

INTERVIEW WITH NEIL MCLAREN



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When I think of James Neil Douglas McLaren, I always remember his first lessons in what was then the 4th year of English Philology at Granada University in 1980-1981. I had completed my first three years in the campus that Granada University had in Jaén at the time, and those among my new classmates who had been Neil's students previously said that he was a great teacher and that I could not possibly miss the subjects he taught. So there I went; that first year I enrolled in the two subjects he was teaching, one dealing with the analysis of non-literary texts (what has later been included in the field of "non-literary" stylistics) and one dealing with the analysis of literary texts proper. Well, after that first year in Granada, I thought I still had many new things to learn from him, so when I knew that he was teaching another subject the following year, on ELT methodology, I thought "I can't miss it," and there I went again. I think I did not miss one single lesson he gave in those two years, even though it sometimes meant walking a long way to and from the Faculty more than once a day. You can guess how lithe and active I felt at the end of those two years. And our internal history went on...

So last year, one day somebody came to me and said something like, "Hey, you know? I heard Neil McLaren is retiring at the end of the year," and I thought something like, "Oh, come on, this guy must be out of his senses." I simply couldn't think of the English Department without Neil, and it is not just melancholy (by the way, I used to stress the second syllable of this word at the time; thank you, Neil, I know better now), or the feeling that I am now obviously not so lithe and possibly not as active, but the thing is that, ever since then a few ideas seem to be going round and round again in my mind, considering the impressive and massive work he has done with so many of us in the past thirty-five years or so, and considering how we have improved so many things whereas others do not seem to be so well off as they should be. So, thanking him for these years and also for this little while that we are sharing, what follows is a rather informal chat between teacher and pupil, and also between colleagues. On the one hand, I am sure that, through his expertise, his writings and the indelible stamp he has left on all of us, he still has many more lessons to teach. On the other hand, I feel honoured to humbly speak of him as a colleague, although I know that this is practically an impossible challenge, being on an approximate par with him is no easy matter, although I think that I can improve, as a teacher, every day, and that is one of my goals for life.

J.N.: Neil, trying to make a balance of these years, in what sense is the current situation different from the situation you found in Spanish Universities in the 1970's?

N.M.: First of all, I should like to thank *GRETA*, and its editorial board, most sincerely for the privilege of this interview, and Prof. Jesús Nieto personally for his extremely friendly, tactful and professional preparation and editing of the same, with all the work that involves. I would also like to apologise in advance for the disjointed nature of some of the observations that follow. Coming on to the first question, then, there are really many differences between the situation now and the situation when I arrived, in 1973. If we think about the University curriculum, it was first of all a five-year course and English was only introduced in the third year; it was a

closed syllabus in the sense that there were no optional subjects; and it was also –not so anecdotally– different in the sense that we had classes on Saturday morning! So that it was a regular procedure for the student to have three classes Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and three classes Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, which was a very good idea, in my opinion! Teaching *Prácticas de Lengua Inglesa*, as it was then, in the third year and fourth year, we had big groups, and we were allowed to divide the groups by competence, that is, after a pre-test we effectively "streamed" them and we adjusted the teaching to the two or three groups. That, perhaps, would not be politically correct nowadays –or maybe it would– but I didn't have any problem with it. I'm not at all sure the students had very many problems with it either - that's something which has changed.

Of course, the number and type of students is also different nowadays. I don't want to categorise sociologically a type of student, but obviously the primary and secondary education system was quite different then to what it is now: there were far fewer people who went through the whole system. And there were quite a lot of students who, although they were not particularly gifted perhaps linguistically, when they came into English in the third year did have the backup of those first two years. Apart from the lack of the greater flexibility we have nowadays, when I started it was pretty clear, I think, when you came into a Faculty like the Arts Faculty, you were more or less assured of a job, and that job basically was teaching. I remember our course was very clearly orientated to providing a good, solid, general education in English Philology, and specifically a pedagogical education for future English teachers, and nobody, I think, had any serious doubts about that, apart from the few people who went on to do research: in those days, as you remember, certainly in Granada, there were few facilities for secondary school teacher training, since the professional teacher training colleges were basically concerned with primary school teachers and not with training secondary school teachers. I think that nowadays we have to be much more flexible, and much more concerned with a greater variety of future occupations, which hopefully will be reflected in the materials students have to study, and how they study them, in our English courses.

