

# Looking Back: Reflections on a Career in Applied Linguistics

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## ***Introduction***

The series editors for this book ask authors to provide “an autobiography of about 10,000 words, summarizing your academic life”. This is a request I have never been asked for before beyond the brief two-paragraph bio-statements that normally appear on book blurbs or in conference program notes. Normally I would imagine such an account would be of little interest to any but a few close friends and family members, so at the outset I would like to prepare the reader for the apparent self-indulgence and self-obsession that such an account is bound to suggest. In preparing this account I found myself at times revisiting some periods of my life that I had largely forgotten (or perhaps, tried to forget). Other times however were periods of intense academic and professional excitement and provided many treasured memories of places visited, friendships made, and hurdles crossed. I will leave the reader to decide which was which.

## ***From applied linguist to teacher educator***

Perhaps like many in my profession, my introduction and initiation into the field of applied linguistics, and in particular, the teaching English as a second/foreign language, happened quite by chance. After completing my secondary education at a school in a small town in New Zealand (Gisborne – the place where Captain James Cook first landed in 1769 on one of his south pacific voyages) I didn't proceed straight to university but worked for two years for the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation as a trainee cadet. I wasn't sure what field of broadcasting I would end up in but hoped it would lead to a career related to some aspect of the arts. I worked in the head offices of the Corporation in Wellington doing for the most part the rather mundane chores that a trainee was assigned. At the same time (1962) I commenced part-time studies towards a Bachelor of Arts degree at Victoria University in Wellington. After two years of part-time study I decided to abandon my thoughts of becoming a radio or television personality and switched to full-time studies, majoring in English but also taking courses in music, history and philosophy. I had no particular career path in mind at that time. However I needed part-time work to help finance my studies and a classmate mentioned to me that she had found part-time work in a language teaching centre for international students at Victoria University. She had found employment as an assistant in the language laboratory and another student helper was also needed.

So I made my way to the centre (The English Language Institute as it was called, and still is), which was housed in a two-story house near the campus. I later learned that the Institute had been established with funding from the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to provide English language support for students on government-sponsored scholarship programs in New Zealand. It also offered a Diploma in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, targeting English teachers from the pacific region, south east and north east Asia, who were also studying at the Institute on New Zealand Government scholarships. When I arrived for my job interview the place was buzzing with activity as students arrived for their classes and tutorials and I found myself in a world that I didn't know existed. Here were numerous foreign students, earnestly seeking to master a language that had cost me nothing to acquire. And they came from exotic destinations such as Indonesia, South Korea, and Sarawak, places that had long

held a fascination for me. After a brief interview with one of the lecturers I was offered a part-time job and shown where I would work and what I would be required to do for my 8 hours or so of weekly work. My work was to set up the tapes in the language laboratory and to offer any help that was needed as students completed their listening assignments.

This was a transforming experience for me and within days of starting my job I decided that teaching English as a second language, whatever that was, was something I wanted to focus on. I never considered any other option and from that day on had a clear focus for my studies. It was not a well-established field in New Zealand at that time and some of my classmates thought it an odd choice. But I was fascinated by the subject of English language teaching, by the fact that there were career possibilities in the field of English teaching, and also by the fact that it seemed to offer the chance of exotic travel, another plus from my perspective, never having left New Zealand. There were a few courses in linguistics available as part of my undergraduate degree and in addition to those I managed to sit in on as many classes I could manage that the English teachers studying at the Institute were taking as part of their Diploma. Later when I moved on to complete my Master's degree at the same university I took as many language-related papers as were on offer and also a paper on TESOL that was offered by the English Language Institute. Following my graduation with an MA degree I was thrilled to be offered a job as a junior lecturer at the institute, and so my career began.

When I first began work at the institute as a student assistant I was anxious to find out as much as possible about the field of English teaching. Perhaps the book that most impressed me at that time was R. A. Close's *English as a Foreign Language*, a masterly introduction to the grammar of English from the perspective of a second language learner and one which is still well worth reading. I also discovered the journal *English Language Teaching* and was amazed to discover how much there was to learn about the field of English language teaching. I felt there were three areas I needed to focus on and to learn as much as possible about on as part of my initial professional development: the English language, second language learning, and language teaching methodology. (It was only some years later that I realized that I needed to add a fourth area of study – second language teacher education -). After completing my MA degree I taught at the Institute (mainly offering follow-up tutorials to some of the staff's lectures as I recall) but also completed the Diploma in TEFL which the Institute offered. I made many friends among the Asian teachers on the diploma course, one of whom, a delightful man from Cambodia named Kong Orn, became a close friend. On his return to Cambodia he later became a minister in the government and was among those murdered by the Khymer Rouge a few days after they entered Phnom Penh. Although I learned a lot from the diploma course the weakness in the training I received at that time was in the practical area. The diploma course was heavy on theory but largely ignored many of the practical realities of the classroom.

