

A Short History of the Founding of the CALL-IS Interest Section by Roger Kenner

(Co-organizer, founding member, secretary, and former chair)

This account, written from my personal perspective, and drawing on letters and other documents from the period, chronicles my involvement in the founding and first couple of years of the CALL-IS Interest Section of TESOL. I feel very fortunate to have been a participant in this exciting period, which saw the establishment of a new academic discipline: Computer-Assisted Language Learning.

Personal Beginnings:

My own introduction to computers is probably typical. In 1979, just before the advent of the microcomputer revolution, I was newly appointed in charge of Concordia University's Learning Laboratories and was assigned the task of setting up a system to deliver computer-based instruction to the students. My only previous computer experience had been a disastrous Fortran course in college many years earlier. Inspired by the reaction of the students to our fledgling system, based at first on old grammar and punctuation lessons which had been lying around, unused, for years, I set out, once again, to learn programming. This time I was quickly bitten by the computer bug, and, with the help of my language teaching background, was able to develop a few, more appropriate tutorials.

Realizing that I could not have a monopoly on good ideas, I set up a system whereby teachers and student-teachers could approach Lab personnel with computer ideas. We would counsel them on the feasibility of their approach, point out to them possibilities they had not even considered, and then design software for them. They would provide the content and I and my staff would write the program. The concept of "authoring system" was virtually unknown at the time. These were all programs written from scratch.

It was through this arrangement that I came to know David Sanders, a professor of methodology at our TESL Centre. His offering student-teachers the option of doing projects with us became the source of many interesting computer programs.

After a year or so of the system's development, I decided it was time to attend some conferences and collect some readings, so as to learn from the experts in the field. I quickly discovered that there were no experts; in fact, there was no field. Microcomputers had suddenly sprouted up and everyone was learning as they went along. What we were doing at Concordia was actually fairly advanced. I began to deliver seminars, give papers, and submit articles.

David Sanders and I collaborated on a study where we gauged student's reaction to the computer-based material and solicited their suggestions for improvement. This was published in System. Based on this same study, David Sanders submitted a proposal for TESOL '82, to be held in Hawaii.

Things Get Started

While I was unable to get all the way to Honolulu, I understand that our work was well received. So much so, in fact, that Jean Handscombe, incoming president for TESOL, and responsible for the Toronto Convention, invited David Sanders and I to organize a closed, pre-convention symposium on the impact of computers.

Things were much more informal then. No written proposal was required. I cannot know what personal communications David Sanders and Jean Handscombe had, but I gather that the TESOL administration had taken notice of the amazing interest in computers and had decided TESOL should get involved.

Our mailing list for the Symposium was very unscientific. We each contacted everyone we knew. In attending and giving seminars, I had come across quite a few people who were heavily involved in exploring computers and language. Some of these names now fairly well-known: Chris Jones, Jim Pusack, Chris Candlin, Glyn Holmes, Dana Paramskas, Donna Mydlarski, and the like. We further, asked each of these people to suggest others. Of all the people we contacted, forty-two agreed to attend.

Many of my contacts were not involved in ESL or ESL, but taught French, Spanish, or some other language. We obtained special permission for these people to attend the Symposium without registering for TESOL. I felt it was important to maintain the inter-disciplinary nature of what was to become CALL, to maintain communication between ESL people and those teaching other languages. This is perhaps the first instance of how we, at CALL-IS, have consistently introduced new concepts and new approaches into the TESOL organization.

Our final list of participants reads like a "who's who" of the field of CALL: Ingrid Berljawsky, Joel Bloch, Chris Candlin, Carol Chapelle, Tom Dillon, Pat Dunkel, Irene Dutra, Gary Esarey, John Esling, Antoinette Gagne, Sandy Harris, Chris Harrison, Paul Hardin, John Higgins, Joan Jamieson, Ann Johns, Tim Johns, Chris Jones, Randall Jones, Stan Jones, Roberta Lavine, Don Loritz, Bill McMichael, Peter Mueller, Anne Merkel, Donna Mydlarski, Frank Otto, Michael Palmquist, Dana Paramskas, Nancy Post, John Roberts, Gail Robinson, Joan Rubin, Judy Scholefield, Frank Smith, Vance Stevens, Kim Merriam, Gerry Strei, Michael Sutton, Bill Vanderwerf, Judy Vernick, David Wyatt.