The next thing, of course, is that when I started it was "pre-internet", pre-multi-media: books were the thing, and books were expensive, libraries had nothing like the capacity they have now. Many, perhaps most, of our students could afford to buy books, perhaps more than nowadays - it's difficult to compare -, but obviously books and photocopies were the essential staple element, which in one sense simplified the task enormously, with all the limitations inherent in that. But if we think that you can't do everything anyway in a university English course, even one of five years, then it's not a bad idea to have a book-based course, where students at least get the most they possibly can out of their learning material.

Anyway, to conclude, I have quite fond memories of that initial curriculum. I do think it had very positive features, despite its rigidity –it could have had, for example, such things as introducing translation activities into the English curriculum. It had to be modified, and it has been modified. Whether for the better in general terms is very difficult to say, because the student population has changed so enormously over the last years. I think that we have much greater resources, and the challenge we have nowadays is to use those possibilities of all kinds, not only technological, but others. For example, in the old days it was more difficult for students to travel abroad, as there was no established Erasmus system. The situation is vastly different now and there is a very well-established system, and I think it's really sad that all students do not take up all the opportunities they have for travelling. Anyway, I feel equally comfortable about both situations, because they were/are in a sense both appropriate for their respective times.

J.N. Thinking of what we can imagine just round the corner, how do you think we should start adapting to the new challenges implicit in the Bologna process?

N.M. The first thing I think we will have to do is to get our aims clear. The term "Bologna" is bandied about in a loose way, and I feel we really will have to decide what we mean by it. Is it a re-working of the whole degree course, or is it, as I personally think it should be, much more a concentration on the methodological side and getting that right, providing the right number of physical possibilities, rooms for example, to be able to teach in the way that the Bologna concept suggests? I might say that it is not, in my view, a question of reproducing the "Oxford and Cambridge" system, which as you know is very much based on individual supervisions, or tutorials. I'm not sure we realise the enormous expense which that involves. I mean, those universities are very well-off, for historical reasons, and it's not something which can be introduced, at least in those terms, overnight, or perhaps ever, in a University like Granada, with sixty-five thousand students, or whatever, so I think we've got to be careful about trying to copy systems which have operated in other universities. British universities are,

comparatively, very small –though admittedly other European universities are certainly not–, and you can't just translate their system wholesale into the Spanish system. However, I'm all in favour of the change, as long as we don't go overboard and try to do too much and therefore feel frustrated that we're not doing enough. I also hope that we won't discard the formal lecture just like that –I'm not suggesting that that has been proposed–, since I feel it's got a clear place in the syllabus, given what we could term the traditional Spanish "learning style".

It's perfectly obvious that the students will have to use all the resources of technology at their disposal –and that does not mean just switch on the Internet and look for something–, the teachers also will have to be very much clued up on what is available in the Internet in their field, which is half the job, directing the students to the reliable sources, and not "any old" source. That's an area which all of us are completely aware of; it's just that there are different levels of confidence about using these techniques. In my view, the whole principle of the student workload being the basic unit, as it were, is perfectly sound, as long as –to go back to my first point– we are very clear what our aims are. It shouldn't be the case that, as long as students work three thousand hours, or whatever, they get their degree, and also I'm not sure that we all realise how much, not simply extra work, but careful reading of projects done by the students, etc., how much time and energy that is going to take. It will have to be built in, not only to the students' workload, but the teachers' workload, in an intelligent way.

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quick results, it's not going to be the case that everything is going to change overnight. There are going to be inequalities, for all kinds of reasons; some universities with a smaller student-staff ratio than others will probably be

able to function more efficiently; even universities with new buildings will be in an advantageous position, maybe. All those kinds of logistic things will mean that we're not talking about instant success, we're talking about, say, five years to get going, ten to know that we're pretty well on the right track.