The director of the centre at that time was a British TEFL expert who had had a mainly British Council career in Europe and India prior to taking up his appointment as director of the English Language Institute shortly after I made my first acquaintance with the centre. He was H.V. George (always referred to deferentially as Mr. George by most of the staff), a man who was held in awe by staff and students and who was a charismatic if somewhat idiosyncratic thinker. He loved to challenge the established orthodoxies of the day and offered alternative answers of his own to most of the important questions of the time. H. V. George had a marked influence on all who worked with him. His strengths were English grammar and second language learning theory, and he had

developed his own individual theory of language learning which he expounded in his lectures and course handouts. (These eventually appeared in a book on error analysis, which although well regarded when it was first published, soon disappeared from view since it was written by an "outsider" to the field of second language learning). H.V. George was also one of the earliest proponents of corpus analysis, having compiled a verb form frequency count while he was on the staff of the Central Institute of English in India. Curiously his ideas on teaching were rather archaic and still embedded in the pattern-practice paradigm of the day, as seen in his book *101 Substitution Tables*, which we were required to use as a teaching resource in some of our classes. I still have pangs of guilt and embarrassment when I recall subjecting English teachers (some of whom were from Singapore and Malaysia and of course spoke English fluently) to drilling sessions using Mr. George's substitution tables. After my year as a junior lecture following my MA degree I realized I had a lot more I needed to learn about the field and that to pursue a career in academia I would need to acquire a Ph.D. Luckily I had graduated with first class honours for my Masters degree and this gave me a good chance of obtaining a scholarship for overseas study.

In those days the prize destinations for overseas study were Oxford or Cambridge or similarly prestigious universities in North America. However I decided to try my luck and apply for a Canadian government scholarship, since there seemed to be a number of prominent scholars working in the second language field in Canadian universities (people like H.H. Stern and W.E. Lambert for example). And so in 1968 I was fortunate to receive a Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship towards Ph.D study in a Canadian University, and opted to complete my Ph. D at Laval University, a French-medium university in Quebec. Not long after that I found myself busy learning French and attending graduate courses on the campus of Universite Laval in the delightful city of Quebec.

One of the reasons I chose Laval was that I wanted to study with a well-known Canadian applied linguist who taught there— W.F. Mackey – whose book *Language Teaching Analysis*, which appeared in 1965, impressed me with its clear and systematic approach to the analysis of language teaching methods and materials. Mackey was director of a centre called the International Centre for Research on Bilingualism, located at Laval University and set up with funding from the Ford Foundation. When I arrived at Laval I was given an office in the centre, which seemed to me to have no clear purpose apart from acquiring documentation on any and every aspect of bilingualism that could be documented. Mackey, like H.V. George in New Zealand, was also interested in syllabus design and vocabulary (among his many interests) and in the notion of identifying the core vocabulary needed to learn English as a foreign language. After discussions with Professor Mackey the topic I chose for my doctoral research was in the area of vocabulary selection, and I eventually completed a rather pedestrian doctorate in this area, (teaching part-time in a primary school and also at Laval University during this period to acquire more classroom experience). Looking back I am not totally sure why I chose the topic I did for my doctoral research. It focussed on lexical familiarity – people's subjective impressions of word frequency - and my study compared people's impressions of the importance of words with their actual frequency in word frequency counts. (Oddly enough, this issue has recently appeared in the literature again with an article devoted to the topic in a recent issue of the journal *Applied Linguistics*.) Looking back today on the issue I devoted some two years full time research to brings to mind the immortal words of the comedian Bette Midler: "Why bother?"

But other things that went on during my Laval years were to have a much stronger impact on my career. Halfway through my degree I noticed that there was a conference in San Francisco (1971) sponsored by a relatively new

organization called TESOL. My professor suggested I submit a paper proposal (my first at an international conference) and that on my way to the conference I stop off to meet another New Zealander, then teaching at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque – Bernard Spolsky. Luckily my paper for the conference was accepted and on route to San Francisco I stopped off to meet Bernard Spolsky in Albuquerque. It turned out that he had been a teacher at my high school in New Zealand and had taught both my sister and brother. Small world. Over the years he became a valued mentor and friend. My paper for the San Francisco conference picked up issues related to error analysis – a topic that H.V. George had introduced to me – and the paper I gave “A non-contrastive approach to error analysis” got an amazing reception at the conference. I was at the right place in the right time and following the reception of my error analysis paper received numerous invitations to speak at universities in Canada and the US, forging valued contacts and friendships with many key players in the field of applied linguistics. The reason my paper went down so well was that there was a minor paradigm shift going on in applied linguistics in the 1960s and 70s as the theory of contrastive analysis was being overturned in favour of alternative views of second language learning, that eventually led to the field of second language acquisition. This was a period when the names of people like Steven Krashen, Evelyn Hatch, Heidi Dulay, Marina Burt, and John Schumann started to become more and more familiar. I became a small time player in the emerging SLA field around that period, but more importantly, from that time was welcomed warmly into the emerging community of practice that was laying the foundation for the newish discipline of TESOL. In the US this consisted of people like Richard Tucker, H.H. Stern, and James Alatis, and in the UK people like Peter Strevens, Chris Candlin and S. Pit Corder, as well as younger emerging figures in the field such as Merrill Swain, Henry Widdowson, H. Douglas Brown and many others, whose intellectual leadership in the profession as well as friendship has always been an inspiration to me.

