



Winter 2006-2007

Bill Isler  
Reports on  
TALGS 2007

Updated  
Achievement  
Profile: Mary  
Giles

Special  
Interview:  
The Founders  
of Pro Lingua  
Associates

Report from  
Seattle:  
TESOL 2007

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[/Index/](#)  
[/Letters/](#)  
[/Profiles/](#)  
[/Search/](#)  
[/Podcasts/](#)

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# ESL MiniConference

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## Bill Isler Reports on the 4th annual TALGS (TESOL/Applied Linguistics Students) Conference

TALGS this year was different. After 3 years of being scheduled on the third weekend in February, this year's TESOL and Linguistics Graduate Students conference was held a week earlier because the Carolina TESOL Winter conference took the third weekend. About 30 people attended. But as before the conference, co-sponsored by Carolina TESOL, took place at the Bate Building of East Carolina University, Greenville, NC.

The Invited Speaker, Dr. Donna Christian, president of the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL--[www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)), gave a pre-conference talk on Friday afternoon 3-4:30 p.m. Charting a Path to Bilingualism for Our Students. In it she noted that the U.S. lacks the language resources (in languages other than English) to meet its diplomatic, economic, security, and social goals, and in addition that the diverse languages of students in U.S. schools are not usually viewed as resources to be developed. She proposed pathways for individual students to follow through the educational system that lead them to bilingualism, along with policies and practices that would support such paths.

The conference proper, however, began on Saturday morning at 8:15 with two rounds of concurrent sessions. These paused at 10:00 for Dr. Christian's plenary on bilingualism, followed by a lunch break. After lunch, one round of sessions followed, and the conference included a general session/discussion forum. There were two more rounds of sessions before the conference ended around 4:55.

As always, the range of presentation topics was amazing: bilingual education in North Carolina with a focus on dual language immersion, teacher-embodied reflection through transformative Boalian theater, teacher attitudes and code switching in English speaking students, metaphorical language use in health professions, second language pedagogy (e.g. L2 writing; error correction; pragmatic transfer), indigenous language maintenance, new ethnic varieties of English, and more.

Some highlights:

Digital Languages: Teaching Complexity and Comprehension through the Application of the Visual in Digital Languages (Caroline Brooks, East Carolina University)

In case you hadn't noticed, kids of the Internet Generation are different. They operate at twitch speed; they process information in a parallel fashion rather than linearly; and they access information randomly rather than step by step. Rather than fear technology, they utterly embrace it, genuinely craving the newest i-Pod; and fantasy and role-playing are a basic part of their lives. They are used to instant learning and expect immediate results. How can all this not have an impact on their learning and cognition? These kids have to 'power down' to deal with books and the classroom.

Yes, there are positives in the picture. Learning, in the Internet schema, involves play, i.e., is a source of intensely absorbing pleasure. Because it is relaxed, involvement is heightened, thereby increasing our ability to learn. This gives us a logical question—how can and should we initiate our ESL students into this world of technology?

The presentation included an analysis of two popular web site designs. Have you ever heard of the 1950's Hello Kitty style? Would you ever imagine the Bauhaus movement of the early 20th century having a major role in web site design? Though the Internet generation may not be able to verbalize this, it intuitively picks up the underlying approach and meanings of distinct styles/organizations, a given-new format versus a gestalt recognition, subjectivity in its personalization versus a machinelike objectivity.

Parents before the Internet Age were the active educators; now that's no longer the case. What will be the long-term impact on the cognition and academic achievement of the Internet generation? How are a generation of simulated worlds and adopted personas being applied to reality even now? And can our use of game-based approaches help students with marginal skills or motivation? Fundamental stuff here, folks.

Conference Talk:

The 10:15 plenary by, Dr. Christian was "Bilingualism for All Students through Two-way Immersion." This was an overview of two-way immersion, synthesized from research conducted by the CAL, with information from programs around the country (overwhelmingly English/Spanish).