The Toronto Convention: 1983

After several years of very rapid, haphazard development, things in the field of CALL were rapidly coming together in 1983. The first books on the subject appeared. Microcomputer platforms standardized. The first acceptable commercial software began to appear. Learned journals began publishing. Those on either side of the Atlantic began earnestly talking to each other. New philosophies on the role of the computer were introduced. I cannot credit our Symposium with any causative effect. It was simply an event which happened at the right time.

The excitement in the hallway on that March 15, pre-convention morning, was electric. The gathering together of all these individuals to a common purpose kindled an almost visible energy.

A horde of people we had failed to invite clamoured in the hallway to get in, and there was some resentment over the fact that it was a closed session. We were forced to change the agenda to include an open, public session in the afternoon. The TESOL organizers supported us all the way, making a large, public room instantly available.

We divided up in the morning, with one group, led by David Sanders, discussing where courseware should go pedagogically, and the other group, led by myself, discussing authoring

and how this material should be created and delivered. Reports from each group were to be delivered in the afternoon.

David and I escaped alone during the lunch break and, over coffee in the nearby Eaton Centre, he imparted to me the hidden purpose behind this Symposium. He, Jean Handscombe, and other TESOL officials had been discussing means of establishing a special interest section concerned with computers. Neophyte that I was, I did not even know what an interest section was. We discussed ways to guide the afternoon discussion so as to introduce this subject.

The afternoon saw the group assemble in a large hall. The forty or so Symposium participants were assembled in the centre of the room, encircled by a couple of hundred spectators, seated and standing against the wall, all around the room. The morning's groups made their reports. The ideas presented are so commonplace now, it is hard to remember that they represented novel visions at the time. One consensus that was reached amongst all participants was that we should call our endeavor CALL, thus distinguishing it from CAL, CAI, and other notions of the time.

Towards the end of the afternoon, David Sanders took the floor and broached the idea of forming an interest section. He had slipped out during the talks and had obtained a meeting room for later in the week. He invited all who were interested to assemble then.

The magic begun at the Symposium continued on for the rest of the week. Most of the computer-related sessions took place in the same adjoining rooms. The short hallway became the "CALL hallway" as each presentation was followed by extended discussion just outside the room. For the first time, it was like a "mini-convention" within TESOL. The assembly of experts had a positive effect on presentations. For a couple of years anybody who had anything at all to say about computers, at any convention, had received a packed hall. These sessions had been like old time revival meetings, with testimonials about the wonders of computers, but little substance. It became quite easy to separate the wheat from the chaff at this gathering, as presenters found themselves addressing their peers. The effect was not lost on the TESOL organizers.

The special meeting to discuss the formation of an interest section was filled to overflowing. The procedure, according to the TESOL constitution, was explained. Fifty names were required on the petition, but we easily gathered more than 150 names.

David Sanders was acclaimed as Chair. Nominations were taken for Associate Chair. Frank Otto, Randall Jones, John Higgins, and myself were nominated and declined. Only Paul Hardin and Vance Stevens stood for office. John Higgins and Irene Dutra organized the vote, by written ballot. Vance Stevens was chosen.

The first Steering Committee was elected by show of hands: Paul Hardin, Roger Kenner, Don Loritz, David Wyatt, and Karen Price. Since I was in close contact with David Sanders, and still had the infrastructure in place which had organized the Symposium, it was natural that I serve as Official Secretary. The mailing list was given to me.

The meeting adjourned as a great success.