From Canada I needed to get to warmer climates and after completing my Ph.D in 1972 took up an invitation from an Indonesian student whom I had met at the English Language Institute in Wellington, to teach for a year at her university in Central Java. She was now the head of the English department at a small University in the town of Salatiga, which was well known locally for its excellent English program. The university was called Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana. It was a Christian University, but the fact that I was an atheist did not seem to bother anybody and it turned out to be one of the most memorable years of my career. My appointment was largely as a volunteer, since I would receive room and board and a salary of \$150 US a month. Despite the salary I was happy to accept the invitation. Central Java is a spectacular place to live, and in my year there I also visited many other parts of Indonesia, such as Bali and Sumatra. Apart from teaching English and helping revise the curriculum in the university, I worked with students in drama productions and tried to learn Indonesian.

On my way to take up my position in Indonesia I stopped off in Singapore to meet the director of the recently established Regional English Language Centre, (English was later to be dropped from the centre's name), Tai Yu Lin, who invited to teach at the centre as the New Zealand Government staff member after competing my year in Indonesia. The centre had been established in 1968 by an organization called the South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization, a consortium of regional ministries that ran a series of centres in different subject areas around the region. The Singapore Government sponsored the centre in Singapore as it still does, which focussed on language teacher education, the only centre in SEAMEO with this specialization. New Zealand was an associate member of the organization, and in its early days RELC received a lot of support from foreign governments, so there were staff members at RELC sponsored by the

British, New Zealand, Australian, American as well as Singapore governments. I have been involved with RELC off an on ever since and now do one teaching stint a year there in what is one of my favorite cities, teaching post graduate courses to MA and other students. In the 1970s RELC was one of the few places in Southeast Asia where full time post-graduate courses in TESOL were taught and so occupied a unique niche in language teaching at the time. Its excellent library, a lively group of colleagues from around the world, and the fact that everybody who was anyone in applied linguistics passed through the centre made it a stimulating environment to work, as it still is.

I enjoyed the opportunities for academic writing that started to come my way since the favourable reception of my first venture into serious academic publishing with the publication of my paper on error analysis (which now looks so quaint and dated that I have not included it in this anthology!) and beginning in the 1970s I often found a ready audience for papers that drew on the courses I taught at RELC, exploring issues in the teaching of the four skills, grammar, vocabulary, and other areas. With two visiting colleagues at RELC (John Platt and Heidi Weber) we put together the first edition of the *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*, an attempt to help our students wade through the terminology they encountered in their reading and their courses. Two edited books I published during this time, *Error Analysis*, and *Focus on the Learner* (with John Oller Jr) although compiled while I was still a graduate student in Laval, appeared at this time and were considered landmarks in their day. (Amazingly, *Error Analysis* is still in print some 35 years later). Living in the fascinating multilingual and multicultural context of Singapore also prompted an interest in the role of English in Singapore and in how English there, as in many other former British colonies, was becoming localized with a variety of local English emerging as a marker of Singapore identity. One of my colleagues at RELC – a British teacher trainer and wag called Ray Tongue, was compiling a list of local expressions in Singapore English, which caused a few ripples when it was published. I was actively involved in much of the discussion those days on what came to be known as New Englishes, World English, and English as an International Language and published a few papers on these topics. I also participated in an important international conference on the subject at the East West Centre in Hawaii, which brought together some of the key names in the field for a week of discussion and debate, people like Sir Randolph Quirk, John Pride, Braj Kachru and Peter Strevens.

In the papers I started writing at that time I thought it important to try to make theory (mainly drawing on applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and second language acquisition) relevant to teachers in training, and tried to develop a writing style that teachers in training would find accessible. I think a model I unconsciously followed was that of my Professor at Laval, Bill Mackey, whose articles were superb examples of good composition. The articles I wrote during this period as well as the books that I edited and authored were well received. Later I assembled a collection of my papers from the 1970s into a book called *The Context of Language Teaching*, which received an award from the Modern Language Association of America in 1985.

Later after completing two terms of appointment at RELC (with a period devoted to full-time textbook writing between them, that I discuss below) and realizing the need to work within the context of a traditional university English department, I took a teaching position for a year at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1979, and had the chance to live in a city that has become another favourite destination and also another excellent vantage point from which to observe the role of English in a different kind of setting from the one in

Singapore. Unlike in Singapore, Hong Kong Chinese people may be fluent in English but they normally use Cantonese among themselves and reserve English for use when speaking to non-Chinese or for specific work-related settings and purposes. There is hence not a Hong Kong equivalent of "Singlish", that variety of Singapore English widely spoken by Singaporeans of all walks of life.