The government wanted research on improving foreign language education through immersion, integrating language and content. In 1986 one east and one west coast school began two-way immersion programs (Dr. Christian contrasted for us the several variations on the theme: Dual Language Umbrella, Developmental Bilingual, Transitional Bilingual, Two-Way Immersion, Heritage Language Immersion, and Foreign Language Immersion); these had as common goals language development in both target and native languages, bilingualism and bi-literacy, cross cultural competency, and high academic achievement. All included monolingual content instruction through two languages for all students, with 50 to 90% of daily instruction in the minority language.

Results differed as a factor of student language/family backgrounds, program implementation, community support, and school-level factors. But, in a nutshell, the overall outcome was simple and clear: those in Two-Way Immersion perform in all contexts at least as well as their peers.

Using immersion thus is a no-brainer, right? Unfortunately, policy at the local, state, and federal levels critically affects education. Local school boards determine if two-way immersion can even happen. State-level politics has made a bigger difference, notably with an English-only movement (and its typically anti-bilingual feeling); California, Arizona, and Massachusetts have put on the ballot referenda about bilingual education (when was the last time you heard of a movement to restrict math teaching?).<sup>1</sup> On the federal level policies for funding programs affect education. NCLB is silent on the method of instruction—all it requires is testing students in English—but this has caused English to be stressed earlier so that students will be ready to take tests.

Research documents the success of the model; will a dedication to good educational practices widen the use of immersion, will the global economy and national security needs push it, or will we be obliged to become activists to build quality education for our kids?

Language Maintenance and Status: Belize Kriol (Christa Teston, Kent State University)

Before Columbus the one language spoken in Belize was Mayan. Traders brought Spanish and eventually English, and the English brought slaves from West Africa. Speakers of Garifuna migrated to the area, and indentured servants were brought in from China and India. In the mid 1800's, refugees poured in from neighboring countries (by then Belize was a British colony) and Mennonites arrived from farther north; later a

variety of Asian groups flowed in.

Having large numbers of people speaking mutually unintelligible languages required the creation of a functional contact language; hence, Belizean Kriol developed (in Belize there is no hard 'c'), a creole in which English is the language of the lexicon but a variety of African languages provide the syntax (mainly Yoruba). Its phonology, vocabulary, and syntax differ significantly from standard English, but Kriol is the one language shared by nearly all and used by all for everyday communicational needs. Like other creoles, it is, of course, capable of expressing the full range of thought and emotion in daily life.

Since independence in 1981, a concern has been the creation of a unified nation, and a primary means to this has been efforts for Kriol to gain official status as the national language—essentially, to expand its vocabulary and codify its form to express the range of meanings and serve the range of functions required of a written language.

There have been attempts to codify Kriol—published Kriol texts, a dictionary, poems in Kriol, some short stories for adults as well as some children's literature (there's a Kriol Ananse), and even a small text on how to write Kriol for children. Efforts are being made to include Kriol-based text within the school curriculum.

But Kriol is still largely oral; the language of the colonizer is used by the bureaucracy, the courts, and industry. Further, since English was established as the official language in 1826, Kriol became perceived as 'broken English,' with resulting stigmatized social attitudes toward the creole. Gaining political and economic power (the prime minister uses English unless catering to a remote population) may be an uphill climb, but the number of world Englishes may be about to increase by one.

#### Afternoon Discussion Forum

More on Two-Way Immersion: an informal discussion of policy, politics, research, and practice

Educational statistics are not the only upside to bilingualism. Functioning bilinguals have the onset of dementia delayed by an average of 4 years. Strokes might wipe out a native language but still leave you with a functioning language. And in the classroom, Latin cognates make academic learning easier for a speaker of a Romance language (though students may need help recognizing cognates on their own).

On the less positive side, however, Dr. Christian noted that bilingual

education has gotten the blame, when some practices were used, for less than stellar results. The one thing that research has shown is that school (climate, practices, personnel, etc.) is the greatest determining factor in success.

