

SCOLT History 1990s–2012

Lynne McClendon

Former SCOLT Executive Director

The Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT) like many other language related organizations flourishes in the context of periodic educational agendas and reforms, in turn, influenced by economic, political and social ideologies of the time, and it is therefore instructive to revisit briefly the educational landscape of the previous two decades. The 1990s saw an educational movement defined by standards and accountability although one of the catalysts that had begun this movement actually took place in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, researched and published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education during the Ronald Reagan presidency. This publication awakened leaders from various fields and educational organizations to the notion that the then current educational *status quo* would be detrimental to the country's future in developing a competent workforce. Not since the 1958 Sputnik-inspired National Defense Education Act (NDEA) had so much attention and action been directed at upgrading American education.

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics had published *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics* in 1989. Only three years prior the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) had published the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* that focused on *what learners can do with the language they learned* rather than *what they knew about the language* and offered guidelines for measuring student performance. Many other subject disciplines also began developing standards. ACTFL revised this document producing the 1991 *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines—Speaking* followed by the 2001 document, *Preliminary Proficiency Guidelines—Writing*. Also introduced in 1996 and revised in 1999 was the document, *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the Twenty-First Century*, more commonly known by its 5Cs: *Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities*. Gradually, the ACTFL Standards were accepted by the foreign language educational community, but the actual process of understanding and interpreting the standards and proficiency guidelines in terms of every day classroom instruction would take more time to achieve, and SCOLT believed it had a role to play in disseminating this information.

Many SCOLT members and Boards of Directors were involved with various facets of this exciting work, and it was felt that the SCOLT Conferences should help promote this fundamental shift in foreign language instruction so influenced by the standards and proficiency guidelines. The time had arrived for SCOLT to feature the standards movement and take a reading on the region's involvement and commitment, and, to this end, the 1997 conference theme, *Addressing the Standards for Foreign Language Learning* opened the floor to presenters to share their involvement with the new paradigm in language instruction and learning. The 1998 SCOLT Conference theme *Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities*

provided an opportunity for foreign language professionals to showcase specific techniques and examples of each goal strand's implementation in the classroom. Likewise, the 1999 SCOLT Conference invited presenters to share insights into one of the more difficult concepts of connections through its conference theme: *Connections beyond the Foreign Language Classroom*. Future conference themes would also promote various aspects of the new standards and proficiency movement.

Strong national economic conditions and technology for the masses were also motivating factors during the 90s decade. Lee Bradley, the SCOLT Executive Director during this period, working with Grady Lacy at Valdosta State University, established SCOLT's first website. As was the case with most early websites, it was not interactive and updating information was slow...but it was SCOLT's first foray into cyberspace... one big step and leap of faith for the SCOLT Executive Board. The website continued to improve over successive years and now sports interactive capabilities as well as regularly updated information. The favorable economic conditions also allowed SCOLT to keep the conference rates low so as to encourage as many attendees as possible. One hallmark of SCOLT's founding principles is that the conferences are open to all regardless of whether participants are SCOLT Sponsors or Patrons. The founders wanted to provide a regional gathering for sharing ideas, practices, successes and problems facing the foreign language community so it was essential to make the conferences as affordable as possible. The Executive Board also wanted to have a presence in as many SCOLT states as possible and the 90s witnessed SCOLT joint conferences in Tennessee, Arkansas, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, and Virginia.

The 90s decade for SCOLT also opened to an official recognition of outstanding leaders in the SCOLT region. The Founders award was initiated to recognize those who had contributed to SCOLT's beginnings such as Elizabeth Epting, the first SCOLT Secretary-Treasurer; Herman Bostick, SCOLT's founder and long-time contributor; Joanna Breedlove Crane, a past SCOLT Chair and long-time participant. The organization kicked off the first decade of 2000 by recognizing Lee Bradley, who succeeded Herman Bostick in the directorship, with the Founders Award in recognition of his service to SCOLT as Executive Director from 1988 to 1999. Going forward, the Founders Award¹ now recognizes those individuals who over time have given service to SCOLT in various ways. Exemplary K-12 and post-secondary instructors were also recognized with the annual *Outstanding Teaching Award*, now named *Educator of Excellence*² and reserved for post-secondary recognition since another award has been designated for K-12 instructors. The very first recipients of this award were Paula Heusinkveld of Clemson University; Kathy White, former SCOLT Chair (1997 and 1998); and Richard Beaton, former Foreign Language Association of Georgia (FLAG) President and Chair of the Georgia Junior Classical League. It is worth mentioning that all three of the first nominees not only attended many SCOLT conferences frequently making presentations but were well-recognized in their own educational landscapes. Incidentally, Paula Heusinkveld also served as Co-Editor for SCOLT's academic publication, *Dimension*, and was also recognized with the Founders Award in 2004.

