred and twenty-five pages! And each page probably had twenty lists on it, twenty times 125 and--needless to say I didn't have time to go through the lists!

There will be more and more specific services like this. And I hope our USIS-sponsored EFL *gopher* will eventually have a lot of practical information on things like this. Nearly any periodical, certainly any newspaper, in the world is now available on Internet. Whether you realize it or not, you can now sit down and read certainly all of your major Mexican newspapers on your computer screen if you prefer. You don't have to buy them, you don't have to subscribe, you can have access to the on-line on your

computer screen. Although I think you might almost go blind reading these little screens! For example, the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, all of them are immediately on-line. In fact, in Poland, we were getting the *Washington Post* on-line, on screen, before it was being delivered to people's offices and doors in Washington D.C. We were six hours or so ahead of them because of the time difference, so we were getting the *Washington Post* before the people in Washington. It's instantly fed into a certain system, and of course, the Internet, whether you like it or not, is nearly all in English, for the whole world. However, the *Chung Mai* did have a half-screen in Thai script and half a screen in English, bilingual.

MJ: I'd like to ask you a hard question: There's word going around, on the grapevine of classroom teachers, that the "whole language" approach is going out of fashion in Europe, whereas it's just becoming big here. A related issue is that English is a *foreign* language here, not a first language, so the language produced by the students themselves is often less rich, more teacher-controlled, teacher-modeled.

Jenson: That's always been a basic concern, that whole language was developed in a native language context, a native language setting. So efforts or attempts to transfer the whole language approach to a foreign language setting have been problematical and have been controversial because of some of the things you mentioned. But I think nearly everything you read about whole language in English as a second or foreign language still confirms that idea, that really whole language is for a second language setting, like people living in America, people moving to Australia, learning English in an English environment. And if you want to adopt whole language ideas and methodologies in a foreign setting like in Mexico, we certainly have to adapt and adopt within the methodology. And my personal opinion about the whole language concept is that indeed, it's very sound in its theory, and in its foundations, that language is not just grammar exercises, not just repetition and drills, but it is something to be *used*, and used for communication. So I think that's what we should be emphasizing in Mexico, not English as a whole language per se, but very specifically English for communication in Mexico. In fact I've been surprised at how much structural approach and audio-lingual approach still *survives* in various pockets of the world and in Mexico. So if we can emphasize the idea of using authentic texts, using realia, using real materials, that's at least a move away from the very formal, stilted, stylized what we call a structural approach, and even grammar-translation approach.

I'm not really aware too much of what Europe is doing *beyond* the whole language approach. But even in a setting like Europe, where English is not a *native* language for most people, English is so pervasive and so very very much *the* language of international communication, the lingua franca of Europe, that their whole setting of teaching English in France, or teaching English in Poland, is already very different than teaching English in Mexico. Because I think Mexico is just sort of coming to the point to realize and admit that English is *the* international language. And they have to learn English. Whereas, Europe realized decades ago that English is the international language, and they have realistic uses for English in their setting; the French are talking to the Dutch, the Dutch are talking to the Poles, it's just automatic to use English. And that may be coming here, because Mexicans probably realize Americans are such poor foreign language learners, or so (what's a good word?) stubborn, they just don't learn foreign languages, that they should learn English not just to communicate with the *gringos* but to communicate with the rest of the world. I'm not real sure of what Europe is going to beyond the whole language, but it's also like a TESOL matter, talking about "The communicative method is out," "We've gone beyond the communicative method," but nobody's really going back to grammar-translation, nobody's going back to structural drills, so I'm not quite sure what they're going beyond and going to. That would be my reaction.

But I do think and I do hope I can keep working with Mexican teachers of English, and emphasizing the fact that *any* language is about communication, and we as teachers have to make sure that our students communicate with this language rather than just do exercises, structural drills, and sort of the "standard" classroom activities.