

## Interview with Bertha Gómez Maqueo <sup>1</sup>

NEVIN SIDERS, MEXTESOL

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*Gómez Maqueo:* MEXTESOL began with confusion. The confusion started after a group of teachers went to a TESOL conference in Puerto Rico and decided they could form an affiliate here, in Mexico City. Half of the teachers were from the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales, A. C. (IMNRC) and others were from the Anglo Mexicano de Cultura (AMC), although there were some teachers from public schools in Mexico, like, for example, Ruth Flores. This group of teachers had the help of Fred Bechetti, who was an assistant cultural attaché in the American embassy, and he was very interested in the teaching of English. There were no English Language Officers in Mexico, either in the British Council or in the American embassy at that time; I think he had been a teacher and he was very interested in the teaching of English. So we had his help and the IMNRC was also very interested in forming this affiliate, so they helped out very much at the beginning, even the MEXTESOL office was in the IMNRC.

It was not a very big group, I remember that the charter is signed by Tony Cabrera, Josephine Claudio, and Harley Stevenson. Harley Stevenson was working at what was later CEMAC, that is now the cultural institute and national center, I don't remember the name of it now, because it has changed names.

*Journal:* CEMARC?

*Gómez Maqueo:* Yeah. He was working there, and he was the first president of MEXTESOL.

The very first convention we had was in Tampico. I remember three things about that convention. First, that Grace Scott got elected as next president. I was sitting next to Ruth Flores, and she won a television because we had a raffle; somebody had given this television, and many other things to be raffled. And that Marilyn Chasen broke her foot and couldn't stay for the convention.

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<sup>1</sup> Bertha Gómez Maqueo was interviewed on December 28, 1995 in Mexico City..

The **next** convention was in Cocoyoc, and Enrique Gutiérrez was elected president there. And in 1976, the first *Journal* was edited. It was in April 1976. I was looking back at that issue to remember the date, because I thought that was something important. Because we only had a *Newsletter* before that, and it was not a very big *Newsletter*, but anyway that had already started. But the *Journal* began in 1976.

*Journal:* Did it have the same distinction as today: the *Newsletter* contains activities and the *Journal* is academic?

*Gómez Maqueo:* More or less, yes. That was more or less the way it worked, although there were advertisements in the *Journal* from the beginning. I don't know if there still are. If it's purely academic, I don't remember if it still has advertisements or not.

*Journal:* In the interview with Vincent Carrubba the other day he said there was a previous association.

*Gómez Maqueo:* Oh yes! There was MATE. Mate was the Mexican Association of Teachers of English. That was also started out of IMNRC. But it died out, it couldn't continue.

At the beginning [of MEXTESOL] there was only the Mexico City chapter. But it grew very much because, you know, there are many teachers in Mexico City. And a few months later we founded the Tampico chapter -- that's where the convention was -- and at that time there were **many** members and **many** chapters, but they weren't organized the way they should be, and many of them died out.

But since we wanted to be a national association, that's why we founded the different chapters. For example, when the convention was in Guanajuato-- there was a chapter in Guanajuato--because what we did at the beginning was that when we wanted to have the convention somewhere outside of the City, we always tried to found a chapter there. That was at the beginning. Mexico City chapter turned out to be very, very powerful because it had most of the members, and there were quite a few disagreements between the national and the Mexico City chapter. But things turned out for the better, and the Mexico City chapter backed up the national very much.

At the time there were about twenty chapters: one in Tijuana, there was one in Ciudad Obregón, all these chapters died out.

*Journal:* When were there twenty chapters?

*Gómez Maqueo:* I would say about five years after the association was founded, say about ten years ago. We had a chapter in, for example, Guanajuato --- twice. Once it was in the city of Guanajuato when we had the convention there, and that chapter died out, and there was another one in León, and that chapter died out too. I think that's the reason that we're being very careful now with opening up chapters. MEXTESOL has gone through very difficult situations. We often didn't have a **penny**. It is only lately that I see it is trying to grow but not with so many financial problems as it had before. I think it is on a sounder base now than it used to be way back at the beginning, because we had lots of members and they didn't continue being members.

*Journal:* What can we learn from that?

*Gómez Maqueo:* Why did that happen? I don't really know what happened. Well, I suppose that chapters were not attended to the way they should have been because they depended on who was president and who the members on the committee were. Sometimes the members didn't work at all, and you know how **hard** one has to work when one is member of the executive committee.

One of the reasons I think the chapters died out was because we didn't have this council that we have now, where the chapter presidents come to Mexico City to try to solve their problems.

*Journal:* What we call the *Think Tanks*?

*Gómez Maqueo:* Yes, the *Think Tank*. The very first time that we really met with the chapter presidents was in Guanajuato, but we really only met socially.

*Journal:* What year was this?

*Gómez Maqueo:* That year was 1978. And it wasn't until 1979, when John "Nick" Shepherd was president, that the Think Tank was founded. He was director of the Anglo-Mexican Institute. It was only under him that *the Think Tank* was founded. Although we had the *Think Tank*, the chapter presidents were not considered as important as they are now! That was one of the reasons I think the chapters died out. They always wanted to have

something to say, and they felt that they never had a chance to say what they wanted. That was why they died out.