My stint at Chinese university turned out to be shorter than originally anticipated, for while I was there I was encouraged to apply for a full professorship at the University of Hawaii, an invitation that few ambitious academics could resist. Hawaii was actively trying to build up its TESOL program and a position had become available following the tragic death of Ruth Crimes, who was killed in a plane crash while on route to the TESOL Convention in Mexico City. I had already gotten to know Hawaii and its Department of English as a Second Language, having spent a summer there taking summer courses immediately after competing my doctorate. In Hawaii I joined a department which was on its way to becoming one of the top departments of ESL in the US. Working in the department gave me as colleagues some of the best brains in the field, such as Richard Schmidt, Richard Day, Michael Long, Craig Chaudron, J.D. Brown, and Martha Pennington, and considerably sharpened and deepened my understanding of the field.

It was there that another University of Hawaii colleague and I (Ted Rodgers) wrote *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*, which has been widely used ever since and is often regarded as a classic in the field. The book had begun as a conference paper I gave in Japan in 1980. This was the time when new methods such as *Silent Way*, *Total Physical Response*, and *Counseling Learning* were being promoted as breakthroughs in teaching methodology and were often I felt, being promoted and accepted uncritically. After my experience studying French at Laval (which I describe elsewhere in this paper) I had developed a distaste for bandwagons and fads in methodology and in my conference paper in Japan I tried to bring a little rational thinking into the discussion. I later sent the paper to Ted Rodgers for comments, who was at that time teaching in China, and he responded with comments that almost equalled my original paper in length. We revised the paper as a joint article that was published in *TESOL Quarterly*. We later expanded the paper into the book that became a best seller of its kind and which has been translated into several languages.

In Hawaii I taught course on methodology, curriculum development and the practicum, and these lead to a number of publications in these areas. At the same time during my Hawaii years I became involved as a series editor for two applied linguistics series published by Cambridge University Press, the *Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series* (jointly edited with Michael Long) and the *Cambridge Language Education Series*. This role gave me a chance to work with many distinguished as well as emerging scholars and also the opportunity to mentor authors through the processes of academic publishing. The two series and also provided an opportunity for many emerging scholars to find an international audience for their work.

From Hawaii I moved back to Hong Kong in 1989, tempted both by the opportunity to spend more time in one of the world's most fascinating cities as well as by the chance to set up a new academic department and several new degree courses at the newly established City Polytechnic of Hong Kong (later to become City University of Hong Kong). I was appointed department chair and was able to assemble a team of outstanding teachers and scholars to teach in the new degree programs, two of which were in the field of teacher education – an undergraduate and a masters degree in teaching English as a second language.

By now I had reassessed my understanding of the role and nature of applied linguistics and added the field of second language teacher education to my research interests. I had come to realize that there was a lot more to teacher education than passing on ideas about language teaching and learning to teachers in training. My research interests expanded to include the fields of teacher cognition, action research, and teacher development, and during my years in Hong Kong was able to build up a very strong academic department, which included people such as Ron Scollon, V.J. Bhatia, Martha Pennington, and John Flowerdew, as well as several outstanding young Hong Kong scholars such as Angel Lin, David Li and Wai King Tsang. I was also able to forge professional links with some of the leading scholars in the field of second language teacher education both in Hong Kong and elsewhere (people like David Nunan, Amy Tsui, Donald Freeman, Kathi Bailey, Rod Ellis, Anne Burns and Karen Johnson) with whom I have had an active association ever since. My areas of research and publication from this period increasingly deal with essential issues in language teacher education and led to a number of books and articles in this area that have had a good profile in the field, an interest that I still actively pursue, as my most recent publications attest.

Following an exciting and rewarding seven years in Hong Kong, personal circumstances required that I re-establish residency in New Zealand and I reluctantly made the move back to New Zealand. There after a brief stint at the University of Auckland New Zealand setting up an MA program, other interests and particularly my textbook projects and the frequent international travel that book promotions and lecture tours involved, necessitated a shift from full-time academic work to part-time teaching. This I now do in Singapore once or twice a year at RELC, spending the rest of the year at my bases in New Zealand and Australia and pursuing others interests in the arts.

### ***Confessions of a language learner***

I grew up in a small town of 20,000 people in Gisborne, New Zealand, which in theory should have been a good place to acquire a second language. The region itself (the east coast of New Zealand's North island) has a large Maori population – the people who lived there prior to European settlement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and who still form a significant percentage of the population – and there is a great deal of cultural mix in the region, with a high degree of intermarriage between the Maori and non-Maori population. (One of my sisters is married to a Maori from the region). Linguistically however, despite having Maori neighbours when I grew up I had little occasion to hear or learn the Maori language. Generations of neglect by the government as well as a policy of language suppression meant that by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century many Maori had lost most of the use of their native language and used it only in restricted settings - for culturally specific events.

Fortunately since the time of my childhood a more enlightened language policy has prevailed. Maori language schools have become well established, and the language now has much more of a public presence, being used by both Maori and non-Maori to introduce all official functions and events, though individual bilingualism among many Maori is still relatively low. Sadly I showed no curiosity about the language a child, typical of the non-Maori population of my time. Maori was a subject at the high school I attended but as far as I can recall it was perceived as a course intended only for Maori students, and not taken very seriously by many of them either. (A fellow pupil at my high school at that time was Witi Ihimaera, who has gone on to become one of New Zealand's leading writers and whose book *Whale Rider*, set in the Gisborne district, was made into a very successful movie). Some years later while I was a Ph.D student the director general of education in New Zealand asked me to join a group of inspectors who

were visiting schools in the region and to observe some of the Maori language classes. From my observations it struck me that the language was being taught as if it were Latin.