Instruction in two languages to integrated groups of students is a challenge to implement. The possibility of using the second languages outside the school can vary widely. There may be too many different native language groups and partner groups that are too small. The Spanish may in practice be watered down so that English speakers can understand, whereas Spanish speakers get pushed. Extra startup costs for materials are by comparison only a relatively small problem.

Politically, there is a gut feeling to deal with—English is the key to success, and it is counterintuitive to feel that learning in Spanish (etc.) adds to overall success. There's also the situation that programs set up to serve English speakers siphon off capable bilingual teachers from the less privileged. Further, language programs here very predominantly tend to be the standard, detached-from-real-world-use foreign language model or unidirectional, transitional ESL/EFL programs—and it is extremely difficult to shift public perception to a fundamentally different model. Though the US may lag here, it does lead in concern for the civil rights of linguistic minorities and hence in its attention to their languages.

There are statistics such as those of NYC's newcomer high school for students in the US less than 3 years, which has a 95% rate of students continuing on to college. Can anyone pronounce 'Hispanic dropout rate'?

The forum also touched on the issue of beginning language study early or late. Adults have a metalinguistic ability—an awareness of what language is about, an analytical ability to analyze priorities – that makes language learning much more efficient. Though only children routinely can acquire accentless speech, accent reduction can reduce the effects of accents that inhibit success.

New Ethnic Varieties of English: Hispanic English in North Carolina (Erin Callahan, Danica Cullinan, & Mary Kohn, North Carolina State University)

Chicano English is a 'non-standard' variety of English found in many areas of the SW US; this study focuses mainly on Hickory and Durham, now mainly looking at acquisition by children, looking for local dialect.

Chicano English arose from 150 years of language contact in the SW in

situations similar to those which encourage creole and pidgin development; it now has phonological and syntactic norms of its own (some speakers of Chicano English may indeed be monolingual English speakers).

New dialects form (1) by the mixing of various dialects (for example, in Australia); (2) the next generation of children pick forms, with the majority winning and weeding out 'marked' forms, and (3) the least stereotyped forms and the most common forms are retained in the new, stabilized dialect. This process is called "koineization."

Consonant cluster reductions happen in many Hispanic dialects, more or less frequent depending on environment. There are variations in the vowel space. There is syntactic variation, including past tense unmarking and regularization of irregular forms. Double negation often appears. However, the study did not find evidence that a koiné dialect has formed.

This is not just an issue for linguists; dialects can affect a student's proficiency assessment, for example if a Hispanic acquires regularization of irregulars as a dialect feature.

Every dialect can vary on a continuum from more to less standard depending on context and speaker. In this study, social dimension was clearly a factor. The vowels of the nine year old student in the study who went to a school with few Latino contacts had much more Southern vowels than the others, as well as Southern vernacular grammar. So, social contact with others seems to control the formation of dialect, and the particular dialect seems to be a matter of social group membership.

What social groups do your students participate in?

Call for participation: TALGS 2008

The stated purpose of TALGS is "...to provide a relaxed but serious environment where graduate students in Applied Linguistics and professionals working in the field of TESOL... can have the experience of presenting their work and receiving feedback." TALGS is "a forum to showcase their research and experiences... committed to bettering the educational experiences of language learners in the community by providing a comfortable environment where an interaction between theory (the researchers) and practice (the teachers) is possible." This is a marvelous opportunity for participants in any ESL teacher training program; don't shortchange students by not strongly encouraging them to take advantage of this experience.

The 5th TALGS conference returns to its regular schedule in 2008; mark your calendars for Saturday, February 16, 2008 (9am-6pm). For information, visit the conference website at <http://core.ecu.edu/engl/talgs/conference/conference.htm>. To view pictures from this year's conference, visit <http://core.ecu.edu/engl/talgs/history/index.htm>.

<sup>1</sup> Colorado defeated the initiative; Mass. banned bilingual education; there the legislature added an amendment allowing two-way immersion—which the Governor vetoed—but the legislature overrode him.

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2007 ESL MiniConference Online



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