

# SELT – School of Experimental Language Training

SELT is a *Teaching English Service Learning Program* and  
*Community Action Research Project*

designed and conducted by **OSEA**  
1997-1999, 2010-present  
In the Maya community of Pisté, Yucatán, México

## Director, 1997-1999, 2010-present

Dr. Quetzil E. Castañeda, Director OSEA and Visiting Lecturer, Indiana University

## Co-Director, 1997

Dr. Joy Logan, Latin American Literature & Cultures, University of Hawaii

## Co-Director, 1998

José Saul Martínez, Masters student in Anthropology, University of Houston

## Co-Director, 2010

Megan Solon, Doctoral student in Hispanic Sociolinguistics, Indiana University

## 1997 Assistant Director

Edith Flores, Masters Student in Spanish, University of Houston

## 1997 Student SELT Instructors:

Carlos Arana	University of Texas-Austin
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Lisa Porostovsky	University of Houston
Kim Robbins	University of Houston

**SELT** was one of the central components and areas of investigation of the Field School of Experimental Ethnography. SELT has three main objectives:

- 1) to provide English-language instruction to the community of Pisté;
- 2) to train Field School students in the theory and use of social-based methodologies of language teaching;
- 3) to evoke a space of transculturation within the classroom where the "double sensation" of ethnographic activity could undergo experimentation with expanded methods of documentation.



**D**rawing from strategies suggested by Freire, Giroux, and Action Research Instruction, SELT sought to create an English program based on the linguistic needs as expressed by the people of Pisté and where feedback, observation, and documentation were both reciprocal and multiply-voiced activities. The curriculum was not preset. Registration interviews in Spanish about the location and frequency of the use of English, and first-day instruction questions about class expectations, provided material for subsequent role-playing situations done by the adolescent and adult Pisté students. These role-playing activities served as both a needs assessment to guide the curriculum and as an initial proficiency assessment of linguistic skills. As well, they allowed us to displace the written text from its privileged position in the classroom, which was necessary in this semi-literate context. Instructional activities geared towards meeting these needs and the goals of the Field School were collectively designed by the instructors with the help of the directors and functioned within a broad four-week topical frame that moved from Self and Family, the Classroom, the Community of Pisté, Tourism and Chichén Itzá.

Each instructor taught one course and observed another. Instructors kept classroom journals of their own course and ethnographic documentation (fieldnotes and photographs) of the class s/he was observing. Every day one hour was devoted to discussion of the day's classes by instructors and the director. Additionally, students' feedback and comments, which were elicited through class activities involving dialogues, commentaries on class photos, role-playing and drawings, also entered into ongoing critique of classroom techniques and, thus, forged a focal space in which to explore multiple modes and uses of documentation of the "observed" observing.

## History of SELT and Ethnographic Ethics

The Field School in Experimental Ethnography, founded in 1997, emerged out of previous field seasons (1994-1996) in which I brought undergraduate students from different universities to the Maya community of Pisté, where they lived with families for 6-8 weeks in an intensive program of transcultural, multilingual exchange and anthropological fieldwork. Students conducted independent research projects or voluntarily taught English as a Second Language (ESL) to hundreds of adults and grade school children for free. As an anthropologist doing research in and with the community of Pisté for the last fourteen years (since 1984), teaching English emerged as one way to reciprocate to the community the gift that they have given me; that is, the generosity with which they have allowed me into their lives and to share in the experience of their triumphs and sorrows. In turn, I am indebted to the passion and commitment with which the students gave of themselves to share in this transcultural experience with the people of Pisté. Together, we have sought to fulfill the ethical responsibility of ethnographic engagement.

### Participants:

130 Pisté Residents (Children and Adults)

Classes: 7 Sections (Children one hour Monday–Thursday)

(Adults one hour Monday and Wednesday)

### Beginning

2 Sections Ages 8–10

1 Section Ages 11–13

1 Section Adults

### Intermediate

1 Section Ages 11–13

1 Section Ages 14–16

1 Section Adults



# "What it Means to be a Language Teacher



From  
SELT Portfolio  
By Laurie Kovacovic

The one thing I thought I would never do is become a language teacher. But throughout the course of teaching English to children and adults in Pisté, I realized that every time the mouth moves or the body gestures, a lesson in language is given; and that the lesson is not only about certain words or grammar, but also about communication.