J.N. "Universal" knowledge of at least one foreign language seems to be one of the great issues ahead, for all

graduates. To what extent are Spanish universities ready for this change in conception and attitudes, both for students and the administration?

N.M. This question is framed generally. Of course my experience is local, but just thinking generally, although it's absolutely essential that most – at least, students who graduate at university level – do have some command of English, for obvious reasons, we come back to the problem of numbers, with universities and faculties being so immensely big here, which is obviously an initial difficulty, no matter how many techniques you use. Though I'm not up-to-date with the latest curricula of different faculties, it seems to be the case that, with the apparent reduction in contact hours in some degree courses, the people who teach those courses are very reluctant to "lose" hours to their students' learning English. That's a difficult problem which will have to be tackled. Whether it can be tackled by law, as it were, is a very difficult matter, it probably cannot, or should not.

What should inevitably be done is *content teaching*; that is, there should be, let us say, one subject in each year that should be taught in English, and I don't think it's too difficult in the great majority of degree courses. I also feel that, apart from that, there should be the obligation for all students to submit, during their years of study, a certain percentage of their work in English. Some students, for example, may feel their English is not good enough in the first year to write anything in English, but they know they'll have to produce, in the four or five years, say, ten pieces of work in English, so they can do two a year, or they can leave the first year and do three a year, or whatever. That would get them accustomed to academic writing in English in their specialities - medicine, or science, or law, whatever - and would also foster the idea that English is directly related to their speciality. I feel that's the way it'll have to go, rather than obligatory English lessons for everyone, which is not feasible, or very difficult. This kind of obligation puts the ball back in the student's court, which is what Bologna is about at the end of the day. It's the students' responsibility, really, to educate themselves as well as they can.

J.N. This has obvious connections with those challenges that both primary and secondary schools have to face. From what you have heard concerning plurilingual education, what are your impressions about it in primary and secondary schools?

N.M. I will be fairly traditional in my response to this question. I just said that I think content teaching should be an important part of university education. However, I'm not at all sure that it should be anticipated in the primary or the secondary situation. Now, this is not intended to be, in any way, a criticism of the

capacity of teachers to attempt something extremely difficult; it's just that I feel it's essential for students to get the basics right, remembering that secondary school is nationally obligatory up to 16, and therefore you cannot presuppose motivation, as we know. I feel that it's so important for students to get, if you like, the "content", that I would be hesitant about adding an additional difficulty, which might reduce competence in the content to possibly dangerous levels - I don't want to over-dramatise-, though I haven't participated in

teaching in a bilingual or plurilingual situation, and I know many teachers have and that there are regular conferences about the issue. I would also like to see a clear statement of *evaluation* procedures, which seems to be a difficult, thorny issue - exactly what you're going to test, and how you're going to test it. As I said, I'm speaking out of ignorance, I really don't know enough, but I think if there is research

on that, it'll be very good to see. Also I'm a bit worried about, and I don't mean this critically, the anarchical way in which it may be introduced. I mean, if school X, or region X, teaches philosophy, or whatever, in English, and region Y teaches history in English, then how are we going to compare, for example, the results of the philosophy students and the history students when they come to university entrance examinations and all that - what impact is it going to have?

However, it's perfectly true that, in other European countries, it's been attempted and done - other countries, it must be stressed, with more experience in this kind of teaching, and in foreign language teaching in general. But we shouldn't, as we sometimes do, say "They do it in (Sweden), why can't we do it here?". It's not that we are better, or worse, or whatever; it's

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just the social, economic, and educational situation is so different that it's difficult. However, I would reserve my judgment, if you allow me, on bilingual or plurilingual education in primary and secondary, while definitely being in favour of a percentage of it at university.

J.N. So, do you think that other supplementary actions, like intensive English courses, the use of undubbed films on TV and some cinemas, for example, would be any help?

