

## An Interview with Vincent Carrubba <sup>1</sup>

NEVIN SIDERS, EDITOR, MEXTESOL NEWSLETTER

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*Editor's Note: This is the first of a multipart series of interviews with some of the founders of MEXTESOL. We hope that this series will allow us to reflect on our origins and honor those who made MEXTESOL possible. The interviews were conducted by our Nevin Siders.*

*Carrubba:* Before the activities of MEXTESOL, we had a strong organization going, and that was called MATE, Mexican Association of Teachers of English. Some people used to call it "Mate" (pronounced in English) but Mexicans always used to call it "MATE," (pronounced in Spanish) and that's the name it really had all the time.

The purpose was to form an association for English teachers and educators in order to exchange ideas and techniques for EFL, and social activities -- there were a lot of nice social activities.

There were members that were teachers and administrators who were officers of schools. These came from all parts of the country not only Mexico City. And then the headquarters for many events in those days was at the Instituto Mexicano-Americano de Relaciones Culturales (IMNRC).

*Journal:* How long did MATE last?

*Carrubba:* It must have lasted, I would say, at least eight to ten years, before MEXTESOL. It was a very good organization, a lot of different activities: cultural activities, social activities, picnics, things of that sort that are different today.

There were lectures related to English teaching and there was an interesting mixture of British teachers and American teachers, so we had an exchange of ideas on problems that were similar.

What else did we have there? Ah, it was supposed to be called a "mutual aid society" because it helped companies, different schools and institutes that

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was carried out on December 26, 1995 in Mexico City.

were looking for teachers, as well as teachers looking for jobs. So it was looked upon in those days as a mutual aid organization.

*Journal:* Between teachers and administrators?

*Carrubba:* That's right. Around 1973, it must have been, when the organization started, we had an important meeting at the CEMAC institute. It was to think and begin to plan and organize everything for MEXTESOL. I remember that meeting because there were a lot of teachers from the British institute as well as the American institute. And people got their heads together to find out just exactly what could be done. It was an explosive meeting, too, because many people disagreed with this and were disgruntled with that, but finally we agreed on what our plan would be.

It was on a Saturday, I remember. Tony Cabrera was there, as well as other people, like Paul Davis from the British institute. And it was interesting from the point of view of the fireworks that went on at that time!

*Journal:* Was this a response to the establishment of TESOL? It happened just a few years later.

*Carrubba:* Yes. That's right, it was just a few years later. It was regarded as an affiliate of the association.

*Journal:* Today TESOL takes some positions that are controversial, like opposing California's Proposition 187. What could have been controversial about joining TESOL in those days?

*Carrubba:* Well, for example: how good could MEXTESOL be, when compared to MATE? You see, MATE had apparently had all the solutions, issues, and activities that teachers were mainly concerned about. And the idea was: What could MEXTESOL do to be better? It was not apparent. It wasn't something I think most people thought about. They didn't really know what MEXTESOL could be. Especially when you thought about how MEXTESOL would have to be established in different states of the country. That was sort of controversial, too, at the time. Who would do it? How would you go about it? Things of that sort. And it still is a problem today, because there have been many different MEXTESOL branches that started but then sort of died out in time. We thought the idea of branches was pretty good.

Then there was the first National Convention in 1974. That took place, strangely enough, in Tampico. And it was very interesting to go to that one because the people in Tampico were very interested in starting a branch of their own. And I remember Carmina Méndez de Florencia. She was the secretary and she was the one instrumental in starting everything. She really put out a lot of her own interest and gave up a lot of her own activities to have the meeting.

*Journal:* National secretary or local?

*Carrubba:* She was considered a national secretary at that time. (He takes out photos.) And there were people, officers that you might know of today. The treasurer was Mariam Rosas; she was a very active member of MEXTESOL until about five or six years ago. And then there was Paul Davis from the British institute; he was the parliamentarian (we had a parliamentarian at that time). Here is Carmina Méndez de Florencia, she was the secretary and Herlinda Díaz, who was the second vice president. Yours truly was the first vice president. And Grace Scott was *very*, very active in MEXTESOL for a long time until she moved to Florida; she was the president.