The standards movement of the 1990s gradually gave way to the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) better known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Prior to this legislation, the federal government

required that states receiving federal aid must have academic standards and testing at certain grades. The 2001 reauthorization expanded the grades to be tested and strengthened the accountability via test results as a condition to receiving Title I funding; of course, there were many other provisions of NCLB and successive reauthorizations added or modified the original legislation. One of the provisions of NCLB looked at *highly qualified* teachers and set forth guidelines for making this determination most visibly through high stakes teacher-testing at the P-12 levels. The 2004 Conference Theme, *Assessment Practices in Foreign Language Education*, also included presentations on teacher testing and in particular the unequal test structure and materials from different languages as exemplified in the Praxis language exams. Also, discussions and networking were fostered at SCOLT conferences to help post-secondary instructors become familiar with the revised process and standards for program accreditation via the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

Concurrent with the standards movement during the 80s and 90s and into the beginnings of the next decade was the debate referred to as Official English or English Only and its later counterview English Plus. The roots of the language controversy had begun in the previous decades when the Cubans entered the United States as a result of Castro's revolution and eventual dictatorship. In later years, this event was coupled with the resettlement of huge Asian populations resulting from the Vietnam War as well an increase in migrant and illegal immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Many states began offering bilingual programs to assist these non-English speaking students in U.S. schools. In fact, the federal government created the Bilingual Education Act in 1968. The language debate affected not only the language of instruction in public schools but also the language of communication in governmental services and reached a tipping point in California in 1998 with passage of Proposition 227 which established English as the language of communication and instruction and thereby dismantling the California bilingual programs. The Clinton administration opposed legislation to make English the official language of the United States, and states were left to decide the issue, some of which followed California's example. This administration supported bilingual education and also required federal agencies to ensure people could receive communication and services in foreign languages. Although the following administration of George W. Bush espoused the English Plus ideology, in 2002 the Bilingual Education Act which had existed for 34 years morphed into the English Language Acquisition Act mandating education for English Language Learners (ELLs) under Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Act/NCLB legislation which favored English immersion programs over bilingual programs. These events rekindled research into language learning and helped to fuel the impetus for the standards and proficiency approach pursued by foreign language educators. The uncertainty of effects from the English Only movement for foreign language education gradually gave way to a more positive role for foreign language education in U.S. schools. Dual language immersion programs (usually at the elementary level) also took root allowing English-speaking students and non-English speaking students to access learning through instruction in two languages (one, of course, being English). The 2003 SCOLT Conference theme, *Models of Excellence in Second Language Education*, featured various types of successful language programs including dual language immersion.

Other SCOLT Conferences during this time period focused on the above mentioned trends in education and the far-reaching impact of languages and language instruction. For example, the 2005 conference theme, *Many Languages, Many Learners, One World* provided presenters and attendees both an opportunity to examine the impact of changes happening in education. Similarly, in 2008, an effort to provide discussion on advocacy and the impact of the Official English and English Plus movements, the Board of Directors provided the theme, *Languages for the Nation*. One final example is the provocative theme from the 2006 conference, *Languages for Today's World*, a topic which could be seen as relevant through today.

During the first decade of 2000s, SCOLT was actively involved with promoting standards and proficiency based practices as well as developing the role of advocacy for foreign language education and to this end, created the position on the SCOLT Executive Board of Advocacy Director. In order to help move the advocacy agenda forward more effectively, from 2003 through 2006, SCOLT sponsored a summer Foreign Language Advocacy Camp inviting representatives from member state organizations (with financial assistance from SCOLT) to meet in Atlanta to discuss not only advocacy steps but also state organization successes and areas of concern. Many of the states created an Advocacy Director on their Boards or assigned a Board member to be responsible for advocacy and took measures to ensure that state conferences hosted sessions on advocacy. The years following 2006, SCOLT incorporated this advocacy gathering into a pre-conference luncheon and work session and expanded the topics, an event which still occurs at the annual SCOLT conference to this day.

