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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Gosewisch, Ronald</td>
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<td>Citation</td>
<td>長崎大学教養部紀要 人文科学篇 研究発表論文集</td>
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<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>1988-01</td>
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<td>URL</td>
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Report of the 8th World Congress of Applied Linguistics at the University of Sydney 16-21 August, 1987

Submitted by Ronald Gosewisch

The intent of this report is to touch upon AILA and the Congress held at the University of Sydney, the presentations, primarily ESL and CAI/CALL, the facilities and the activities.

I. Introduction

AILA, an abbreviation of the French name (Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquee), is 'an organization recognized by UNESCO which pursues... objectives' that focus on the promotion, coordination, collaboration of research in applied linguistics as well as organizing a world congress every three years.'

The 8th World Congress included 25 different sections, first and second language acquisition and pedagogy, bilingual education and CAI/CALL to mention a few. Located in the Carslaw and Marsden buildings just inside Sydney University's main gate and across the street from one another, the presentations were all within easy walking distance of each other, so no one had to rush from one end of the quite extensive campus to the other in order to attend another presentation. Free refreshments served just outside the publishers book display area included coffee (instant), tea and cookies (biscuits).
Events started the very first evening immediately after registration which was held at the Women’s College. A reception with drinks and snacks (a meal, actually). The Second evening, the Vice-Chancellor’s Reception took place in the Grand Hall. More drinks and snacks for a much larger crowd...close to 600 milling about, making new acquaintances and renewing old. The Congress Dinner on Thursday evening was a five course meal served formally in the University Union on the north side of the campus just adjacent to the Parramatta Expressway.

Selecting which presentations to attend at such conventions as this, is always a problem for the participants. One must spend considerable time carefully reading the Congress schedule and the abstracts of the presentations in order to make proper decisions. The Programme and Abstracts for AILA’s 8th Congress were, unfortunately, rather unwieldly thus compounding the problem. Moreover, once a careful perusal has been made, all does not necessarily go well. Last minute cancellations, changes in content from that outlined in the abstract, overcrowding at popular presentations, all such pitfalls are quite beyond the control of the participant. In the case of this writer’s experience, one presenter did not show and in two cases, the content of the presentations had been significantly changed from the original abstracts, because, as one of these presenters explained, in the process of research, newly discovered information and understanding forced the presenter to change her thinking quite radically.

II. Presentations

A. The First Day

The first presentation attended was given by Jill Burton who
was to talk on a menagerie of ESL methods. In fact, her research led her to discuss the problem of applying student centered teaching in a publically administered program of ESL for adult learners, which had heretofore been by in large teacher centered. The sub theme of her presentation was the need to keep teacher developed teaching materials flexible in nature so as to be readily able to adjust them to many and varied situations one finds in such a program as her research centered upon. The second presentation focused upon foreign language proficiency in U. S. secondary schools. (Having experienced two teachers of Spanish, neither of whom could speak Spanish, piqued this writer's interest to attend this presentation.) Though one could see that there had been definite improvements over the situation of some thirty years ago, success as measured in the percentage of pupils who learned and retained more than sixty percent of the material from any one course was still dismally low. In the neighborhood of from ten to fifteen percent. The third presentation was a somewhat (to this writer) confusing discussion on the applicability of psycholinguistics to the 'teaching of literacy' (sic). Though no definitive statement was made, the implication was that this field of study should provide linguists with a broad area of research for some time to come. Nothing mentioned about the status of literacy itself. The fourth presentation was the one that most interested this writer. Unfortunately, a last minute announcement was made just before the scheduled time declaring that the presenter could not come to the Congress. As mentioned above, the day was a prime example of the trials and tribulations of the wayward convention goer.

B. The Second Day

First attended was a presentation on comparative discourse
given by Pauli Saukkonen of Oulu University, Finland. The examples tended to confirm that a good deal more silence between utterances is tolerated in Suomen (Finnish) than is in English. Next attended was a comparison of M. A. K. Halliday’s ‘grammatical’ approach, O’Connor and Arnold’s ‘attitudinal’ approach and David Brazil’s ‘discourse approach to English intonation’. In this presentation Afaf Elmenoufy attempted to show how these approaches were applicable to teaching situations. And then attended was a poster presentation by Karin Hawkins in which she tried to explain the role of the teacher vis-a-vis adult learners of ESL. Briefly she suggested that the teacher must take a more egalitarian approach, giving the learners more responsibility for the dynamics in the classroom. Finally attended that day was a symposium convened by Gabriele Kasper and Rudiger Grotjahn on ‘Methods in Second Language Acquisition research’, a three hour rehash of the various methods being applied at the beginner level in diverse parts of the world.