*Journal:* Where did these people work? In IMNRC and the Anglo-Mexicano?

*Carrubba:* Yes. Paul Davis worked at the Anglo-Mexicano. The others worked at IMNRC. Throughout the years, there were many officers from both, the British institute as well as the American institute.

And then a great idea impressed us. There was a *major* activity that would really promote many things. And that was the idea contributed by Grace Scott, of having a cocktail party at the TESOL convention in Los Angeles, California, so that TESOL could know that MEXTESOL in Mexico existed. And it really proved very valuable, because a lot of convention-goers went to the cocktail party in Los Angeles. It was a way to meet different people, and for them to recognize that there was something happening in Mexico. And from that point of view it was very, very useful.

*Journal:* When was this?

*Carrubba:* That was 1974. And there were a lot of new things. It was considered as an affiliate organization in Mexico. And there were officers from the national convention and from the national organization, from TESOL in the United States, that came to Mexico and served as consultants and were wonderful guides as to how the organization could grow. They were very, very helpful in that respect.

*Journal:* What kinds of things did they organize?

*Carrubba:* Some of the ideas of what the officers should do. For example, the idea of the second vice president and the first vice president -- the second vice president organizing the convention. They were the ones that started that, because I think that's the way it went in TESOL in the United States. They gave us guidelines of that type that were interesting, and that helped us find our way.

There was another group, that was established just before the organization of MEXTESOL. It exists today, on a smaller scale. And this is called the Linguistic Circle, attended by approximately fifteen to twenty teachers. It has monthly meetings, and at those meetings the different members of the association give talks on their various experiences. Outside speakers are also invited to talk to the groups on methodology, techniques, or their research. And from that point of view it's an interesting group to be in. Of course, it's open to any members that are interested. The meetings are held every first Saturday of each month.

Bertha Gómez Maqueo is the life-long president of our Linguistic Circle. We wanted such a president in order to avoid voting for an officer every year.

*Journal:* It sounds like the Linguistic Circle is very similar to MEXTESOL, in its purposes and all.

*Carrubba:* Well, it's not as far-reaching as MEXTESOL is. And it's really very simply occupied with different topics or problems teachers have on their minds.

*Journal:* Another question is: What was our founding convention like? What happened? How did we get together?

*Carrubba:* That was the Saturday meeting I referred to at CEMAC.

*Journal:* You can still remember it vividly, obviously! You say it just like it was just the day before yesterday. “The meeting on Saturday!”

*Carrubba:* That’s right! To me it was a great event! There were many plans laid for what was to be done, even though things would change later on. But for us it was a big happening because we felt that TESOL in the United States was becoming very important from the point of view of linguistics, and also because of the philosophy of what teaching should be at that time, you see. And that’s why we were very proud to have an association in Mexico that went along more or less the same lines. This, of course, replaced MATE, which could not function the same as MEXTESOL.

As I said, MATE was mainly a social and semi-professional organization. But when MEXTESOL came along there were many far-reaching ideas, mainly on the basis of the value of linguistics, which at that time was highly emphasized and that is rather de-emphasized today. Now many different aspects of pedagogy are included in TESOL and MEXTESOL, so it was very different and we wanted to start our own organization; and that was the Saturday that made an impact on everybody.

*Journal:* Do you remember the date?

*Carrubba:* No, I don’t. Unfortunately, I don’t remember the date--1973 was the year, I think it must have been the summer, perhaps August when people had time for a meeting.

*Journal:* It’s curious that you say that linguistics used to have a bigger role.

*Carrubba:* Yes. I feel that nowadays, many other considerations are taken into account. But at that time -- oh, this was around 1952 when I got my degree at the University of Michigan -- linguistics was the science, the great body of science that enlightened many teachers. The broad principles of linguistics were very important, and still are very important, but today, many other concerns are important in TESOL and MEXTESOL: classroom techniques, learning styles, big and small group interaction, etc.