Because of the success with the Advocacy Camps, SCOLT was invited by the Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS), a Language Resource Center funded by the U.S. Department of Education based at the University of Oregon, to participate in an extension of the Western Initiative for Language Leadership (WILL)-the new initiative called the Southern Initiative for Language Leadership (SILL). Lynn Fulton-Archer was the SCOLT Advocacy Director at that time and worked with Greg Hopper-Moore, the WILL Project Leader, to select and prepare the first group of SILL participants, K-12 foreign language instructors from the SCOLT region. The first SILL gathering happened in 2008 at the Simpsonwood Lodge and Conference Center in Norcross, Georgia. The week-long sessions introduced the participants to various language topics and programs and by the end of the week, each participant had formulated a project which they would implement in their respective schools throughout the school year and report the results at the next gathering in 2009. In order to facilitate the work of the participants and access help and communicate with other SILL participants during the school year, CASLS provided a special SILL-NET site. Of the original 20 candidates selected for the first session, 14 participants returned the following year. One of the participants, unable to attend in person due to the imminent birth of her child, joined the group by her computer accessorized with Skype and sent her project to the camp location by Fed Ex. She became known as *Beth in a Box*, but she was clearly thinking outside the box in being able to view the proceedings as well as ask questions via Skype. Another was unable to rejoin the group due to deployment in Iraq. All the participants presented their projects and agreed that the initiative had been successful in helping them to assume leadership roles more effectively, to improve their own classroom management styles, and to hone their

instructional skills. SCOLT encouraged the participants to attend ACTFL conferences and to submit a session proposal outlining their project and what they had learned. Some of the participants also presented their projects at SCOLT Conferences.

Another outgrowth of the advocacy work was the development of the Careers Project initiated by Carol Wilkerson, SCOLT President in 2005. She developed an electronic *careers* format similar to the board game of the same name on the SCOLT website in which the viewer could click on certain squares to learn more information regarding foreign language related careers. Updates were provided by various Executive Board members and of course, by Carol. The project enjoyed five years of success but keeping the on-line information updated and relevant proved too daunting a task at the time.

Another great accomplishment of the early 2000s was indexing *Dimension* from 1980 through 2009...a process which took a great deal of time and dedication. The SCOLT Executive Board was fortunate to have the services of Maurice Cherry, the 2002 SCOLT President and Co-Editor of *Dimension*, who was able to obtain assistance through the Furman Advantage Research Fellow Internship Program in the person of Justine Sittema Liébana and the Furman Modern Languages and Literatures department as well as some funding from SCOLT. This momentous task provided an index by author, table of contents for each yearly edition as well as identifying key words for all the articles that appeared in *Dimension* issues as specified. This valuable asset can be found at the SCOLT website in the 2010 edition of *Dimension*.

Since NCLB especially emphasized assessment, language organizations were viewing how best to evaluate progress made by language learners, especially in view of the fact that federal and state funding would be allocated for assessment in disciplines other than foreign languages. The *New Visions in Action* initiative, co-chaired by Mimi Met and Ann Tollefson, former ACTFL presidents, and jointly sponsored by the National K-12 Foreign Language Resource Center (NFLRC) at Iowa State University and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), sought to set strategic directions and priorities for the profession at the onset of the 21st century. Another event sponsored by the NFLRC in 2006 was the *National Assessment Summit*, which invited various language organizations to send representatives. *The National Assessment Summit* was designed to bring together users and producers of assessments and discover where assessment needs existed as well as learn which assessments practices proved successful. Sue Barry, as SCOLT President, attended and was so impressed by the ongoing work throughout the language community regarding assessment that she encouraged SCOLT to address assessment practices in foreign language education. SCOLT issued a challenge in the form of a competitive grant to K-12 school districts that would commit to having its entire foreign language staff develop and use performance-based assessments (PBAs). The Richmond County School District in Augusta, Georgia was chosen from among the applicants. The SCOLT Executive Board had selected Greg Duncan, a leader in the profession for years, SCOLT Sponsor and educational consultant, as the project facilitator for the staff training which took place during the summer of 2007. Once the training was underway, the teachers really got on board and developed some initial PBAs to be field tested during the upcoming first semester of school with the

understanding that they would revise and create additional PBAs as they grew more accustomed to implementing this resource and could acclimate the students to expectations. Follow up sessions directed by Greg were provided in February and May of 2008. The Richmond County foreign language teachers felt that this approach had been very effective with students and had improved how students related to foreign language learning, resulting in more competent language users. As a result of their success, the Georgia Department of Education invited the teachers to contribute to the foreign language assessment bank being created at the foreign language resource website. A team of teachers were invited to present the project at the 2009 SCOLT Conference held jointly with the Foreign Language Association of Georgia.

