

Almost 30 Years of NNELL

A BRIEF RETROSPECTIVE

by Nancy C. Rhodes, *Center for Applied Linguistics Chair, 1987-1991; Executive Secretary, 1991-2003, National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL)*

The following is a synopsis of the keynote and slide show presented at the 2016 NNELL meeting honoring the founding members of NNELL (ACTFL [American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages] Convention, Boston, 2016)

As one of the founding members of NNELL, I'm pleased to provide you with a brief history of the organization, with photos and vignettes, of how NNELL has played a pivotal role in the trajectory of world language education in this country and in many educators' careers.

HISTORY OF NNELL

Why was NNELL established?

It all started in 1986 at the ACTFL Conference in Dallas where a group of like-minded ACTFL members, interested in teaching languages to young children, were attending a networking session to share resources and teaching methods. They were excited to meet others with similar interests, but frustrated that after six or seven years of meeting informally there was no way to continue to share ideas and expertise throughout the year (no internet, remember). The group

decided then and there that it was time to organize an official network to promote early language learning. So, 25 educators from 16 states who attended the meeting met again in January 1987 in Washington, DC, to discuss the organization of a network that would promote language teaching in elementary schools. The meeting took place at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) in Washington, DC, a logical host because of its long-time interest in promoting early foreign language education. No one had any funding in those days, so the local organizers offered housing to many of the attendees in their homes. Mimi Met remembers, "It was like a pajama party at my house – and the excitement was palpable."

After two days of intense and exhilarating interactive meetings, dinner discussions, and late night pow-wows, NNELL was born. Meeting participants defined the network as "a forum for people interested in early language teaching." The main objectives were to: (1) facilitate communication, and (2) provide information that would improve public awareness and support for early language learning. The proposed activities were to: (1) publish a newsletter, FLES News (FLES=Foreign Language in the Elementary School), three times a year, and (2) promote

the teaching of foreign language in elementary schools, especially through presentations at and collaborations with local, regional, and national conferences (see PHOTO 1.).

There was a lot of energy and camaraderie in the room at the meeting, as you can imagine, and two participants, Helena Curtain and Kathleen Riordan, even proposed that we have a NNELL uniform to promote unity and collaboration among members! (see PHOTO 2).

The network was open "to all who [were] interested in the field" and if you signed up, you received the newsletter free of charge the first year (publishers agreed to sponsor the newsletter). Members were also encouraged to promote early language learning by organizing and attending FLES sessions at local, regional, and national conferences. Past President Carolyn Andrade noted the camaraderie of NNELL: "Many of the people I first met professionally through NNELL quickly became friends" (personal email, 10-31-16). And that is the key to NNELL – the people. We bonded quickly, and realized that it was in our best interest to support everyone in the organization and their efforts in order to further the teaching of languages to young children on a national level.

What were the key philosophies and beliefs in



PHOTO 1: Founding members of NNELL at organizational meeting, 1987



PHOTO 3: Carol Ann Dahlberg, NNELL's first president, is awarded the Florence Steiner Award for Leadership in Foreign Language Education, ACTFL, 1988, Monterey.

creating the vision for NNELL?

Two of the most important beliefs that were prevalent throughout the early years of NNELL were that (1) language instruction should start in the early grades, and (2) languages should be available for all students. These were not necessarily popular notions in the late 1980s, even among our colleagues in other language organizations, so we often felt we were fighting an uphill battle. Carolyn Andrade commented that “During those early years, we shared both progress and setbacks in our varied and often skeptical work environments while strongly advocating

for young children and best practices in their language learning experiences.” Past President Kathleen Riordan, looking back, commented that, “the concept of a network encouraged teachers, usually with little administrative support, to be change makers.”

How did NNELL get its name?

As with any new entity, selecting a name was part of figuring out an identity and philosophy. We spent many hours debating the pros and cons of various names. This process helped us to develop unity and clarification of purpose. We considered at least six other possibilities: NESFLE (Network of Elementary School Foreign Language Educators), FLIC (Foreign Language Instruction for Children), NELL (Network for Early Language Learning), EFLL (Early Foreign Language Learning), EAL (Early Additional Languages) and NNELE (National Network for Early Language Educators). We are glad we picked NNELL—it has stood the test of time and truly reflects not only the goals and purposes, but also, after its first twenty-nine years, the accomplishments of our nationwide organization. (And it’s not too hard to pronounce!) The newly named group quickly got working

and had its first meeting in April 1987 at the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages in New York City. Luckily, NNELL member Christy Brown was Conference Chair that year and gave NNELL her president's suite to use for the meeting. At that meeting we brainstormed key issues to address for the first issue of FLES News.

Very quickly, NNELL's forward-thinking members began to be recognized by the profession. By 1998, NNELL's first president, Carol Ann Dahlberg, was awarded the Florence Steiner Award for Leadership in Foreign Language Education for her work in higher education and elementary education (see PHOTO 3).