The First Year

As the convention euphoria faded and we got down to serious work, it became evident that David has overlooked one very serious detail. As John Haskell was sorry to explain, new interest sections had to be approved by the Interest Section Council before the Executive Board

could act. This council had met before our meeting, and would not meet until again until the following year. His hands were tied.

Still, TESOL was anxious to accommodate our group. "I have suggested ... some ways in which you might get under way, despite the temporary lack of legitimacy as a bona fide Interest Section", he wrote. We would be given treatment at the Houston Convention as if we were already an interest section. In the interim, TESOL would make funds available to support our organizational mailings and other set up needs.

Like Jean Handscombe, Penny Larson, the organizer of the Houston Convention, was very much on our side. At the time, the custom of having interest sections read and approve conference proposals had not yet begun. Nevertheless, she obtained the list of our IS officers, chair, associate chair, and steering committee, and engaged us all as readers. The positive effect of peer evaluation seen in Toronto had borne fruit.

As secretary, I put together the first "mail-out" in June of 1983. CALL-IS was centred at the Language Lab of Concordia University, and my staff maintained the membership list, which had grown to two hundred. A good number of these people were not members of TESOL, but were involved in French and foreign language instruction. This "non-TESOL" component was to be a point of discussion with TESOL for several years. It was my feeling that CALL encompassed more than just ESL, and I did not want to lose the input and expertise of all these others.

We included, in the first mail-out, a request for address confirmation and a detailed questionnaire, put together by Karen Price. There was an announcement for the first "Software Fare", now an annual fixture at TESOL.

It is sad that, despite all of our efforts, we were unable to produce a newsletter in that first year. Instead, we began a tradition that lasted for several years; that the Chair and Associate Chair would create bi-annual "mail-outs", containing timely information and ballots, while the newsletter would be devoted to articles, reviews, and academic concerns.

Our second mail-out was delivered just before the Houston Convention. It included a detailed analysis of responses to our questionnaire. In retrospect, it provides an interesting picture. Just less than half of our members were still using main-frames and mini-computers. The Apple II was the primary micro. Nearly half wrote their own courseware, with BASIC the preferred language. Two-thirds had to share computers with other, non-language users. Seventy-five percent were university or college-based.

By then, David Sanders had been forced to retire from active service as Chair, concentrating on forming his own business. It was pretty well left to myself, as secretary, and Vance Stevens, as Associate Chair, to guide the IS to a level landing in Houston.

Houston

TESOL invited Vance Stevens and myself to arrive a day early in Houston, at their expense, to participate in the pre-convention workshop for interest section leaders. We were taught all the legal requirements of interest sections and TESOL's policies. Under the guise of a "rap session", CALL-IS's official business meeting took place on March 7. Fifty-three people were present. As it was impossible to restrict participation to "members", a motion was made to assume all present to have that status. (Most of us did not like this open-meeting approach to elections and resolved to change it.)

Vance Stevens was confirmed as Chair (or "proposed Chair", since the actual appointment of Chair was still the domain of TESOL's executive). Having been in de-facto charge of the membership and finances of the organization, I was acclaimed as Secretary-Treasurer, and then elected Associate Chair. A new Steering Committee was elected, consisting of Joel Bloch, Cecelia Dressia, Ronald Komer, Don Loritz, Kathryn Hall-Allamyari, Charlie Lewis, Juan Perez, Karen Price, and Emily Thrush. Thus was established the policy of a nine-member Steering Committee, which our organization still maintains. Emily Thrush was elected our IS-council representative for New York in 1985.

The next day, Vance presented our case to the IS-Council. There was a lot of concern and argument about the "proliferation of interest sections" and our seizing members from other groups. Still, the motion "to accept the petition for the establishment of a computer assisted language learning interest section, and to recommend same to the executive board", presented by Lise Winer, and seconded by David Wyatt, was carried by 22 to 3.