It was also during the first decade of the 2000s that SCOLT actively pursued organizations offering teacher scholarships for summer study. In addition to those scholarships provided by Cemanahuac Educational Community, the Embassy of Spain, and the French Cultural Services of the French Embassy, SCOLT secured scholarships from the University of Québec at Chicoutimi, Estudio Sampere, Centro MundoLengua, and the Academia Latinoamericana. Recipients shared their experiences at the SCOLT conference following their summer program. The scholarship recipients all agreed that time in a location of the target language was invaluable in helping them to be more confident in target language instruction and, of course, in embedding cultural insights in instruction from a honed perspective.

SCOLT continued to recognize outstanding language educators and added a new recognition for K-12 teachers in 2005. This new award, Language Teacher of the Year, was co-sponsored by ACTFL and had come about through the efforts of Duarte Silva, the Chair of the *Task Force for Teacher Recruitment and Retention* as a part of the *New Visions in Action Initiative*. Each regional language organization was invited to send their vetted nominee to the annual ACTFL conference where one recipient would be selected by an ACTFL committee to be the official ACTFL spokesperson for the profession. SCOLT's own Ken Stewart, a SCOLT Executive Board member and SCOLT's first candidate for this award was selected by ACTFL as the first recipient of this new national award. Another of SCOLT's candidates, Clarissa Adams-Fletcher, secured the national title for the second time in 2011. Ken Stewart, Tracy Veler Knick, Juan Carlos Morales, Carmen Scoggins, Linda Zins-Adams, Clarissa Adams-Fletcher, Lisa Podbilski, Thomas Soth, Robert Patrick, and Pamela Reynolds, all SCOLT Language Teachers of the Year, have remained active language professionals. Many of them have taken leadership roles in SCOLT and other language organizations and all have become articulate in their advocacy for foreign language education.

The latter part of the first decade of the 2000s brought an economic downturn which caused SCOLT as well as many other organizations to become more fiscally conservative. It was decided that the print edition of *Dimension* would be published every other year with the intervening years being published at the SCOLT Website thus saving printing and distribution costs. Reluctantly, the conference fees had to be raised somewhat to help cover the overall costs. The SCOLT Executive Board also began holding electronic meetings to conserve its budget. Some of the previous outreach programs with our member states were also revamped to reduce costs. P-16 foreign language programs also felt the economic punch with some programs

being eliminated or severely cut back. One concrete example was the case at the State University of New York at Albany's stunning pronouncement of the elimination of their entire language department at the end of 2010. Of course, P-12 language programs were affected by NCLB with its emphasis on math and reading scores. Throughout this difficult period, language professionals continued the course of improving instruction and remaining professionally committed while offering support to colleagues and institutions affected by the economic tides. Fortunately, the economic forecast has improved in recent years (now 2014 at the time of this writing) and P-16 foreign language programs have survived while noting some casualties.

In more recent times, NCLB had morphed into the 2009 *Race to the Top* (R2T) with its funding windfall and even more recently into the Common Core Standards. President Obama's R2T provided competitive grants to State Education Departments to develop and implement educational reform which could serve as models. Four key elements and reform areas the grants had to address were: developing, retaining, and rewarding effective principals and teachers; building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals regarding improving student performance; turning around the lowest-performing schools, and adopting meaningful standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college as well as the workplace. It is this last provision that has given way to the Common Core Standards, developed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers with funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and others. Presently, some states which had originally signed on to adopting the Common Core Standards have had a change of heart and much contested debate has arisen over these standards. ACTFL has addressed this new thread with its on-line publication entitled, *Alignment of the National Standards for Learning Languages with the Common Core Standards*.

It is unclear what the future holds for this latest general educational reform effort. What is clear is that foreign language organizations such as SCOLT working with its many member state organizations, other regional and national language organizations as well as ACTFL will continue to support language research, share researched-based effective practices, recognize the good works of many language professionals, and provide opportunities for exchange of ideas to better serve the foreign language community for the good of all language learners and practitioners.

I retired as SCOLT Executive Director in 2012, passing the baton to David Jahner, who along with the Executive Board in two short years, has safely guided the organization through the worst economic times in recent history while reinvigorating SCOLT's mission and goals. I look forward to seeing this organization, begun 50 years ago by Herman Bostick and a handful of other dedicated language professionals, continuing down the path of success for many years to come.

¹ A list of recipients can be found at: <http://scolt.org/index.php/awards/founders-award>

² A list of recipients can be found at: <http://scolt.org/index.php/awards/educator-of-excellence/previous-educator-of-excellence-awardees>