IMPACT ON THE PROFESSION

Becoming a formal organization

By 1991, NNELL members decided that it was time to transition from an informal network to a formal organization. The thinking was that, as we approached the 21st century, it was an opportune time for early language educators to join together as a stronger force, to coordinate efforts of all those involved in early language education, and to work collaboratively with other organizations and groups that shared NNELL's goals. One of the main differences for the readers of FLES News was that they would now be voting members of NNELL instead of just newsletter subscribers, and an annual fee of \$12 would be charged. In addition, NNELL fine-tuned its purpose



PHOTO 2: Helena Curtain (Wisconsin) and Kathleen Riordan (Massachusetts) proposed a NNELL uniform to promote unity and collaboration among members.

with the following mission statement: *To promote opportunities for all children to develop a high level of competence in at least one language and culture in addition to their own, and to coordinate the efforts of all those involved in early language education.*

To implement that mission and improve collaboration among language teachers on a more personal level, NNELL identified regional representatives for five geographical regions who coordinated networking activi-

ties in their regions. The very successful annual NNELL Swapshop Breakfast was also established to help teachers network on a national level (see PHOTO 4).

GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS

One of the most exciting aspects about NNELL has been seeing how a small grassroots, low-budget effort – of teachers, administrators, teacher trainers, and researchers – has been able, by working collaboratively, to make a huge impact on the teaching of languages to young children. Over the first 29 years, NNELL moved the field of K-8 language education into the forefront of K-16 language education. Major accomplishments included influencing the scope of the national language standards, playing an important role in national legislation, and providing leadership in preparing teachers and leaders in the profession.

Imagine, for a moment, a time when there were no methods textbooks, no national standards, few publications, and no national organization for elementary language teachers. When we started this network: (1) there was no Languages and Learners: Making the Match, the Curtain & Dahlberg methods text, that we could refer people to; (2) there were no acknowledged model programs that we could recommend for replication; (3) there were no national or state language standards; (4) there were few publications focused on early foreign language education; (5) there was no NADSFL (National Association of



PHOTO 4: NNELL members meet in 1991 at CAL to decide NNELL's future organizational structure and goals.



PHOTO 5: NNELL President Eileen Lorenz with JNCL/NCLIS Executive Director, J. David Edwards, a great supporter of NNELL initiatives.



PHOTO 6: NNELL members meet in 1993 to draft a proposal for the first ever federally-funded National K-12 Foreign Language Resource Center to be housed at Iowa State University (from left: Mari Haas, Helena Curtain, Mimi Met, Eileen Lorenz, Carol Ann Dahlberg, Nancy Rhodes, Marcia Rosenbusch, Karen Willetts, and Lynn Thompson).

District Supervisors of Foreign Languages) organization to help promote excellence in foreign language teaching at all levels, K-12; and (6) there was no technology interface for language instruction. Now, thanks to the involvement and perseverance of many NNELL members, we have these things and much more. And it wasn't necessarily easy. When NNELL began, there were many, many educators, including many within the language profession, who did not see value of starting language teaching at an early age. This has gradually changed, as is most evident by the national language standards recommending a K-12 sequence of study for attainment of high levels of language proficiency.

One of NNELL's greatest successes was helping the profession realize that the national standards needed to target K-12 education, and not just grades 8-12, as first drafted. After a chance encounter in an airport with Standards Task Force Committee members, NNELL editor Marcia Rosenbusch learned that they were not even considering including elementary programs in the standards. She quickly contacted the NNELL board, and in the winter 1993-94 issue of FLES News, NNELL published NNELL Statement to the Student Standards K-12 Task Force, a strongly worded statement warning that the future standards for foreign languages "will significantly impact foreign language education well into the 21st century." It went on to state that: "It is imperative that these standards speak not only to the foreign language programs in existence today, but that they also define a framework for the future. To establish standards only at eighth and twelfth grades, but not at fourth grade, would be to limit the future of the profession to current practices." The rest is history. The World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages document is in its 4th printing, it addresses a K-12 (and beyond) audience, and the majority of elementary and secondary teachers report that they use the standards in their teaching. The chair of the original Student Standards Task Force, Christy Brown, attributes NNELL's strong push for a K-12 framework as the impetus for her to organize

working closely with JNCL/NCLIS (the Joint National Committee on Languages and the National Council for Languages and International Studies), focusing in particular on the Language Resource Centers of Title VI of the Higher Education Act (see PHOTOS 5 and 6).

NNELL also worked with former Senator Paul Simon of Illinois, one of the leaders on Capitol Hill in promoting strong K-12 language programs and better understanding of global issues. And on a current note, legislation recently re-introduced, the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program, creates a competitive grant program for universities to expand study abroad and encourage more minority, low-income students to study overseas (see PHOTO 7).

It is extremely satisfying to see that the leaders of NNELL have played an integral role in furthering the entire language teaching profession at all levels. NNELL officers have gone on to publish important academic works, hold leadership positions in school districts and universities, and play key roles in other major language organizations. Six of NNELL's leaders went on to become President of ACTFL.