N.M. Of course, absolutely. It's a national scandal –I think that's not an exaggeration– that the mass media do not provide the Spanish listener with more English input. It's perfectly true that we have satellites and many TVs have "dual", and people who have them, and people who are interested can tune in to the BBC and so on, but it's not good enough that all the national television channels are not *obliged* to programme films and so on in English with subtitles. People must come to regard it as normal to hear English sometimes on TV. A recent example of what seems to me a totally misguided approach was the first speech of president Obama. On national TV, they dubbed it from about the fifth second of his speech. The speech was extremely well delivered, it would have been easy to subtitle it, with no difficulty whatsoever. It's a tragedy, without being dramatic, that possibly one of the most important presidential speeches in our lifetimes, given the situation, was not obligatorily made available to the Spanish audience in English, because it just doesn't give anybody the chance to begin to understand what this man is saying, who he is saying it to, how he is saying it. The Spanish listener may not understand everything, but the tone of voice and the body language are so important. I think that's a very concrete, specific case, which could be multiplied, and I was very sad to see it not given in the language. It's true that satellites help,

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but I think that doesn't mean that the authorities don't have a tremendous obligation to do much more.

J.N. Another on-going debate has been the reliability of *Selectividad*, the exam that all Spanish students have to pass to enter the University. I have very recently heard that in less than three years this will include not just a written test –as has been customary–, but also an oral one. In what sense do you think that this may change attitudes among students and teachers, and priorities, in terms of methods and approach?

N.M. If there is an oral element of some kind in the Spanish university entrance exam, it will obviously condition the way teachers prepare for this exam, and I would estimate, condition it for the better, because I think we all agree that in general the oral competence is really one of the, as you say here, *asignaturas pendientes* of the language teaching programme. Since all the criteria which are being used now, nationally and internationally, to organise foreign language teaching place, quite rightly, a tremendous emphasis on oral skills, then of course it's important and it's obviously going to have a serious effect. The first thing one thinks about, given the practical situation, is a listening test, which is OK, if it can be done fairly for everybody. It will mean, again, a tremendous amount of work, extremely

careful synchronisation of exams and security measures, but I think that can be done. What's much more problematic, naturally, is the speaking skill. If *Selectividad* is going to be, in serious terms, the public exam to get into university, and if we are going to demand some degree of speaking proficiency, I suspect that will mean including external examiners, which logistically is complex but it can be done –it's done in many other countries–, but it will have to be paid for, and organised. And then there's

time: oral exams can't be done like a listening test where the students listen together, even if in smaller groups. They take many more hours, so it's going to be difficult in the school timetable to organise it. Then, even if it's a fairly simple oral exam, which it will have to be, I do feel that it should be two examiners, one of them external, in order to give a certain level of reliability in the test

–I really don't know enough to say what possible role the new technologies could have here. The old –and I don't mean "old" negatively– ARELS exams, as models for a possible oral component in Selectivity would be very interesting, if they could be reformulated, because they were very good at giving a situational context where people could speak. I know there are more modern exams on the market now, but that would be an interesting model to look at. This is a very complex issue, and maybe we will begin with a listening section, see how it goes, as it were, and then with our confidence renewed, add a speaking one.

J.N. And now, in a more personal vein, what do you, as a father of two bilingual children, think of the age factor in learning a foreign language? What means do you think other couples may have if they want to have some "guarantee" that their own children will attain a reasonably good command of a foreign language in the future?

N.M. In this respect, I would like to comment on, and I'm sure he won't mind, the experience

of one of my colleagues –I have seen and talked to the child in question. The parents deliberately exposed their child, or let her be exposed, to an enormous amount of input from satellite TV, children's programmes, etc., from a very early age. The child is now, I think, five and a half. The input was constant, almost at any time of the day, the father is a native English speaker

and spoke to the child in English, but it is absolutely amazing the amount of knowledge the child has acquired, *and* the capacity the child has to produce and adapt that knowledge. Motivation was great; there was no frustration. I've had many conversations with the father, and he's assured me that the child comes out with expressions which he certainly hasn't taught her, which are perfectly appropriate, and which are even used ironically. I mean, it's not simply the language, it's the discourse. Of course, there are dangers involved, which all of those involved in this particular family

realise: there's the danger of a possible isolation, or possible overdependence on the TV. And it's probable that such progress can only happen *before* the formal instruction stage: it's probably not going to happen with a child of ten or eleven.