My own struggles with English, which is my native tongue, helped form the approach I took to teaching English as a second or third language. The primary problem in my experience with language has been the failure of oral and written language to adequately express feelings, descriptions, or almost anything. Or perhaps the problem was my eclipsed vision that oral and written language were the only acceptable ways to “concretely” state something. Somehow, a boundary line was drawn between body language and word language, even though the two are used simultaneously. The body’s contribution to language was forgotten by the mouth and hand. So when teaching language in the ESL setting, I tried to connect body movement to spoken language as much as possible. Instead of learning the definition of words by a chain of connections relating the English word to the Spanish word, and then to the object, I tried to include more active means of connection. For example, instead of teaching the word “pencil” as translated to *lapiz* which represents that thing in your hand which by now you might forgotten that you are holding, even though you are learning its word right now, I used movements like writing with a pencil, touching a pencil, and drawing a pencil, to define the word. Hopefully this practice of connecting word language with body language and movement helped the students learn English, and not a translated version of Spanish.

Outside of ESL it became apparent that I was not the only person teaching language in this manner. The many people I would talk to in the street, whether in Spanish or Maya, also relied on gestures and movement to accompany the spoken word, especially in situations where they were teaching new words, phrases or expressions. In one situation, a middle aged woman introduced me to her family in Maya. She pointed to each person, raised her hand to indicate older and younger, and positioned herself in proximity of those related most directly to her. I pretty well understood (or I think I did) the relationships. Later in the conversation however, she

referred to the same people without gestures and I was lost. We then shared a chuckle at our mutual confusion and understood perfectly well the humor of the situation. Another example of understanding spoken language through body movement was hearing and seeing people greet each other in the street. Without understanding a single word, at first, the raise of a head, a hand, a repeated expression, the tone and rhythm of the words explained more clearly what was occurring than a direct translation to English or Spanish ever could. In the instances in which I was able to understand what was transpiring without full translational knowledge of the words used, I understood more completely the meaning of the language being exchanged. And so when speaking myself, whether in the more formal arena of the classroom, or casual encounters on the street, I tried to talk as much as possible with my body, so that my language could also be understood, and mutually intelligible exchanges could take place.

The main reason the people of Pisté want to learn English is as a means of economic opportunity in the context of tourism. In order to serve the international clientele of tourists with expectations of effortless communication, English is a necessity. So of course, language lessons, in the classroom and otherwise, dealt mostly with words needed to sell, seat, and service the tourists. But it would be impossible to teach, no less retain, all the words used in tourist-Pistéleno exchanges. So in order to continue communication after words have failed, there must be a backup plan. That plan is movement and gesture. Language can and does persist without words.

But tourist economy is not the only reason for people wanting to learn English nor my teaching it. Learning and teaching language is a gateway to communication on a personal level. It requires interaction and exchange. Language is something we can reciprocate, play with, and create. Not once did I feel like I was solely teaching English because with every exchange I learned something not only about language, but also about the person with whom I was engaged, as they did with me. This even occurred on a group level as “jokes” frequently emerged from blundered attempts to “speak correctly” in class. These jokes were understood and enjoyed by everyone, especially if they were the result of one of my blunders, and they usually were. Also, the interaction of learning/teaching language is a situation of trust. Students trusted me to teach them useful, correct English. They entered into a situation in which they would be corrected, singled out, and challenged. This is an example of double sensation because I too was being challenged by teaching, I was also in the spotlight, and my Spanish and Maya skills were under requested scrutiny. I too, had to trust my students.

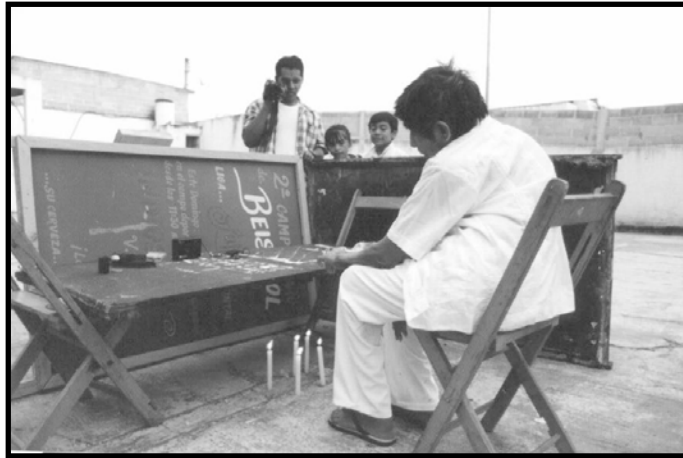
Being a language teacher is a situation of intense exchange. By learning what others think about language, you begin to re-evaluate your own perceptions of what it is, how it works, and how it changes. For me, a newfound awareness of its physical dimensions helped reconfigure my thoughts on and use of ever-changing language. By teaching language, you learn language, and language is created between those involved in the exchange. Of course this experience is not reserved only for “language teachers” but for anyone in a state of communication.

