

## John Eckersley's speech at the English UK 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner

Chair Sue  
Chief Executive Tony  
Members of English UK

I feel it a great honour to be invited to this conference dinner. I have been asked to "say a few words", but when I asked how few I could get away with I received no answer. So wait and see.

The first conference of ARELS (one of the "parents" of English UK) was held at the Bell School in Cambridge on 2 April 1960. I remember the date well because, besides being the day of the Oxford-& Cambridge Boat Race, it was the day I was getting married = and as a result I missed the Conference. (I still don't know who won the Boat Race). My wife Angela was already an employee of the School and was much later to become my partner (I know it's usually the other way round, but that's the ambiguity of the word "partner"). From then on, Angela and I made a point of attending every ARELS conference while I was principal of our school.-They were fixed points in our diaries. They were held in various locations - seaside towns in the south of England, Edinburgh, Oxford, Cambridge; York, Harrogate, and one on a golf course somewhere in the Midlands.

I remember that it was policy at one time to get celebrities to make the conference speech – I remember characters like Laurie Taylor and Paul Jennings. And also retired politicians – David Steele, for example, Roy Hattersley, and, Dennis Healey. I'm afraid you have come down a bit in the world since then!

I have been trying to jog my memory back 50 years because I want to speak about the beginnings of ARELS/ In many ways we were a pioneering group and we developed a host of ideas that are now taken for granted. Many people played a part in this endeavour, but I have picked out six whose efforts and qualities got it started, ensured that it didn't die in infancy, imbued it with a distinct character and ideals - and developed some very important activities and functions. I'll designate these six "heroes". I haven't done much research on this: it's not authoritative history., I'm speaking mainly from memory (and my memories of events 50 years ago are a bit like a few mountain peaks projecting from an ocean of amnesia). Others who experienced those years will have different - and maybe more accurate - memories, and might well pick very different "heroes"

I started my school in 1955, initially with a partner [that word again] but later alone. In 1957 the Ministry of Education decided that privately owned schools of English could apply for inspection by an HMI and might then be "recognised as efficient" [a rather quaint expression]. There were not very many schools of English then and most were quite small – often family run - compared with today. It was a sort of cottage industry. But it was obviously a growing industry, fed by the immense need to learn English felt by young people in post-war Europe . We had our inspection –by the father of David Blackie, as it happens – and were duly "recognised as efficient". A year or so later we had a visit from the principal of Davies's School in London, who had the idea of forming an association of recognised schools. His name was Malcolm Campbell. He convened a meeting of all the schools which had shown interest, and that initial meeting in February 1960 was attended by 16 schools. There was also a representative of the British Council, Horace Cartledge.

The document approved by this meeting, setting out the aims of the new association, – is remarkable. It made it clear that the prime aim was not to be promoting the interests of member schools and maximising their profits, but rather raising the standards of English language teaching in Britain,. including the organisation of training courses for EFL teachers.

Promotion was mentioned in paragraph 4, but it referred only to making the existence of the association known and issuing a list of members.

The question arose of what the name of our association should be. Membership was open only to “recognised” schools and many of the members at the time used the words “School of English” in their name (Studio... , London..., Eastbourne..., Regency... and so on), as a few still do

So: “Ladies and Gentlemen! Welcome to our new association! The Association of Recognised Schools of English!!...= Hang on a minute...!”

So we became the Association of Recognised English Language Schools - ARELS .[to rhyme with cheerful things like barrels and carols]

Two men -it seems to me - had brought this Association into being and later imbued it with its special character and aims. They became the first two elected chairmen and they are my first two heroes. **Malcolm Campbell** was a softly-spoken man with a genial and self-effacing manner. But that concealed a steely determination. It was clear to him that members should not rest on the laurels of recognition but should be engaged in an ongoing programme of raising their standards in everything they did . When, after some years, it became evident that the Ministry’s inspection regime was not sufficiently rigorous, he successfully proposed that ARELS should set up its own inspection system .It was euphemistically called “Consultancy”, but it was compulsory.

**Frank Bell** had been a POW of the Japanese and as such had played a prominent part in running the “undercover university “ in the POW camp, which was described in his book of that name published after his death by his wife Elisabeth. He saw English language teaching not only as a promising business but also as a way of bringing together in friendship people from the previously warring nations. As chairman, Frank played an important part in bringing the new association to the notice of people in government. He gave it gravitas. Frank had a friendly and approachable nature and an ability (which I gather was not totally effortless) to find the felicitous turn of phrase in public speaking.

In the early years of the Association, the chairman had to carry out the duties of what we now call Chief Executive, as well as running his own school. As ARELS grew, this began to become very onerous, and it was clear that we needed a Secretary of the Association. We found a remarkable woman, who threw herself into the job, arranging and minuting committee meetings and conferences, keeping the accounts and in effect running the whole administrative side of the Association. Her name was **Gretta Smith**. But Gretta had two young children – 2 boys - and the time came after a number of years when she asked that we find someone else to take her place. But she offered to stay on for a time to induct the new General Secretary. So we advertised and interviewed for a replacement. As far as I remember the first appointee resigned quite soon after taking on the job and the second proved totally incompetent. So while he was nominally in office, Gretta stayed on and did all the organising. Without her, I think the Association might well have collapsed at this point. Gretta died very suddenly from leukaemia. ARELS set up a fund for the education of her boys, and for many years there was at every annual conference a “Gretta Smith Memorial Lecture”.