J.N. To what extent do you think that Information and Communication Technology can be a help in learning a foreign language? Is this part of a new conception of the way people communicate with each other, do you think the risk of "wasting" your time in front of

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a computer screen is simply not worth it, or should there be some means to make the most of these new tools without interfering in the learners' new interests?

N.M. It's perfectly obvious that it's all here to stay. I think we have to distinguish between "authored" programmes, I mean, *CALL* –Computer Assisted Language Learning– in the traditional sense, and the more recent use of the Internet and Internet-related activities. I think we will have to be very careful about choosing the right *CALL* programmes, because they're very often too self-enclosed. Even though they may call themselves "interactive," they don't allow the students very much leeway to recycle themselves in the programme, and if we use those kinds of authored programmes on CDs too often in a class, it will become mechanical, in a similar way in which the language laboratory was mechanical. But there are extremely helpful webpages on the use of computers in language learning available for teachers nowadays –like *ICT4LT*. The Internet, on the other hand, and associated activities, give more English possibilities. The range of language is greater, it's less organised, and therefore the teacher has a difficult job. You can't just let your students loose on the Internet and let them pick up everything, you have to structure the tasks carefully, but, if we come back to what seems to be accepted as a modern axiom, that foreign language teaching must be learner-centred, then it's obvious that the Internet does offer a lot of possibilities for the students to do many activities that they are genuinely interested in. So from that point of view, it's enormously useful, because of the immense variety.

I was just reading recently an article which said that we still need more research on the *effectiveness* of computer-aided learning, because it's OK, and it's enjoyable, but really how effective is it, and how do we test that effectiveness? We will have to evaluate how effective certain things are, and it's not easy to do, that's a question which still needs to be answered with more research, but I think there's no question that the modern technologies are going to be, or are being, very useful.

The other difficulty I see with it is organising the curriculum. We're talking about time, and we all

know the tremendously limited time we have. Just going back to our first question, at the very beginning, when I arrived in Spain, in secondary schools there were in the first year of what was then *Bachillerato*, five hours a week of English, and this regular daily "dose" was very useful. Now, with the reduced number of hours, if you're going to use the technologies, you will have to have very clearly defined aims and levels you want to reach.

One final point which might be relevant: it does seem to be the case that communication technology activities, whether they are CD-Rom kind of authored programmes, or whether it's work on the Internet, do provide a kind of "safe" environment for the student to make mistakes: the student can make mistakes without being exposed. The students can go up the wrong track and then come back, as it were, if it's a good programme, or if they know what they are doing on the Internet, and that may be psychologically beneficial for students, to be allowed to make the mistake, not in writing, not exposed to the classmates, nor to the teacher necessarily, but just to himself or herself. To what extent do students really feel this is a safe environment where they feel they can play with the language, use the language with more freedom than they otherwise would?

J.N. And now, in for a "tricky" question. Please forgive me and feel free if you do not think you should answer it. We hear about methods, approaches and new instruments in the teaching-learning process, but we sometimes seem to forget about something that I think is previous. In the old debate between being a native and not being a native, some kind of agreement seems to have been reached, so that the emphasis now lies on qualifications, both for the native, through proper training in ELT, and for the non-native, through a deep knowledge of what being a non-native teacher of a language implies. And now, there comes a second debate, this time around models of English in the world, and we have Inner Circles –your own–, Outer Circles –a Nigerian "L2" English speaker, for instance–, Expanding Circles –mine, hopefully–, English as an International Language and what not. How do you, as a native teacher who has lived abroad

for so many years and who is married to a non-native teacher of English, feel about all that?