There were some non-Maori from my town however, some of my own age and some of a later generation, who showed more interest in learning the language. One, the son of a local Chinese family, took the Maori language course at the local high school and has becoming fluent in the language, an asset that currently serves him well as the Mayor of Gisborne (Meng Foon). Another, the daughter of a prominent local businessmen, took an early interest in things Maori, became fluent in the language, went on to complete a Ph.D in aspects of Maori culture and language and to become a distinguished and much respected scholar of Maori and of early New Zealand history as well as a pro-vice chancellor of Auckland University (Dame Anne Salmond.)

Having failed to take the opportunity to learn Maori as a high school student, what other opportunities were there for language learning? Well, French was on offer at my high school and I chose it as one of my subjects, one which I dropped after the first week. I can still remember the first "lesson" I had in French, from a teacher who set out to make the subject as irrelevant and uninteresting as possible. He made no attempt to arouse any interest in the language or any reason to study it, and after two lessons that consisted of attempts to come to grips with aspects of elementary French grammar, I dropped it, reasoning, "Why do I want to learn French. I will never have the need for it!". Ironically some 10 years later I was earnestly studying French again in preparation for a Ph.D in a French-language University in Quebec, and three years after that was actually teaching a course in applied linguistics in French!

When I eventually entered university in Wellington, a requirement of the undergraduate arts degree was to complete a reading knowledge in a foreign language. I perceived this as another hurdle to get over and considered my options.

Students who had done French at high school would find the requirement a breeze if they took French reading knowledge. So I thought it would be a safer option to take Italian reading knowledge, assuming that I would be on more or less an equal footing with other students in the class. On day one of the class however I found how naïve an assumptions that was. The teacher was an elderly and charming toothless old gentleman who spent most of his lessons regaling us with fascinating anecdotes about his youth in Italy. However his "teaching" consisted of handing out Italian texts for translation. Most of the students in the class had already taken French or Spanish or Latin at high school and found this very easy. For me, however, the text might as well have been in ancient Greek. Luckily one of the tutors, a lovely New Zealand lady who had studied in Italy, took pity on me and offered me free tuition at her home on Saturdays, and that together with the help of a patient and supportive student friend, enabled me to pass the course. (Thank you Hamilton Baxter!)

Fast forward and I have been accepted into the Ph.D program at Universite Laval in Quebec. One of the reasons for choosing this program was that I was determined to learn a foreign language, and studying in Quebec city offered the opportunity to acquire both a Ph.D and a foreign language. Prior to leaving for Canada in 1968 I took a short French course from an inspiring teacher in the French Department (Madame Norris) at Victoria University in Wellington as well as private lessons with the wife of one of members of the French diplomatic course (in exchange for English lessons for her). When I arrived in Quebec in 1968 I enrolled in a summer course in French at Laval University. French summer



courses there were quite an industry. Most were for US and Canadian college students who had studied French for some time and wanted the opportunity to live in a French-speaking environment. My needs were rather different, since although most of the graduate course I would be taking would be in English, (I was enrolled in the English linguistics program), I needed a good command of French to survive in my new environment. The six week course on offer for me was my first introduction to a course offered within the straightjacket of a "method", In this case the French version of the audiolingual method known as the audiovisual method.

We were told it was a breakthrough in teaching methodology, based of course, on the latest scientific research. What it consisted of was mindless and endless drills and dialogs, no use of English allowed, no taking of notes, and faultless pronunciation. I think this experience prompted by subsequent interest in "the method thing" and to my book on approaches and methods. I did eventually succeed in mastering a reasonable command of French, but this was despite the course. At the university I managed to befriend as many French speaking students as possible (initially mostly from Laos, Vietnam, and French-Africa) until my French was good enough to enable me to form friendships with local students.

Fast forward again and now I am in central Java, Indonesia, spending a year there after my Ph.D, and now determined to learn Indonesian. Unfortunately the language most commonly spoken in central Java is Javanese, and not Indonesian, This time I didn't have the chance to take a course in the language but working with student tutors I managed to acquire a survival level command of Indonesian, which developed further when I spent seven subsequent years in Singapore and employed a Malay-speaking housekeeper who helped me maintain a basic command of the Malay/Indonesian, one which has not left me.

Some 8 years later I took a job in Hong Kong and this time the language I needed was Cantonese. The university I first worked at (Chinese University) offered a Cantonese course for staff, and I enthusiastically enrolled, but after a few weeks along with most of the rest of the class, I found that memorizing useless dialogs and grammar patterns was not likely to take us very far in the language. I left Hong Kong after a year and returned for a much longer stint 7 years later. Still determined to make some headway with Cantonese I worked with a tutor once week, and realized at the rate I was learning the language, the level of fluency I was aiming for would take another 40 years. One problem with learning Chinese (be it Cantonese or any other variety) is that if you are not at the same time learning the written language, you have no way of learning anything from exposure to the written language around you. In Indonesia the written language is everywhere and since it is written with the same alphabet as English, one can begin to absorb words that are visible in print form everywhere – on street signs, on packaging, on advertisements and so on. Using a dictionary the learner can make good progress working independently on language acquisition. With Chinese the situation is very different. Since I was only studying spoken Cantonese and not learning written Chinese at the same, the option of learning from exposure to the written language was not open to me, so progress was much slower. Those expatriates I did meet who spoke good Cantonese or Mandarin had spent a minimum of two years in full time language study, something I would have loved to do but could not.

