

Interview with Marcela Díaz¹

T. NEVIN SIDERS V., MEXTESOL

MEXTESOL: So, you were saying you didn't join MEXTESOL immediately after its foundation, but you did go to some of the organizing meetings.

Díaz: Yes, yes I did. It was a few months later that I joined. It was through the *Anglo-Mexicano*² played a very strong part in the whole organization of the association; and the *México Norteamericano*³ and the UNAM⁴ were the three sort of strong parties in the association.

As a matter of fact many of the first presidents came from the Anglo. We could start counting them: John Shepherd, Gene Taylor, Paul Davies, all of them from the Anglo. They really worked hard toward the success of MEXTESOL. And, I don't remember what number of president I was, I came out elected in 1982 — or was it 1983? — I can't remember that either. And I was telling you about the business meetings, I was elected after a *six hour* session in Acapulco.

MEXTESOL: What about the *Think Tanks*?

Díaz: The first Think Tank I attended was in Cuernavaca or somewhere. And the Think Tanks were carried out in English! It changed afterwards, having something to do with the law, or the minutes had to be translated into Spanish to make it legal or whatever. But all the meetings were carried out in English...It was in a way better to have them in English because it's an association of English teachers. It does give the teachers the chance not only to practice but to carry on English among themselves, and they feel a little bit more like English teachers than if

¹ The interview took place on January 31, 1997. Nevin Siders would especially like to thank Ms. Díaz for this interview.

² Instituto Anglo-Mexicano de Cultura.

³ Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales.

⁴ Centro de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras (CELE).

it's going to be done in Spanish. And the conventions were generally two day affairs; what is it now? — four day conventions. They were not as large, but the spirit was there. It kept growing, and growing, and growing! When I left, when my period was over, I left the association with nineteen chapters all over the country. Mind you, I did not found them all! We founded only about four more, but there were chapters in La Paz, in Hermosillo, in Culiacán, and those far away places. The one in Torreón was very strong; Guadalajara had always been very strong, really strong! And I was so glad to hear that it had come back to the association, because it's going to help keep it running better and better. They're very enthusiastic and hard working. We had chapters in Mérida, and Veracruz, and Coatzacoalcos.

MEXTESOL: Did you participate in the predecessor to MEXTESOL? In a couple of the other interviews for this series, they mentioned the Mexican Association of Teachers of English (MATE).

Díaz: No, that was with Bertha Gómez Maqueo, wasn't it? I attended some of the meetings, but I did not really become a member of that. At the time, that was in 19...what?, I was very young and I also had a recent marriage and young kids, so I didn't have so much time. Not that I had it afterward, either. As a president I was working (at my job) all day long, and altogether I was doing 19 hours work a day. And part of my illness now is a result of those days, because I got terribly involved in it and I suffered a lot.

I actually got my diabetes from a real fight. I organized the *Foros Internacionales Interescolares de Maestros de Inglés del Politécnico*⁵. And somebody came and told me that MEXTESOL was being sued for three million pesos, after the convention in Guadalajara. And I said, "What?!" I caught the ball which wasn't supposed to be mine because I wasn't president any longer, I finished my presidency two years before! But I caught the ball as if it were mine and that's when I got immediately ill, I had to go from there straight to La Raza Hospital. They wanted to put me there because I was near a coma. And

⁵ Instituto Politécnico Nacional, Mexico City.

later on I said, "How stupid!" I mean it was no longer my responsibility. And that's the way I got my diabetes. Shocking, horrible.

But anyway, the moment I joined it, and all the time I belonged to the association, I've enjoyed *every* minute. Because there's been a lot of bad things, yes, but there's been a lot of good things as well. And one of them was meeting so many, so many, so many teachers all over Mexico, and talking to them, and learning about their problems. It was very enriching experience

MEXTESOL: You worked in public schools, the *Politécnico*, and in these interviews we have gotten many different perspectives on the world from public schools and private institutes and universities

Díaz: It's a wide world, a wide, wide world. A very unfortunate difference. I can say that I enjoyed both a lot. In one, obviously working for private institutions you have the money. Working for public institutions you have the experience of working or having worked with all kinds of people, people who can not pay. I'm not going to say poor people there were lots of students who had never had the chance of going to class after having breakfast and all that. *Very* good, nice people, nicer I must say, than in private institutions. I'm not saying that those in the private institutions are horrible, no. One thing I have to be thankful for is that all the people I have come across have been very nice. Good people.

MEXTESOL: You started to tell the story of the convention when you were president.

Díaz: It was supposed to be held in Monterrey, but they never finished the hotel where it was going to be held; the construction was only half completed so we had to bring it down to Mexico City. In fact it was the first one held in Mexico City! And the only place we found where we could hold it was in the Fiesta Americana (today the Crown Plaza) and there was a mob, a real *mob*, which later on came to hate me because I had to send away people from Mexico City and only accept the people who came from outside Mexico City under the argument that they had had

months to preregister, and the others had already traveled to Mexico City.

