

Opening remarks to the 2005 ECIS ESL & MT Conference, Rome

Buongiorno e benvenuti a Roma.

My name is Eithne Gallagher and I am the chair of the ECIS ESL and Mother Tongue Committee. I am a teacher and I'd say on good days I'm a relatively good teacher but I am not a conference organizer so this has been a huge learning experience for me.

I've learnt I'll never do it again!

I'd like to say a special thank you to the 3 people who sent in their registrations and paid their money without asking any questions.

Joking aside – one of those things lacking in my education is that I never learnt to type.

Now you would think that by replying to all those thousands of e-mails my typing skills might have improved – unfortunately no! but I do have an extremely powerful index finger on my right hand – I'm not quite sure what use I'll put it to now that this is all over!

This conference could not have happened without the moral support and sheer hard work of my colleagues from the ESL and Mother Tongue Committee.

John Deighan - The International School of Geneva

Lyndi Reeaden - Intercommunity School of Zurich

Pat Mertin - Düsseldorf International School

Maurice Carder - The Vienna International School

Kim Oppenheim - Leysin International School

Jeanne M. Briginshaw, from Munich International School, was also involved in the earlier planning stages of this conference.

Maurice, Kim and myself have worked on 3 conferences together:

Vienna in 2000

Leysin in 2002

The work for this Language Forum started as soon as the Leysin Conference finished in 2002.

I would like to stress that organizing these conferences is voluntary work. We do this on top of our full time teaching jobs. Why do we do it? Because we are all totally nuts....no seriously... I think I speak for all members of the Committee when I say we do it because we believe in the cause – we want international education to take ESL and Mother Tongue issues seriously.

At the Vienna conference David Graddol, the keynote speaker, said it was the duty of all international educators to promote the learning of their students' mother tongues. It was in Vienna that teachers voted to change the name of the committee from ESL to ESL and Mother Tongue.

In Leysin we invited Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas to present their monumental research project to us. I am pleased to say that things have changed because of



these conferences. We have taken small steps forward. ECIS now asks what schools do to promote the learning of mother tongue languages in their accreditation documents, more schools have mother tongue programmes – still not enough but more. The MYP Middle Years programme has printed guidelines for effective ESL and Mother Tongue Provision. They are extremely good and much of the credit for this document goes to Maurice Carder.

I'd now like to say a few words about the theme of this Language Forum, but before I do I'd like you to bear with us for the next two minutes and listen carefully to Maurice:

Ponekad osjećamo da ne napredujemo sto se tice ESL-a i dvojezicnosti. Medjutim, danas su točno 22 godine od kada sam po prvi put bio na ECIS konferenciji ovdje u Rimu. U to vrijeme nije bilo posebnog odjela za ESL pa smo odlucili pokrenuti taj projekt. Tada smo i promijenili ime u ESL and Mother Tongue Committee i odrzali nekoliko konferencija. Brojevi su se vratolomno dizali i danas nas je 480 clanova. Imamo nekoliko najcjjenjenijih govornika u svijetu i za sve to moramo zahvaliti Eithne-i Gallagher.

Dobrodosli na konferenciju.¹

Raise your hand if you understood what language Maurice was speaking? (four hands went up)

I want you to use your imagination for a few minutes more. The lingua franca for this conference will be Croatian. All speeches and workshops will be given in Croatian (this raised a cheer of 'finally' from the 4 Croatian speakers!).

But don't worry those of you who don't have well developed CALPS in the Croatian language because I have something to help you – my latest invention. Here it is..... the Polyglot Meter.

This is an amazing machine, quite remarkable. All you have to do is give me your name and another 100 Euro and you will be able to understand the language of the conference. I put in your name and then your money and you will be able to understand. The Polyglot Meter will accept any currency – the Yen, the Thai Dollar, whatever you have in your wallet.

Now some of you may well feel cheated and rightly so - after all you have already paid a lot of money to come here but to be able to understand the lingua franca – now you have to pay more.

Well this is obviously pure fantasy - but it is a very sad reality in some International Schools. Parents are being asked to pay more so that their children can be taught to understand the language of the curriculum – English.

A young woman came up to me at the general conference in Nice. She was a primary 2 teacher in an international school that follows the British National Curriculum. The teacher was new to international education and not used to working with 2nd language learners. After the first 2 weeks she made a list of the children who were weak in maths and in English and she gave the list to her head. Within a couple of days those children needing help in maths were receiving it and she didn't hear anything about the group who were weak in English until parents came to her saying – does my child really need this extra English? Can I help him myself – I



can't really afford the 30 Euros an hour for this help on top of the fees I pay. The young teacher didn't know what to say.

This should not happen in International Education. ESL is an integral part of the curriculum. It is not a token subject. It is not an after school activity. It is not something we should ask parents to pay more for.

ESL as a subject has to be taken seriously. We as a profession need to be taken seriously.

Misconceptions about about ESL and mother tongue issues. In many schools it's enough that you speak English for you to be an ESL teacher and whilst it is a good idea to have someone who speaks English teach ESL, that in itself is certainly not enough! We need qualified language teachers who have a background in linguistics and are competent in several languages. *People who understand the workings of language.*

At one of the presentations I gave recently a teacher came up to me and said, "Well I hear what you are saying about mother tongue and I agree but my head of department has put signs up all over the place saying 'This is an English only zone' and he is trying to make everyone speak in English even in the corridors and playground. He even insists parents speak in English whilst on campus".

What can you say? It's ludicrous but unfortunately it's also common practice.

Have you ever gone into the staff room and heard someone say "this child cannot speak in complete sentences", "that child cannot write in complete sentences and how long has he been at this school"!? These are common utterances in what should be very language aware international schools.

Often the solution is well, let's cure him – let's make him write at the sentence level until he writes well at the sentence level. This child needs more grammar – let the ESL person take him away until he's fixed before we let him loose in the content area.

We as informed ESL teachers know this is nonsense, but yet again it is common practice. Why does this happen? Why are so many people good at seeing what these kids can't do and so few people good at seeing what they can do?

There are too many people making decisions about ESL and mother tongue issues who are not informed or are misinformed. I am not here to have a go at administrators (well not really), we need them on board, we need the decision makers at our conferences.

In Vienna we didn't have any administrators present. In Leysin we had one. Well in Rome we have 20 and this in itself is progress!

Could I ask you to raise your hand if you work in a school where the majority of students are monolingual (7 people raised their hands). Raise your hand if you work in a school where the majority of children speak more than one language (472 raised hands).

Yet, our approach in International education is often dictated by the needs of a minority of monolinguals. There's that lovely quote in the ESL in the Mainstream Course, ***"Monolingualism is a curable disease"***.



We have the finest names in our field present here and one of my hopes for this conference is that we will go back to our schools more informed about what is effective provision of ESL and mother tongue and share this information, beat the drums if necessary, evoke change in international education so that **every child regardless of their language background will have equal rights to the curriculum.**

I'd like to thank Marymount International School of Rome for sponsoring this conference and pass you over to the headmistress, Dr. Yvonne Hennigan.

Maurice Carder's speech translated from Croatian: At times we may feel that we are not making any progress with matters relating to ESL and bilingualism. However, it is now 22 years since I first came to an ECIS Conference in Rome (November 1983). At that time there was no subject committee for ESL, so we decided to form one.

Since then we resolved to change the name to ESL & Mother Tongue Committee and have held several conferences. The number of participants has increased greatly and today there are 480 participants.

We have outstanding, worldclass speakers, and for all this we owe a huge vote of thanks to Eithne Gallagher.

Welcome to the conference.