Currently the language I most want to learn is Spanish, for a variety of reasons, and have made two aborted attempts to learn it. The first was during a visit to Mexico a few years ago. I had a three week time slot available and decided to make my way with my partner to one of the delightful old colonial towns that are scattered all over Mexico and central and South America. The one we chose was

Oxaxa, and through the internet I located what looked like a suitable language school. Yes, the director e-mailed me, we would love to offer you a tailor-made beginner's course. We dutifully arrived at the school in an old house in the colonial quarter. The director, a delightful Mexican-American lady with a repertoire of tasteless jokes that nearly equals my own, insisted that I first take a diagnostic test. No need, I replied. I am an absolute beginner. However this did not discourage her and she invited some of her teachers to come and observe my diagnostic interview. I thought perhaps it would begin with a few simple questions about my name, nationality and so on. But no, the first question she asked in Spanish was "Could you explain to me the situation of the indigenous peoples of New Zealand?". (I was able to use my knowledge of French to guess the meaning of the question, but since I had no Spanish available to me to answer the question she decided not to proceed further with the test). I was assigned a tutor for one-to-one lessons, a jovial chap who proceeded in my first lesson to spend half an hour writing up the conjugations of the future tense in Spanish. I soon realized that like many similar Spanish schools in the region, this one was a place where American college students with 6 years of Spanish as well as assorted backpackers, came to hang out, and that the school had no idea whatsoever about how to teach beginning Spanish.

A few years later I thought I would try again. This time I scheduled a 6 week stop over in Quito, Ecuador during one of my lecture tours. I asked a colleague there to find me a good Spanish language school, one where I could study 6 hours a day with 3 different teachers making use of a solid beginner-Spanish course. Again I made my way to an old house in the colonial quarter and up a flight of stairs to the director's office. What did they have in store for me, I wondered? Well, as the director explained, we use all our own materials here. He pulled out a grubby set of mimeographed booklets, each dealing with one aspect of Spanish grammar. There was one on nouns, another on verbs, and so on. "But where is the communication practice", I asked? I could see there was no oral work in any of the booklets. "How will I learn to speak?" "Oh" he replied. "None of your teachers speak English so you will have to speak Spanish to them." My heart sank again as I saw another disaster in the making. Shopping around for other schools I found the same back-packer hangouts I had found in Mexico and decided I would need to shelve my plans to learn Spanish yet again. Fortunately I did manage to find an excellent private tutor but she was only available for a few hours a week. However she did manage to get me started in Spanish, a journey I hope to resume in the future.

### ***From academic to textbook author***

During my first few years as a teacher and teacher-educator I soon became aware of the role that many textbooks and textbook authors have in TESOL. While I was a doctoral student in the 1970s the first generation of textbooks based on the new "communicative approach" began to appear, making earlier books written to the audiolingual or situational language teaching formulae look very old fashioned. Looking through the books I became familiar with at that time, I posed the same questions that many teachers must have arrived at when new textbooks come across their desk: who are the people who wrote these books, people with names like L.G. Alexander, Robert Lado, Brian Abbs and so on? How did they get chosen? And how did they come to write a textbook? And what does it take to write a best-selling textbook series?

During my year in Indonesia I taught from one of L.G. Alexander's books – *Practice and Progress* - and the bookshops were full of books by him and other popular authors of the day. Many of my students also had a bilingual picture dictionary published by Oxford University Press from their Kuala Lumpur office. It

was a modest little book, put together by taking a topically-organized word list that had appeared at the back of another Oxford publication, and repackaging it as a picture dictionary. This little book proved very popular and was later expanded and published in an international version by Oxford University Press in New York. The *Oxford Picture Dictionary* has been a best seller ever since and has spawned any number of similar titles from other publishers. One day during my year at the University in Salatiga, Central Java, a young British representative from the Kuala Lumpur Office of Oxford University Press – John Nicholson and now a long-term close friend -visited the campus to find out what books we were using and what kinds of books we needed. I pointed out that the picture dictionary was very popular though not particularly useful, since many of the words in it were of very low frequency. I suggested that a picture conversation book along the same lines would be more useful, and he suggested I write one. I rose to the challenge (not a very difficult one!) and produced a manuscript a few weeks later which Oxford published a year later (*English Conversation Through Pictures*), which consisted of situational dialogs with pictures and substitution exercises. (So much for my years of doctoral research!) It was my first venture into commercial publishing, one which from today's vantage points look appalling, but one which sold very well, so well in fact that Oxford asked me what other ideas I had for books. I proposed a few other ideas and they asked me if I would like to spend some time as a full-time writer after completing my first contract at RELC in Singapore which I was scheduled to take up after finishing my assignment in Indonesia. So in 1975 I found myself as a full time writer, based in Singapore.