*Journal:* Yes, I do find it surprising when I talk with teachers who have little training in linguistics and are unfamiliar with much of its terminology.

*Carrubba:* At the University of Michigan, which was a sort of pioneering university in English as a Foreign Language, I worked with Dr. Charles C. Fries and Dr. Robert Lado. At that time Dr. Fries thought about the idea of culture, but he didn't call it that. He felt that he was taking into consideration the countries people came from and how that influenced or changed their habits in English. That was considered very important. And for me it was a tremendous eye-opener, from what linguistics was and how it could even give an idea of what structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation were like and how they had to be taught. But I would say today we consider that all teachers must have this as a background if they're to be fully prepared, but we go on to other ideas that are just as important. For example pedagogy, classroom management, what's done in the classroom, activities that are important from the viewpoint of student-centered classrooms. And so there's not much of an emphasis on linguistics as in the 1950's and 60's, even though new fields have developed in linguistics such as psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics.

And it's interesting that it should be that way because I remember when TESOL first began, oh they were *so* different, the teachers were very much interested in different methodologies that were important; and today they are not as important. It was interesting to see the change.

*Journal:* Today methodologies and approaches do not have "names."

*Carrubba:* That's right. And at that time they used to have very definite names.

*Carrubba:* Then the idea of acquisition and learning was never part of what MEXTESOL and TESOL started out with; that was a completely new idea.

And so that led to a certain freedom, too, of what you could do in the classroom: to improve or promote acquisition. And this was not considered at that time. It was learning from the point of view of what you taught the students, you see; not the idea of acquisition: meaningful interaction, natural communication; the students are concerned with the messages they convey and understand, not with the form of what they say. Then, that was more important than going through all the grammatical patterns, and then the pronunciation patterns, and so forth, as it was at that time.

I think the whole development has been very significant because it shows how MEXTESOL has tried to reflect that attitude in its meetings, in its new convention themes. And I'm really very stimulated from what's been going on in TESOL as well in MEXTESOL. And I haven't gone to many conventions. I used to go to many of the beginning conventions in TESOL in the United States. But as they became more and more expensive I went to fewer and fewer TESOL conventions. So, I have sort of relegated that only to MEXTESOL, in Acapulco or, in many different places. I'm looking forward to the one in Zacatecas. That should be interesting from the point of view of the place itself.

*Journal:* You said that the convention themes have changed a lot. What were the themes before?

*Carrubba:* Well, the themes were more teacher-centered. What the teacher must do in the classroom. And today there has very definitely been a switch to learner-centered activities and therefore, themes are different from on that basis. For example, people who now take part in the MEXTESOL conventions are interested in *activities* that promote student learning, student acquisition. Very often themes refer to different things that the students can do in the classroom, like games, individual or group activities that would help them in that respect. And that was not so much the concern before. It was very much: what special patterns and structures needed to be emphasized, what vocabulary patterns were, and the idea that this was caused by the student's native language. That their problems arose from the native language. And I feel this is still very true in Mexico, but as we have learned, there are many other causes for problems the students have, not only interference from the student's native language. And that has been the nature of many of the themes over the years.

*Journal:* What about the convention themes like this year's "A Bridge to Understanding?"

*Carrubba:* On the whole the convention themes are the springboard for workshops, talks, papers, etc. The themes the first three or four years were: "How To Be a Better Grammar Teacher," "How Could Grammar Come in and Help You?," and "What about Pronunciation?" Now, I don't mean to say that these subjects are no longer important, but they don't have the emphasis that they had at that time. Other things have come into the picture.

And I think it has changed for the good; teachers and administrators feel freer about what the learning experience should be in the language classroom. Before it was a sort of limited idea that structure was the main issue that affected vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, conversation, etc. And today we are not necessarily interested in this as uniquely important.