But by great good fortune, just before Gretta’s death, we had appointed a new Secretary. MajorGeneral (retd.) **David Egerton** proved just the right person to take over. He was an apparently modest and gentle-mannered man – maybe “the very model of a modern major-general” =and he stumped around on an artificial leg. We installed him on the top floor of the ARELS premises in Russell Square, where he had to go down three flights of stairs to reach the loo – and he settled into the job with good humour and great efficiency.. Part of his job

was organising the annual conference, and ARELS – in a rather impractical flight of fancy – had just voted that every second year the conference would be held in a location abroad. We had envisaged Copenhagen or maybe Vienna or Nice. But of course on investigation it was evident that these would have been prohibitively expensive. We had just had a conference in Paris, thanks to the generosity of John Haycraft who had just opened a branch of International House there. So where next? After much casting around, David Egerton arranged the conference at a hotel in Torremolinos. The conference went well and many enjoyed the location. But some members felt unwilling or unable to attend and it was decided that future conferences would be held in the United Kingdom.

I still get a card from David Egerton every Christmas. He is now aged 95 and living in a retirement home. I have described him as a modest man. But when I googled him recently I was surprised to find that he had been more modest than I had realised. He is in fact Sir David, 16th Baronet, OBE and M.C.

One of the original aims of ARELS had been the organising of training courses for EFL teachers. But this had never been done. There were no recognised qualifications for EFL teachers. This meant that school principals found it very difficult to select new teachers. One could have a few things to look for – teaching experience, knowledge of languages, outgoing personality = but it happened all too often that we found we had appointed someone who wasn't up to the job. And what was the job? What did we tell them they should be doing? I'm sure that others besides myself resorted to putting in their hand the wonderful book by W. Stannard Allen "Living English Structure" – with its immortal characters "my girl-friend Maisie" and "my boy-friend Cyril" and telling them to read the explanation of the grammatical point and then get the class to work through the practice sentences at Intermediate level...[There was a curious trap in this book for the unsuspecting teacher. Stannard Allen had not realised that the expression "make love" no longer had the innocent meaning he had known in his youth. So the exercise where the students had to choose between "made" and "did" in the sentence "My boy-friend Cyril (*blank*) love to me last night" caused consternation in the Intermediate class. But I digress. I was talking about the absence of training courses for EFL teachers...]

So my fifth hero is **John Haycraft**. I have already mentioned him, as hosting the Paris conference at International House there. (And incidentally he acted as an excellent tour guide at Torremolinos) John had when young taught English in Spain (his first book was called "Babel in Spain"), and he later wrote "An Introduction to English Language Teaching" and some successful course books (some of you will remember "George and Elvira") At International House in London he started a programme of very intensive 4-week EFL training courses, originally for IH teachers, but then open to everyone. Teachers learnt the rudiments of grammar, phonetics, etc. But above all they were assessed and graded on their practical performance of giving actual lessons. This meant that one could be assured that a teacher with grade 1 or 2 from IH would not be a flop in the classroom – an enormous advance for TEFL in this country.

I now come to my sixth and last hero. Now, I would like to assure you – and him – that when I planned this talk and chose my heroes I had no idea that he would be with us this evening.. But to my delight, he is. He struck me [you'll learn who he is in a moment] as a man always striving for perfection even if it required a solution that was unusual and unconventional – I remember that he once proposed holding the annual conference on a Thames steamer – we never did –But he spent a lot of time and energy trying to devise an oral exam. This had always been a weak point in language testing. Oral ability was usually assessed on a mainly subjective basis by a single examiner. But then he had a brilliant idea.... I am speaking of course of **Peter Fabian**.

The solution to the problem of oral testing came to Peter – he once told us = as ideas often do – in the bath. And - again like many great ideas it was a very simple one, and one which may appear in retrospect to be obvious. Peter suddenly realised that the newly invented language laboratory, which many schools were installing - was the key. If the student's responses were recorded on tape or cassette they could be marked and assessed with the same reliability and consistency as a written exam. So started the ARELS Oral Exam. (And incidentally Peter had an able assistant in composing his test material – one Timothy Blake) With the arrival of the ARELS Oral we could say that - for the first time in language testing = the student's speaking and listening could be assessed with the same reliability as his writing and reading. This was – to coin a phrase – a giant leap for language testing.

So there are my six heroes. Old ARELS hands will think of others and would probably make a different selection, for many people contributed to the achievements of the Association that came into being in 1960. It is one of the strands that have formed English UK as it is today, and I think that English UK carries on much of the legacy of ARELS. When I look at the Yahoo chat website, and try to remember what all the acronyms – SVV, GSV, CAS, HTS = mean, I see the same spirit of camaraderie and co-operation that characterised the ARELS that I knew. I am also made aware of the horrendous difficulties and threats that now surround us and with which the members, Chief Executive and staff now have to cope. I would like to wish English UK the best of luck for its next 50 years