N.M. When I arrived, I shared a class with a Spanish native teacher, now a great friend, and we had a beer, before the course began, and we were just talking, and he said, “I’m Spanish, I know the Spanish situation and I can teach English. You are a native English speaker - who is more valuable?”. In many ways it doesn’t matter., the important thing is the combination, and that obviously is still the case. We should presuppose a high level of English competence in the non-native teacher; it’s perfectly obvious too that the non-native teacher, in our case the Spanish teacher, has considerable advantages in the sense of the knowledge of the difficulties which a Spanish student is going to face when approaching English, because the teacher has gone through the same process, and therefore can anticipate –and anticipation is always a good idea– possible difficulties, etc., apart from the obvious cultural affinity with the student. In this respect, I would just add a brief commentary on what was –I don’t know if it’s changed– the teaching curriculum in the Education Faculty, for Primary teachers, which has an extraordinary little amount of work in –and about– English, whereas a great proportion is on pedagogy and other related fields. This is not to despise any of that, but, if we’re talking about the competence, in general terms, of the non-native teacher, I think that will have to be sorted out, because you cannot seriously expect any teacher trainee to come to a very high level of competence unless you put in a lot more input on the English side: that’s my feeling, there’s not nearly enough time, I think, devoted to English.

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Another factor –but this is me talking in my dotage! – is age, and going over now to the native English speaker in Spain, there’s another discussion I often have with my colleagues. When do we stop being reliable models? Is my English –I’m speaking purely for myself, knowing what I’m saying– really representative of the English which is spoken in Britain today? The answer is it is not 100% representative, it may be 90% representative, and I’m not just simply thinking about slang, the latest expressions, I’m thinking about the whole social and linguistic climate. Because if one has been out of that society, then, no matter how good and fluent one’s English is, which it obviously is, no matter how well you keep your accent, which you do, nevertheless you have not participated in that changing society, and I think, in my particular case, that British society has changed enormously over the last thirty-five years. Then, no matter how often you go back, it’s not the same going back as actually being there.

This is a factor which I think is probably not important at the secondary level so much, but it’s potentially important at university level. I’m thinking, too, about writing styles: they’ve changed enormously in Britain. You can “get away with,” if I may be old-fashioned, expressions, ways of writing, ways of formulating things, which for me, in my educational experience, would have been considered absolutely mistaken, and underlined with the red pen. There’s a greater flexibility, fluidity, there are different presuppositions when people are reading what you’ve written now than there were thirty-five years ago. As a university teacher, I think, one would have to be conscious of that possible limitation, apart from the fact that there’s no question that living

in a foreign country induces erosion of your own language, or attrition. It's perfectly true, you do find yourself forgetting the English words for so and so, because you're using the Spanish words every day. However, one tries to be professional, one tries to get over that, one keeps confident without falsifying anything. That's the point, I think.

As regards the kind of English –English for international studies, English as an International Language? It is that really. I used to tell my students in the methodology classes, don't forget that in the future you may not just be speaking English to native English speakers or native American speakers, or native Australian speakers, but to Swedes and Germans and French and whatever –and I must insist that our students have to be able to talk about *Spain*, their own culture, in acceptable English: the country, their region, the ways people live, etc. etc., which means, among many other things, knowing how to explain what a “plato

alpujarreño” is! Therefore, what I feel is necessary, and I'll finish with a paradox, is what you could call something like “simplified authentic English”. You've got to have simplified authentic language, it's got to be lexically as authentic as reasonably possible, syntactically, phonologically as simplified as reasonably possible, so it's clear, and that's the kind of combination I think perhaps we should aim at.

And as Bugs Bunny, I think, says “That's all, folks.”

J.N. OK. Thank you very much, Neil, it's been a real pleasure.

When I finished this interview with Neil, on a warm, sunny February afternoon, facing the Alhambra from his flat in Granada, I had the impression that his words, and ideas, were as modern, as fresh, as they seemed to me in an October morning, back in the early 1980's, in what was then a brand new Arts Faculty, in “Cartuja,” as we used to call it. It certainly is a luxury we can, and must, afford.