C. The Third Day

The morning of this day was spent in a two part session on writing and the teaching of the various genres that are part of any broad curriculum. The afternoon was reserved for a cruise of Sydney Harbor, but this writer, being the world’s worst sailor, spent the rest of the day trying to re-group for the next day.

D. The Fourth Day

The first presentation attended on Thursday was a fascinating study made on the problem of writing summaries, the different strategies used by beginners and professionals and how linguistics might possibly help with this problem. The basic finding in this
presentation by Kjersti Fløttum of Belgium was that beginners tend to focus on the particular, or 'selective-generalizing sequence' which is usually both general and vague in nature, while skilled writers of summaries used the 'integrating sequence', keeping the macrostructure always in mind, with each general element being particular or specific. Next I attended a presentation on CALL which described a project in which small groups of students were asked to learn two CALL programs and to write their own materials of new text for such programs. A multiple choice and sentence sequencing program were used. Two things were recognized by this writer as a result of this presentation. One is that most schools around the world using computers are still using very primitive hardware, usually with 32 k of RAM, hardly enough to run the crudest of word processing. Another is that Dr. Stephen R. Krashen of the University of Southern California was right when he said at the TESOL Convention in New York, 'Teaching is a test.' In the afternoon, the Poster Presentation by William McGregor actually turned out to be a regular presentation in a combination seminar and lecture format. Focusing on the problem of preserving given Aboriginal languages, Mr McGregor told of his experiences in Northwestern Australia with the Aborigines there who had by in large lost all contact with their original language and culture, speaking but a form of pidgin English. The rest of the presentation was a description his proposal for a curriculum to teach their own language to the Aborigines, one that focuses on speaking ability more than anything else, and, that is designed in accordance with the Notional-Functional Approach. In addition, he pointed out the pitfalls and problems that the development of any such curriculum has by giving a simple example of greeting. An Aborigine in the Northwest would never think to ask such a personal question as, 'How are you?' (A personal
question? we participants all thought. ) Within the cultural context it is too personal, so when they meet someone they ask, 'Where are you going?' One could quickly see where problems in misunderstanding have arisen in the past between the older and newer cultures on the Australian continent. Finally, on Thursday, I attended the Symposium entitled 'Computers in Applied Linguistics : The Decade of the 1980's and Beyond', convened by Martha Pennington and Vance Stevens. The upshot of the rather extended presentations and discussions was that the field really was only just beginning and had far to go. Another interesting presentation was that of a new software developed at Brigham Young University which was designed to analyze entire books, both lexicon and grammar.

E. The Fifth Day

Friday was filled with interesting presentations, but, as mentioned in the introduction, this did not mean all went well. The first attended was given by Norman F. Davies and Margaret Omberg entitled 'Foreign language writing programs and peer group teaching.' Included was a rationale for the use of peer teaching as a complement to teacher instruction, to focus attention not merely on the surface features of language, but on its communicative purpose as a vehicle of thought. As one participant from India agreed with me, 'It's nice to have one's ideas confirmed by others.' The second presentation attended on Friday was given by Catherine Wallace on 'Learning to read in a second language: a window on the language acquisition process.' Basically an observation of one Pakistani woman's progress in the English language by listening to her read extended texts aloud. No mention was made about the need of non-vocalized reading. In the afternoon I looked forward to attending Tracy Terrell's presentation on 'Stages of
language acquisition in the natural approach.' Unfortunately, crowding prevented one from even getting close to the door, let alone get inside. Half expecting this disappointment, this writer went to the Great Hall to hear M. A. K. Halliday, President of AILA chair the Closing Ceremony.

III. Conclusion

Overall the 8th World Congress of AILA was a success. Though there were several things I would suggest be changed for the next congress, i.e., an integrated and cross referenced programme and abstract book, the experience was both of professional worthiness and personal enjoyment. So much so, this writer fully intends to join those who attended the Congress in Sydney at the next Congress in Athens.


(Received October 31, 1987)