I thought there were *thousands* of people there, thousands. Because it was a weird experience to talk to *so many* people. People were sitting on the floor, not on the chairs but on the floor, and practically hanging from the lamps. But it was a very nice experience: we had speakers from England, speakers from the USA and lots of very good speakers from Mexico, too.

MEXTESOL: You know, this year we had people sitting on the floor, too.

Díaz: You did, good, *good!* I was very glad to hear that it had been a real success. I was happy for Octavio [Espinoza], because Octavio was very enthusiastic from the moment he joined the committee. He *really* wanted to have it up there [in Zacatecas]. And the only thing I'm sorry about is I wasn't able to attend it. But you know what Zacatecas is like, it's going up and down, up and down.

MEXTESOL: The convention was dedicated to Bertha Gómez Maqueo.

Díaz: Oh, that was nice, too, very nice. She has promoted the association for so many years.

MEXTESOL: Going back a step, you said there's a very *unfortunate* difference between public and private schools, one has the money and the other has nice people.

Díaz: It compensates, doesn't it? The enthusiasm of the people who haven't got the money, but then they want to learn. But then they can't because they are not well fed, they have to work and study, so it's difficult for them. But as I said, I enjoyed every minute I worked for the private institutions and for the public ones, too. Not that I worked for many public ones, I mean there was only the *Politécnico*. And as far as teaching, I taught very little at the *Politécnico* because I was in the graduate stage, but the experience was very nice. The private institutions have better facilities. Mind you, the *Politécnico* is growing in that sense, in that most schools have their language labs, not that they're the best; what you need are good teachers. They are very, very

short of teachers there because, you know, teachers want *money*, if you want to survive. If they get money they're working very hard, all day long. And I also think there's a lack of vocation in teaching. But hopefully there'll be more teachers.

In 1978, when we had the TESOL convention in Mexico City, I presented a paper talking about English as a second language in a third world country. And one of the major problems was the lack of teachers; I think there were about 10,000 teachers all over the country at the time. I think we still have the same problem, not enough teachers. The *Politécnico* has been working toward preparing teachers more. And the teachers at the vocational level have sat for the COTE and DOTE courses for teachers [given by the British Council]. I don't know how many teachers were in that course, probably twenty something, and then they wanted it to be repeated. So at least you can see there's a step forward here at the *Politécnico*.

A similar action was taken in 1982 or 1983, when the *técnicas*⁶ started this in-service teacher training. I participated with the British Council. And we prepared teachers to teach teachers. Unfortunately Ing. Saúl Hernández was director at the time, and he left the post and moved to Culiacán or one of those places. He was a *very* good element, because he started all this idea, all this scheme, at all levels in all the disciplines, where teachers from the States came to Mexico City, they took the course, and then they were sent back, and there they repeated the course to groups; they were "repeaters" or "multipliers." But unfortunately, when he left the post, it was stopped. He and Ing. Infante died, unfortunately. He was a very good teacher, also. Both from the *Politécnico*, and worked with the *Secundarias Técnicas*. And they really, really promoted this to help teacher education.

Another of the ideas of MEXTESOL was to keep it only for people from private schools. At the time, we worked real hard to have the official schools, and teachers join us; and we really fought hard for that, because that's where the *real* need was,

⁶ *Escuelas Secundarias Técnicas*, government sponsored technical middle schools.

and still is. And then it became more and more and more working toward private schools. They say that because teachers who work for public schools are not interested in becoming better teachers; but then again it's because the cost of the conventions, you can't have people from public schools going to conventions — How much did this one cost?

MEXITESOL: The registration was 400 and something, the hotel of course was ...

Díaz: Well, only the 400, plus transportation, plus food, and all that, it must have amounted to at least 2,000 pesos. You can't have a teacher who doesn't even make 2,000 a month ... So, the ones from private schools, they can attend them because the institution itself gives them some help, just by giving them permission, that's a great help. In the public ones, even getting permission to miss classes is difficult. And then all the expenses are large.

MEXITESOL: Well, this year the convention was opened by Zacatecas' Secretary of Education.

Díaz: That's a big help.

MEXITESOL: That's why so many people went.

Díaz: The ones who started that were the people from Guadalajara, and they always had lots of people at the meetings, the regular meetings, and all that, because the state was helping them in a way with propaganda, and all that.

MEXITESOL: And Guadalajara again, Peter Hubbard has continued to work very hard on getting accreditation for teachers.

Díaz: I tried very hard to get accreditation. I talked to Reyes Heroles, he was the federal Secretary of Education at the time. We talked to him a long while, "Yes, yes, yes, of course, what a wonderful idea, what this, what that." But, no help, no real help. All I wanted was to get recognition for the convention, for the meetings. They could have had this special accreditation for specialty courses they give. They never gave us the accreditation. But, then I was alone in Mexico City [all the other members of

the executive committee lived in other cities], and I didn't have anybody to turn to but the big man.

MEXTESOL: Thank you for inviting our readers into your home.