Well, I remember most of the names of the presidents, but I think you have that, don't you?

*Journal:* Recently Iván Abreu made a nice list that is going to be mounted on the wall of the National office.

*Gómez Maqueo:* Two of our ex-presidents have died already. Because one, the youngest one, was killed in an accident. And many of them don't live in Mexico. Harley Stevenson, I think we lost contact with him completely, Grace Scott, some of us have certain contacts with her, John Shepherd doesn't live in Mexico, either, Jim Taylor comes to Mexico but he doesn't live here anymore. ... I don't remember anyone else, who has gone to the States, I mean any presidents. Well, just lately, Susan Zimmerman has gone to live in the States, maybe she won't come back, we don't know.

*Journal:* The thing you like about MEXTESOL?

*Gómez Maqueo:* The thing I like best about MEXTESOL is that **any** teacher of English can become a member because we do have other associations in Mexico, but they're very exclusive, for instance, they just want teachers from the universities, from **certain** universities, etc. But MEXTESOL caters to all kinds of teachers and I think this relationship is good for all teachers.

This relationship is good for all teachers because one learns from each other, one finds out about different situations in which English is taught, and perhaps one can help others. That's why I like the MEXTESOL association best, because I have belonged to other associations, but as I told you, they're mostly exclusive, only for one certain group of persons, and don't cater to every teacher who wants to become a better teacher. I think that we have tried to follow in MEXTESOL the ideas that TESOL has of helping other people become better teachers.

*Journal:* Well, that's certainly one point that, as we discuss in our conventions, that there are thousands if not tens of thousands of teachers, especially in the public schools, who have little or no training. But, on the other hand, to receive some kind of accreditation--recognition for the workshops we give, for the teachers to "collect points"--we would need to require that the members have a certain training, to have bachelor's degrees.

*Gómez Maqueo:* What we would have to require most of all, what we would have to do, is to try to get **government** recognition for these things. Of course, in order to get this recognition, perhaps it would be a requirement that the teachers have certain training so these certificates that they get would be worthwhile for them, so they would get the “points” they need in order to increase their salary.

We would have to have some sort of agreement with the government so that they would back these certificates that we give teachers, and that would help MEXTESOL become more important than it is now. I mean from the point of view of the public school teachers, and perhaps we would get more teachers to come in our society. Because there aren't that many teachers from public schools, and I think perhaps these are teachers who need help most of all. Because you know it's very expensive for them to go to courses in the different institutes. And if we could help them out, that would be very good. That's one of the things I have always wanted to see. But it has been very difficult to get these agreements with [state and federal] governments. Some of the states in Mexico, like for instance I remember Jalisco--in Guadalajara--we have been able to get the government to back these certificates, and it's supposed to be very helpful.

*Journal:* That chapter's very large.

*Gómez Maqueo:* That chapter also died out, but now it's one of the largest chapters. It **was** also a very important chapter at the beginning, but it died out. There was a chapter in Monterrey too, and we don't have a chapter in Monterrey anymore. And these were the largest ones at one time. Guadalajara, fortunately, has become a very active chapter again. But in Monterrey, it died out twice!

*Journal:* There's one other president who you **do** know, who you sort of skipped over in your list ...

*Gómez Maqueo:* Yes?!

*Journal:* When were you president?

*Gómez Maqueo:* I was president in 1978, when we had the TESOL convention in Mexico. It was a wonderful experience, especially for all of those who were on the executive committee or who in some way helped out for the TESOL convention in 1978. I should say that at the beginning the presidency was from the day after the convention to the next convention: it was

from one convention to another. It wasn't like it is now, that we start at the beginning of the year and end at the end of the year. The committee changed immediately at the convention; it was difficult because we could not hand in all the reports of what happened at the convention, or the money. You see all the money was coming in at that time, and it was very difficult to **change** the committee at that time. But that's the way it was at the beginning.

And the convention was always during the first days of November: we had lots of problems on account of that because that was a time when the air companies renewed their [labor] contracts and sometimes there were strikes. We had a terrible time when we went to Oaxaca because there was a strike, there was an airline strike and people had to go by car or by bus in order to get to the convention on time. And also on the way back it was very difficult. And it was also very difficult because the people who were at the hotel hadn't left -- the rooms weren't vacated on time -- and we had lots of problems on account of that, and that was on account of the air strikes. So when we had these problems about twice, we decided to change the date of the convention so we wouldn't have these problems with the airlines or with the hotels. Because naturally the people couldn't get out, they didn't want to get out of the hotel.

It's much better now the way it is that it's in October. It's much better now, and it's much better not to change the committee until the beginning of the year because then you have the full year and I think that has helped to make the organization better.