The products of those early years are best forgotten, though one turned out to be reasonably satisfactory. Oxford needed a three-level course to be used in Thai teacher training colleges for trainee English teachers, and they linked me up with a Bangkok-based British Council teacher-trainer (Michael Long – but a different Michael Long from the one who would later be my colleague in Hawaii). We wrote a course called *Breakthrough* which was published in 1977, an early attempt at a communicative course drawing on current ideas of communicative syllabuses and communicative language teaching. The course did quite well in Asia at the time, appearing in both British English and American English editions. Other courses I wrote for Oxford at this time included a secondary school series for Indonesia, and later, a similar series for Hong Kong secondary schools.

Two years later I was back full time at RELC trying to balance textbook writing, teaching, and academic writing, a struggle that has been going on ever since. Around this time the Japan office of Oxford University Press asked me if I would be able to write a conversation course for the North-Asian market, and the result was another functionally oriented series *Person to Person*, co-authored at the time with an American teacher based in Japan –David Bycina. (*Person to Person* has sold over a million copies to date and is now in its third edition.) Following the success of *Person to Person*, my co-author and I decided to propose a basic series to Oxford. Every budding textbook writer dreams of writing a basic series - a four skilled multi-level international course - and popular courses at the time includes such classics as *Kernel Lessons*, and *English 900*. However our Oxford proposal was turned down, since Oxford was committed to another series at that time.

By this time I was on the faculty of the University of Hawaii and was becoming well established as an author or series editor for Cambridge University Press. The New York office of Cambridge was expanding into the ESL/EFL market, and following the success of their British series (*The Cambridge English Course*), approached me about the possibility of writing an American ESL series for Cambridge. This was in 1986, and I invited two of my graduate students who

were nearing the completion of their MA degrees (Jonathan Hull and Susan Proctor), to join me on this project, realizing that it would take a huge commitment of time and energy. So I took leave from my university position for a year, and we began the process of planning and writing the Cambridge series. This was no easy task, since neither us nor any of the Cambridge staff or their advisors knew exactly what they wanted. They knew what they didn't want, but not what such a course would look like. Four years later the first level of the course we developed appeared, followed later by level 2, and then when all three authors had moved to Hong Kong, by level three. (I later added a starter level) We had no idea what the market reaction would be. The primary market was expected to be in Asia (Japan, Korea, and Taiwan) and in 1990 we planned the big Japanese launch which took place at the annual meeting of the Japan Association of Language Teachers in Tokyo. I did a presentation on the course and it was widely displayed at the conference. Towards the end of the conference a representative from another publisher quietly pulled me aside and said to me "I think you are on to something with your new course – it's the buzz of the conference among publishers!".

The course went on to be a world-wide best seller, with two subsequent and extensive revisions and the addition of videos, a teacher training course and a host of other components. It still maintains a strong presence in the market after nearly 20 years despite attempts by many other publishers to dislodge it. Part of its initial success was due to timing. The market needed a fresh new course at the time and the competition was not strong. But the course also had characteristics that made it popular with teachers and students in many countries: a simple and clear unit structure, good design, and practical and well-sequenced activities that teachers reported brought about quick results. It was intended both for teachers whose mother tongue was English as well as those for whom English was a foreign language. It was also designed to appeal both to experienced and inexperienced teachers. The former could use it flexibly, adapting and supplementing it as they went. The latter could follow the series fairly closely and pick up basic teaching skills along the way. In my travels around the world in the last 20 years I have found that after teaching from the series for a few years, many teachers start their own language school using the series as the core of their program.

While those unfamiliar with textbook writing sometimes judge such courses as easy to write, (a comment normally made by people who have never written textbook-materials) materials-writing is in fact a very complex and tricky process. The goal is to produce something that looks appealing and is easy to use, and we were fortunate to have achieved this result with the *Interchange* series. However it took several years to produce, involved extensive field testing and multiple and extensive rewrites before the series was ready for publication.

Since then I have continued to write for two competing publishers, an anomaly that came about by chance, writing courses in the areas of listening and speaking skills aimed for the North Asian market for Oxford, and general courses for a world-wide market for Cambridge. And as a textbook author I have been fortunate to have had a second parallel career to my academic career, one that has taken me all over the world and enabled me to establish long-lasting friendships with teachers, course directors, and publishers' representatives in many countries. A highlight of this part of my work is always my lecture tours and workshops, which have enabled me to meet and talk to thousands of English teachers in more than 20 countries, and whose warm and friendly reception always makes me forget the discomfort of long plane flights and frequent changes of location. And of course the financial rewards of successful publishing

are substantial, enabling me to fund a variety of scholarship programs as well as to enjoy the good things of life.