The Hyatt Hotel in Houston was built around a huge, enclosed atrium, at the foot of which was a bar. It is here where the officers of the IS met to discuss its future. We discovered, for example, that our petition could not be put forward without a "Statement of Purpose". This same was hashed out over a few beers and quickly typed on Don Loritz's portable typewriter, to be delivered to the TESOL Executive.

We had long discussions about the proposed constitution of CALL-IS. TESOL's constitution at the time called for all official interest section business to be transacted at annual IS business meetings, to be held at the annual convention. None of us liked the way in which a group of 50 or so people, members and non-members, could just wander in and decide the direction of a group of 200 people. Most notably TESOL's constitution called quite specifically for the Associate Chair to be elected at the meeting. Luckily, it said nothing about the Steering Committee. Discussing various mechanisms, we decided on a cross between the British parliamentary model and that of the American senate. The Steering Committee would consist of nine members, three of whom would be elected each year by mail-in ballot of the entire membership. Electing only a third at a time would guarantee stability and continuity. I may be wrong, but I believe we were one of the first interest sections to opt for mail-in voting. Our hands were tied as far as Associate Chair was concerned. It did not seem that we could elect that position directly. We decided that the Steering Committee, would meet before the Business Meeting and would choose the Associate Chair. To meld with TESOL's constitutional requirements, we had to include the fiction that the outcome of this selection of Associate Chair be "ratified" by the annual IS business meeting. Thankfully, the Steering Committee's choice was never called into question.

Don Loritz, having the most to say on the subject, was pressed into drafting the actual constitution. It was presented to the membership during the following year and ratified.

The Software Fare, basically our first CALL-IS activity, was a resounding success. We easily convinced TESOL that it should be repeated the following year in New York (at TESOL's expense, in terms of renting machines.) This was in addition to the Academic Session.

The Executive Board met after the Convention and, acting upon the recommendation of the IS-Council, officially created the CALL-IS Interest Section. Vance's and my elections were also ratified.

The Second Year

My first daunting task after Houston was to negotiate with the Central Office as to how best to end our year of independent existence and become part of the TESOL fold. As far as TESOL was concerned, we had no official members. There was no mechanism for most people to sign up until the time for their membership renewal, just before the 1985 New York Convention. We reached an agreement with the Central Office whereby they would use our list of members during the first year, even if their records showed some of these people to be members of other interest sections. We had a year to get everyone signed over.

Indeed, our list still included many non-TESOL members, whom I did not want to lose. TESOL agreed to keep these names on the list for a year as well. During that year, through long negotiations, we convinced them to do something unprecedented for CALL-IS. They created a special category through which people could obtain all of the CALL-IS materials, but enjoy none of the other benefits of TESOL membership. Such members were to pay a nominal fee of \$10 for this service. It is unfortunate that, despite all the effort expended, the noble experiment failed. We never got more than 10 "CALL-IS only" members. As the value of CALL-IS became known, a good number of these people just went ahead and joined TESOL.

Our membership drive was quite successful. Just prior to the New York Convention, we received the word from the Central Office that almost 250 members had signed up for CALL-IS.

The greatest success of the year was the appearance of our first newsletter, assembled by Joel Bloch. It appeared in December of 1984. At the time we were allowed to solicit our own advertising, to pay for extra mail-out pages and other perks. We had an advertisements from Oxford University Press and Regents/ALA.

As secretary, I was responsible for the two "mail-outs" of the year, which were still independent of the Newsletter. In the first was our proposed constitution, which was ratified unanimously. There was also a call for nominations for the three vacancies on the Steering Committee.

The Steering Committee decided that the first three replacements would take the place of the three least active members. In the second year, those who had been on the Steering Committee since 1983 would retire to make room for the newly elected members. In the final year of transition, the three remaining non-elected members would cede their position. This process was to proceed quite smoothly.