Another thing we tried to be careful about is about sending representatives to the TESOL conferences. When MEXTESOL didn't have any money we always asked, "Who is going to the TESOL convention?" Because either you were sent by your school or as a private individual who wanted to go. Then these persons were named the representatives, so would always have a representative and would always know what was going on in TESOL. At the beginning many of us used to go to the TESOL conventions, but later on because of the cost, not so many have been able to go as used to.

I was telling you about the experience that we had here in Mexico when the TESOL convention was here. We had the people who were in charge of the convention, the second vice president, and also in charge was Marianne Celce-Murcia. I met her in 1978 precisely because she worked with Charley Blachforth who was the second vice president and in charge of the conven-

tion. They came to Mexico several times and we formed a committee here in Mexico and worked with them, especially at the end of the period, that would be **right** before the convention. They came down before the convention began.

Many of the people in MEXTESOL worked with them, and we had one of our nicest experiences taking people to schools, showing them our city. One of the persons who helped to make a small bulletin telling them about the restaurants near the convention site, which was in the Sheraton Hotel María Isabel. It think it's not a Sheraton any longer, but you know that's the Zona Rosa, the Pink Zone. There are many beautiful restaurants around there. And there's all kinds of prices, and so we made a bulletin about the important points in our city. One of the people who worked on this was María de los Angeles Moreno, who was at that time the head of the *secundarias técnicas*, and she worked with Barbara Weller who was the assistant head of these *secundarias*.

It turned out very nice, I think I still have some of the literature from that time around, but I don't know where I have it. If I find it I'll let you have it, because I think you should have that in the MEXTESOL office.

The very, very first Newsletter that I remember came out after the first convention. I even remember that I wrote something for the Newsletter, and that Vince Carrubba wrote something for it too. At the beginning we used to have meetings here in the Mexico City chapter every month, but it turned out to be too much. We were very enthusiastic, you see, at the beginning and we thought we could do a lot. And besides the city has changed, every day it gets harder to get around as you must know. This is one of the reasons we decided there shouldn't be that many meetings. The convention, well only one a year. But each chapter has the meetings it considers necessary. We used to even have two meetings a month, because we had one in the evening for those teachers who couldn't come on Saturday mornings.. It turned out to be too much, as I said.

*Journal:* Well, so far the discussion's been about the social relationships; What about the academic side?

*Gómez Maqueo:* We have always tried to have as many good speakers as we can. It has always been the custom to have people from out of town as the plenary speakers, but many of the people here in Mexico have been able to give very good workshops, as they know the situation better than the

people from out of town. For instance, the academic program for last year's [1994] convention I liked better than the one we had this year [1995], but I think it was a very, very good academic program, and sometimes we have had *very* good programs. Not always. Because I believe that one of the things that is difficult to choose, from so many papers we receive, to choose those that really should be on the program. Sometimes on paper it's not the same as the reality, because you can give a very good abstract and not a very good workshop or not a very good paper. I think MEXTESOL has always tried to have good academic programs.

Also, in the *Journal* there's always something that you can learn, something that is important for teachers to know. And that's another part of the academic program that MEXTESOL should have. When we had a hard time with the *Journals*, and there were some years when we had only two *Journals* instead of four--or when we had one!--still we always tried to have good papers in it so that the teachers would have somewhere to look for ideas in teaching. And I think that's one of the most important things the *Journal* has to do.

I think the teachers were very enthusiastic from the very first convention. We don't have more teachers from the public schools I believe **now** because they aren't able to pay. That's why I'm very interested in having good programs in the regional conventions because most of the teachers can go to the regional conventions since they don't have to spend very much.

*Journal*:. How do we choose our leadership?

*Gómez Maqueo*: Now you have to give at least a brief idea of what the person does and how the person is. But many times, as you say, there were just names and people look at the persons and vote for them, but many times they don't *know* the candidates. At the beginning we tried to put out a slate before the convention. But that turns out to be very difficult because nobody wants to have to do so much work. People like to have things done for them, but not to have to do them. Lately it has been very difficult to choose the leaders because the people have to work harder in order to make enough money because things have become more expensive, no? So, that's one of the reasons that it's very difficult to get persons.

It's very nice to say that you're president or vice president or secretary of an association. But when you have to do lots of work and give up a lot of your free time, many people don't accept, and this is a problem. It's one of the



problems that we have **always** had in this association. We tried to have some sort of executive secretary, but that didn't turn out so very well. Now what we have is the office administrator, and it's much better because we tried to have a person in charge of the office, and it turned out that this person was the most important person in MEXTESOL because many times the people on the committee didn't go to the office at all, and it doesn't work out very well that way. This has **always** been one of our difficulties, from the very beginning.

It's really very important to see your name there, "*presidente*," but to do the work that you have to -- that's not the same. It's very difficult. It's very difficult because you have to give up **a lot** of time to the association. If not, there's a lot of problems. You must have seen that, and that's always been the same. But now, I think lately we have had people who are **willing** to give up their time. But at first people didn't understand that they had to give up so much time to the association.

I think that MEXTESOL has grown on a much stronger basis lately than it has ever been. That is very good, because now the association has reached an age where it really has become an important association.

*Journal:* Thank you.