The area of curriculum development and materials design is also of interest within applied linguistics, and in my role as an academic I have explored issues related to material's design in my research. This has included examining the relationship between theory and research in materials design, the role of textbooks in a language program, and the relationship between textbook use and teacher planning and decision-making, topics that I have explored in a number of articles and in my book *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*.

Textbook writing poses particular challenges, particularly when writing classroom materials for a large international audience of teachers and students. A good working-relationship with editors and advisors is essential and the ability to take on board feedback and criticism. Textbook publishing today is very different from it was when I first attempted to write materials for publication. Nowadays it is a hugely competitive industry, and textbooks are published to very high standards of design and production that very expensive to achieve. Today's learners expect classroom texts to have the same standards of design as they find in other things they read, and hence the art budget for such books is very high. Add the cost of DVDs, test packets and various forms of on-line support and the cost of producing new books becomes very high. In order to minimize the possibilities of failure, publishers are required to develop new projects carefully, obtaining input from consultants, teachers and potential users, making sure that the concerns of teachers and students have been addressed. Authors need to be flexible and be willing to make substantial revisions to their materials. And today despite my many years of experience as a textbook author, books that I write still depend on the skilful guidance of editors and reviewers before they are in a suitable shape for publication. And even then there is no guarantee that they will be successful.

### ***Life outside of applied linguistics***

While my work as an academic and as a textbook author has provided me with a fascinating career – one which has enabled me to live and travel to some of the most interesting parts of the world - my professional interests have always been only one part of my life. Throughout my career I have also pursued long-established interests in music and the arts that have resulted in my gradually becoming a serious collector of art, as well as a patron and supporter of musicians and artists in my home country, New Zealand. My collecting urges first emerged when I was a student, with the purchase of a blue and white Chinese vase of Ching dynasty vintage. It still features prominently in my collection of Ching and Ming dynasty blue and white Chinese porcelain that has now expanded to cover some 50 pieces. When I lived in Singapore in the 1970s, Indonesian porcelain dealers would arrive once a month from Jakarta and sell exquisite pieces from their hotel rooms in Serangoon Road.

A serious interest in textiles began when I was started teaching in Indonesia at the beginning of my career, since some of the students who studied at the university came from the outer islands of Indonesia and would come to visit me at the university guest house bringing beautiful examples of hand woven Ikat textiles from Sumba, Flores, Timor and other parts of Indonesia. They sold these to pay for their school and living expenses. Since then I have continued to acquire textiles from different parts of the world: Mayan textiles from South America, beautiful Indonesian Batiks from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and I have also built up a significant collection of Chinese, Korean and Japanese robes, items from which have been sometimes borrowed for museum exhibits. Another of my interests is art glass, and when I was on a visit to Cairo in 1975, giving a

series of lectures at the American University of Cairo, I came across a vase in an antique shop by the French glass maker, Rene Lalique. This started an interest in Lalique's art glass and I have now acquired some 120 examples of his vases, a collection which continues to grow, which has been exhibited several times and examples of which can be seen on my website ([www.professorjackrichards.com](http://www.professorjackrichards.com)).

Paintings are another thing I collect. The work of contemporary Maori artists from my home region in New Zealand has also fascinated me, and in my hometown of Gisborne there is a program in contemporary Maori art at the local polytechnic, a program that attracts young Maori as well as non-Maori arts artists from all over New Zealand. As patron of the program I provide annual scholarships to students in the program and commission or purchase works by lecturers and graduates from the program for the local museum.

A different side of my interests is in music. My grandfather George Croft, was a highly regarded builder of Church organs in New Zealand. (The middle initial in my name stands for Croft). Perhaps my musical interests came from my grandfather, and music was an important part of my education as a student. In recent years I have become active as a sponsor of musical performances, musicians and composers. My New Zealand residence where I spend 2 months every year, is the venue for a series of summer concerts my partner, my sister and I organize in support of an annual music competition that is held in Gisborne. We bring in leading performers from both New Zealand and Australia to perform in these concerts, and all proceeds are donated to the Gisborne Music Competition. I also support New Zealand composers of contemporary music and have commissioned a number of works in recent years, including a piano concerto, a song cycle, and a series of piano pieces. Currently I have several other important commissions by New Zealand composers in progress, one for an opera and another for a piano concerto. I also co-sponsor a composer-in-residence program at Victoria University, Wellington. Needless to say, without the success of my textbooks, none of the sponsorships I am currently involved in would be possible.

### ***And from now on?***

A young graduate student recently asked me what I thought it takes to succeed as an academic in our field, and in particular she asked me to reflect on my own career, something that I don't often have the chance or reason to think about since I am generally preoccupied with issues of the moment or planning future activities rather than looking back to the past. However on reflection I believe my own career path started with a passionate interest in my field. It was this interest that provided the motivation to go further with my studies and to try to learn as much as possible about the field of second and foreign language teaching. Doubtless the human desire for success and recognition also provided the motivation as well as the energy needed to devote the huge amounts of time needed for success as an academic and as a textbook writer. Having achieved these goals and having been handsomely rewarded in many ways for doing so, providing support for others who are starting out in their journeys or who are in need of support along the way seems like a good way to round off the wonderful experiences I have enjoyed throughout my career.