## CLOSING CEREMONY OF THE SELT, AUGUST 6, 1997

Student participants of The Field School in Experimental Ethnography taught over 130 adults and children from the Yucatec Maya community of Pisté. In a closing ceremony, students from Pisté received certificates of completion of the English Course. The Closing Ceremony or *Clausura* celebrated student success with food, music, a ritual blessing and cleansing by a Maya Hméen, or “priest,” and a demonstration of the songs in English that were learned (“Old Don Victor had a Milpa,” “Head and Shoulder, Knees & Toes,” and “The Hokey Pokey”). In turn, the SELT teacher-ethnographers performed a demonstration of the Maya that they had been learning during their stay in the community by singing “The Hokey Pokey” in Maya. A documentary exhibit of the English classes was installed in a room of the Town Hall next to the plaza area where the closing ceremony was conducted. The exhibit included photographic essays by the Ethnographer-SELT teachers and drawings made by the children during the course of their lessons. In potlatch style, the photographs were given to the students from Pisté, aged 8-16, who ravaged the photographic displays in search of images of themselves and friends. Other student ethnographers who did not participate in the teaching of SELT, video-documented the entire ceremony, a copy of which has been given to the community.

In terms of ethnographic research, the Closing Ceremony, was an example of an “ethnographic installation.” This ceremony was a meaningful event that culminated a four week process of transcultural exchange and ethnographic study of double sensation. It was meaningful to the children who participated and to the families who shared in their children’s cross-cultural and multilingual educational experience. The standard product of ethnographic research, a book written in a foreign language and sold in inaccessible markets, has no immediate value for the participating members of the community. However, the memories and artifacts of the event, which in turn are evocations of a shared experience of close human engagement within a momentarily expanded community of belonging form the real object and goal of ethnographic fieldwork and practice.







# *Commentary on the SELT Clausura*

*August 6, 1997*

*Laurie Kovacovic*

The clausura was a very special and successful event. It provided the opportunity for the teachers, the students, the families, and the community to be together informally and to celebrate the shared experience of language classes, as well as the “happening” of the clausura itself.

The setting, El Palacio Municipal, was ideal. It was a space we had used from beginning to end, from inscripciones [SELT registration] to adult classes to the clausura. Not only was it a continuing site for events, but it also showed the collaboration involved in the language school. The space belongs to Pisté, but it was shared with us (the field school) and the community at large to facilitate a coming together of people for the purpose of learning language, practicing ethnography, and simply getting to know one another. El Palacio Municipal was one of the central zones of contact, not only for those of us directly involved in teaching and learning there, but also for the observers (from both the field school and the community). Also, the fact that so many different events take place there, from baptism parties to wedding receptions to art exhibitions to drunken incarcerations, liberated the event from the confines of a school structure and idea, and opened it up to a more generalized community event. I, at least, felt much more relaxed and open at El Palacio than I would have at La Primaria.



Looking at Photos of the SELT Clausura

It was also a great space for show and tell. It worked out well that the display items were upstairs. I saw children pulling on their parents' arms, urging them to come see what they had accomplished. The display room, which was the main ejido office up on the second floor of the Palacio, created a concentrated space of engagement with what we did in ESL. It was easier to discuss school artifacts in the showcase area, and then let conversation wander where it may outside of the room. I

don't mean to suggest a division between the terraza area and the display room, rather that the event occurred in one space, and a part of that space brought together all the work of all the students in a condensed area.

I still find it very hard to be critical of the event. Everything that happened was a great surprise for me, and I was incredibly moved by the contacts of that night. From what I could see, pretty much everyone enjoyed themselves; they took advantage of what was there, cookies, drinks, and people, and went with it. For me, it was a sort of affirmation of what I had been doing, teaching English and all. I had begun to wonder if my students liked me, if I was a decent teacher. I felt like I had not made good connections with the community. But at the event, parents of my students recognized me, and I had some wonderful, if short, conversation with them. Also, I was amazed by the excitement and anticipation the students had for performing their songs as well as witnessing our rendition of *The Hokey Pokey*.



Several times my ones) pulled at my me our class display, distributed the photos frenzy of grabbing them gave me hugs received this warmth older students, and asked if I would come year (and I certainly



students (the little own arms to show and after we had through a wild hands, many of and kisses. I also from many of my was continually back to teach next hope I do). But I

was not the only teacher to be engulfed by the affection and overflowing appreciation of students and parents. All the teachers commented on how touched they were by the events at the clausura, whether it was Edith being sweetly mauled by her class, or the fact that *all* of Lisa's students were able to attend. We were surprised at how many people showed up for the clausura, and then we understood how much our teaching English was indeed, a part of the community.