Our first ballots went out in the second mail-out. The elections went smoothly and the response was high. Pat Dunkel, Macey Taylor, and Dehorah Healey were elected. As secretary, I also assumed the function of returning officer. So as not be in a conflict of interest, I delegated the actual counting to a trusted member of my Learning Labs staff, Ms. Isabel Garcia. I, myself, did not know the results until I opened the envelope in New York.

CALL-IS, along with other interest sections, had been very pleased with the consultation that had preceded the Houston conference, with regards to papers to accept or reject. We all lobbied very strongly that this be institutionalized. It did not happen in time for New York, but was in place for Anaheim. It now seems normal, and is taken for granted, that papers be refereed by the interest section involved.

We had a good rapport with the New York organizing committee, however, and all of our IS-sponsored activities were given place on the programme. These included, in addition to the Software Fare and our Academic Session, a colloquium on software reviews, a colloquium on CALL, and a publishers rap session. There was close liaison to make certain that every session that needed computers was given one (still at TESOL's expense, in those days.)

New York, 1985

The Steering Committee met prior to the Business Meeting. I opened the envelope and announced the winners of the election. As per our constitution, we then set about considering a selection of Associate Chair. After a fair amount of discussion and deliberation, we chose Macey Taylor.

Emily Thrush took her place, on our behalf, at the Interest Section Council.

At the Business Meeting, all went as planned. We presented the SC's choice of Associate Chair and asked for ratification. It was unanimous. We thus satisfied the demands of TESOL's own constitution.

All of our sessions were well attended, but the Software Fare was the most unqualified success. Though only spanning a few short hours, hundreds of delegates streamed through the room. (As yet, there was no concept of week-long hospitality room, full of computers. The computers were only there for one day.)

The post-convention planning session outlined a whole series of projects for 1986. The Third Annual Software Fare was planned. Since I had assisted Vance on the Second, it was decided that I should shepherd the Third, with a new assistant. The first volunteer did not work out, so Daniel Horowitz agreed to take part. This was fortunate, as I was unable to make Anaheim and the entire responsibility for final logistics fell upon his shoulders. Plans were made to repeat the Colloquium on Software Reviews and for a Colloquium on CALL research. A call was to be launched in the next mail-out to solicit interest in machine-specific users groups. Each of these was to be given "rap session" rooms in Anaheim. Thus would be born our current subset of organizations, each quite strong in their own right.

After New York: Year Three, 1985-86

As Associate Chair, Macey assumed responsibility for producing the bi-annual mail-outs. The first went out in June, 1985 and the second just before the 1986 Convention. As before, nominations and balloting went quite smoothly.

TESOL's new tradition of sending abstracts out to the individual interest sections, allowing each a say in those which should and should not be included, began that year. As Chair, I organized the reading of these abstracts. I sent each member of the Steering Committee all of the abstracts, and then coordinated the results. Each abstract, thus, had about nine readers. This level of overkill has subsequently been toned down. I am convinced that the current policy has led to much better and more focused presentations.

The organizers for the Anaheim Convention asked me to suggest possible keynote speakers for our field. I suggested John Higgin's name to them, and was pleased to see that this suggestion was acted upon.

I was also asked about "Hospitality Rooms". The intention was to have a couple of interest sections each share a small room together. I argued, and I think successfully, that CALL-IS was different. We definitely needed a room to ourselves, both for security reasons and for the number of people who would drop by. We needed a room that our people could get independent access to, at all times, a room that was under our control. While I was unable to get to Anaheim to see the result, I understand that the experiment went very well. TESOL has not since questioned our special role. Our CALL-IS hospitality room has been a great success at the later conventions.

Epilogue

I was very sorry not to have been able to make it to Anaheim, because of personal and work-related reasons. I was glad that the fragile structures we founders had set up were able to carry so successfully. It was not until Chicago that I was again able to make it to TESOL. I was amazed, at the time, by the strength of the organization I found, and by its continued zeal. I am confident that we of CALL-IS have been of great benefit to TESOL and have fully merited their initial support.