The idea that I think was different in those days was that there was one concept of classroom procedure: what the teacher determined was best for all. And today it depends upon what problems individual students present. Their needs have come into the picture more than they did before. Those are very, very definitely interesting differences. For example, do students need ESP, or should we pay more attention to their learning styles? Do they need special conversation courses? And again this idea of needs has changed the themes of MEXTESOL conventions.

And another thing, too, I think is very important is that more and more are participating in MEXTESOL conventions than before. Before there was just a select few, who always gave talks or gave workshops, or papers. But now more teachers are interested in presenting, topics from their own particular point of view, from their schools, from their regional development. So I think it's interesting, too, that there isn't only one set of criteria that everyone must adhere to. For example, the workshop that I attended on different attitudes that people have in presenting speaking and listening was excellent because there were various considerations and suggestions that this team presented which helped the participants consider what was essential or non-essential. It also elicited responses.

There have been so many meetings that reflected that attitude of freedom of choice in subject matter, and freedom to be expressive about what is important in one's teaching, as an individual teacher. And this was not true before. And that's why I say it's a good development, it's progressing in that respect.

Now I think there's a difference in the people who attend the TESOL convention. For example, there are many, many different areas that are represented. I remember joining a group of people interested in literature, teaching literature, and that was never thought of before when TESOL first began. You didn't dare teach literature; you only taught things that were practical from the point of view of "how people really talked." That was the idea, and that was the pattern for what should be taught in the language

class. They thought that literature was perhaps something a little more refined, perhaps something a little more unreal than it is today. And today it's a concern that many teachers have: How can literature be taught on an EFL or an ESL level? That's a completely new development. And in the same sense, other activities have sprung from that idea. What is there new? What different feelings can teachers or educators have on a particular subject, like literature? And as I said before, this is just an example of how freedom comes into what choices should be made in giving talks at conventions, and how English is taught.

Now, of course when we go to a MEXTESOL convention that doesn't compare at all to what is presented at a TESOL convention in Los Angeles or Chicago or wherever, because the areas are very different, the facilities are much wider in scope. But I feel that even though those opportunities aren't available, it's still interesting from the point of view of what can be offered on a national, Mexican level. And I think this probably tells us that in MEXTESOL in the future, there will be perhaps more of a general representation of what we find in a TESOL meeting, that could become a part of a MEXTESOL meeting, too. For example, that there would be more interest groups in literature or in the teaching of poetry or even in ESP where you have to get into: how is business represented in EFL? And so that can become more of an important concern of MEXTESOL as a whole: how is SP part of what "English" means, teaching here in Mexico.

And, of course, I can see, for example, now this whole computerized learning. The fact that the computer has come in; how can we get that into the classroom? What new developments will that bring? Although I have the feeling that computer science and computer learning has been sort of a competitive idea to English, now it seems that more computer schools are involved than English schools, you see a lot of these people teaching computer methods and techniques. And perhaps it's realistic to face the fact that it can be competitive.

*Journal:* Are there any themes that were proposed, by MATE or at the beginning of MEXTESOL, that could be pursued today?

*Carrubba:* I don't really think so. No, I think that MATE started out very well, and there were general ideas about what they could do. But I think that when MEXTESOL came along, *after* MATE; there were a lot of new ideas that were developed that were not thought of before, and perhaps were more

helpful to the teachers than those given by MATE. I think that MATE sort of approached ideas in a general manner, but MEXTESOL goes more deeply. It tries to satisfy, it tries to answer, it tries to solve problems, although it's not always successful, but it makes more of an effort than MATE did at that time.

*Journal:* You said there were a lot of ideas brought up at the time.

*Carrubba:* Yes, I felt that MATE was a sort of mixture of social activities. People enjoyed going to the different activities because they were entertaining. But at this time we have people like David Nunan come and give a talk to MEXTESOL, which really revolutionizes what the thinking, the whole idea, the whole teaching of English would be. And you have many British speakers, too, like H. G. Widdowson that give ideas that people had not heard of before. How is it that, for example, discourse analysis can be important? How can you convey its meaning? And we were never concerned with such subjects before. They never occurred to us at that time. And this is true, I mean, as time goes on things evolve. And things become, perhaps you can say, deeper in that respect.

But then I think too, one of the disadvantages of MEXTESOL as I see it, is that many new teachers, many young teachers, for example, are very much interested in techniques they can learn and take to their classrooms on Monday after the convention. They rely on activities, on games, etc., and many of them are not interested in the more far-reaching and deeper aspects. How can we get those new teachers involved in this level, too? -- Involved in a deeper look at, say for example, the whole concept of culture, or what does grammar really mean. I think there has to be more work in that direction. How can they become deeper in their attitude toward what teaching is? And not just, "Well, this is a very good game I can try in my class, because I learned about it at the convention. I'm going to try that game."

And of course, that's how all organizations work, there are certain disadvantages and advantages they have. But I think we should work on topics that perhaps are a little more challenging for teachers, and see how we can bring more people to be interested in the philosophy of what teacher development is. And this focuses on what I see is the double objective of MEXTESOL: concentrate on in-service training that teachers may have missed, and on growth in teaching.

*Journal:* Like developmental psychology, special learning styles, phases of development?

*Carrubba:* Exactly. That's another new development, why sure. And that's another thing, I'm glad you mentioned those things, but that's very much in vogue right now, the learning styles, that we didn't begin to think of in the days of MATE or the first meetings of MEXTESOL, you see. And today this is an important thing, as well as literature and things of that type. Learning styles have become very important. And I think this concentrates on the needs of students, learning styles has very definitely something to do with what students need, from the point of view of how they learn. Do they learn through hearing, do they learn through reading, or do they learn through other methods? And we must consider it very seriously.

I feel this learning-centeredness, student-centeredness, should have a balance of teacher-centeredness, too. I think the teacher is very important, not only the student. Perhaps that's what we are overemphasizing in MEXTESOL today -- student-centered learning, only. Well, I think teacher-centered learning is very important, too. The teacher can stimulate; the teacher can interest and guide the student many ways, and that has to be taken into consideration.

But, as in all things of human nature, we always go to one extreme. For example, I remember very definitely one of the beginning conventions that we had in Cuernavaca. One important speaker got up and said, "Oh, thank God the audio-lingual method is dead!" She was sort of being very happy about the fact that we had *new* ideas; well don't we depend on these older ideas, too? Aren't these older ideas a part of what we think in newer terms? But she said, "No, thank God that the audio-lingual method is dead." The audio-lingual method was very important because we got the idea of culture from that, we got the idea of the importance of the phoneme and intonation. And she said all that was dead. And she was a very important international speaker. And it's true that we forget about one area of learning, and now feel that something new is important, and we forget about the advantages of what was important before. That's something that's true of all human organizations, not only MEXTESOL. But it can be a very definite disadvantage, if you're not careful about it.

We have learned from all methods, from all techniques that we had in the past. When we were emphasizing pattern practice, well, that was important

but we find today that it's not the only thing that will help, but it does give some help.

And I think, too, we have to be careful about our themes, and perhaps they can be more specific than general. For example, "Bridges to Understanding," well, how can that be more specifically stated for English teachers, you see? And I think that's what we have to work on: to make things more specific. Of course, it's very interesting to have a general statement, but that again has a broad application to many fields, not only English teaching.

That's what I think. I'm very much interested in MEXTESOL, I think it's helping a great deal in many, many, many different ways. And I just wish that more teachers would participate, rather than just going and absorbing everything, which is important too. But we can certainly learn from their experiences, as well!

And this is what I often ask my students in teacher training courses: How can they be leaders in teaching? How can they give talks at MEXTESOL meetings? How they can read the *Forum* and get ideas about their teaching experiences and convey that teaching experience to other people.

*Journal:* Thank you.

*(The interview in our next issue will be with Bertha Gómez Maqueo.)*