PHOTO 7: NNELL members thank Senator Paul Simon for his tireless support of foreign language teaching, and congratulate him in 1996 at his retirement reception hosted by the language community. Left to right: Mimi Met, Kay Hewitt, Eileen Lorenz, Nancy Rhodes, Senator Simon, Donna Christian, Marcia Spielberger, Richard Donato, and Eileen Glisan.

Task Force visits to elementary school language programs in Florida. These visits ultimately expanded Task Force members' views of language learning, helped them understand the importance of an early start, and thus led to the broadened scope and impact of the standards nationwide.

NNELL has played a major role in policy and national legislation,

NNELL Past Presidents are all names that we see throughout the profession today, not to mention former NNELL board member Marty Abbott, who is now Executive Director of ACTFL. Past Presidents include: Carol Ann Dahlberg, Carolyn Andrade, Audrey Heining-Boynton, Mari Haas, Eileen Lorenz, Mary Lynn Redmond, Susan Walker, Christy Brown, Myriam Met, Kathleen Riordan, Carine Feyten, Martie Semmer, Lori Langer de Ramirez, Janis Jensen, Terry Caccavale, Paula Patrick, Jacque Van Houten, Rita Oleksak, and Nadine Jacobsen-McLean. In addition, Marcia Rosenbusch's critical role first as editor of FLES News and then of Learning Languages made a huge impact on the development of the profession.

Through my roles first as Network Chair, and then as Executive Secretary, I had the great pleasure of working with these extraordinary women, and that has indeed been one of the highlights of my career. One superlative president I'd like to especially acknowledge is Terry Caccavale, who served in 2006 at a time when the board decided to make the term two years instead of one because the leaders had too much to get done in just one year. Terry showed true selfless dedication to NNELL and its members and especially to the teachers in the trenches. At the time, NNELL was going through tight financial constraints and Terry volunteered to go around the country providing day-long workshops to school districts on second language acquisition and immersion education, donating all the proceeds to NNELL. Terry passed away in March 2017, after a courageous battle with cancer. Her legacy and incredible dedication to young language students and their teachers will forever be remembered by NNELL (see PHOTOS 8 and 9).

Major milestones for NNELL included transitioning the newsletter FLES News to a refereed journal, Learning Languages, under the leadership of Presidents Audrey Heining-Boynton and Mari Haas (see PHOTO 10).

Another publication of note, edited by NNELL President Mimi Met for the 10th anniversary, "Critical Issues in Early Language Learning: Building for our Children's Future," included a special forward by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (see PHOTO 11).

Following the tradition of NNELL board members taking leadership roles in the profession, NNELL Editor Marcia Rosenbusch received the Florence Steiner Award for Leadership in Foreign Language Education in 1996 (see PHOTO 12).

NNELL President Rita Oleksak received



PHOTO 8: NNELL Presidents, 1987-2007 (left to right: Lori Langer de Ramirez, Nancy Rhodes, Susan Walker, Janis Jensen, Mimi Met, Martie Semmer, Marcia Rosenbusch (NNELL editor), Carol Ann Dahlberg, Eileen Lorenz, Kathleen Riordan, Mary Lynn Redmond, Christy Brown, Mari Haas, and Terry Caccavale).



PHOTO 9: NNELL Board Meeting, ACTFL Atlanta, 1994. Carine Feyten, tall blonde in back row, enjoyed her 2001 stint as NNELL President so much that she went on to become president and chancellor of Texas Women's University in Denton, Texas, in 2014, the nation's largest university primarily for women.



PHOTO 10: NNELL President Eileen Lorenz offers a "TPR toast" to the new NNELL refereed journal, Learning Languages, at the Advocates for Language Learning (ALL) Conference, 1995.



PHOTO 12: NNELL Editor Marcia Rosenbusch (center with plaque) received the Florence Steiner Award for Leadership in Foreign Language Education, Postsecondary Level, 1996.

NADSFL's highest honor, the "Foreign Language Supervisor of the Year Award" in 2013, shown in photo with NNELL Past President Kathleen Riordan, who herself had won that award in 2001. They both also served as ACTFL Presidents (2001 and 2013). These are just a few of the examples of

how NNELL board members went on to accomplish great things in the profession (see PHOTO 13).

A FAVORITE NNELL MEMORY

One of the recurring issues in the field has been what to call the early world language education profession. From its heyday in the 1960's, the acronym FLES has been used to stand for foreign language in the elementary school. That was why the name FLES News was chosen for the newsletter (although later our thinking changed and we started moving away from the acronym FLES which for some conjured up "failed" programs of the 1960s). And through the years there have been a lot of misunderstandings of the term, not to mention misspellings and mispronunciations.

A favorite memory of mine is a request NNELL received from one of our

overseas subscribers in Africa. Mailed from Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, West Africa, the subscriber thanked us very much for the newsletter FLEA News (F-L-E-A). He wrote, "as I have to work on fleas and other

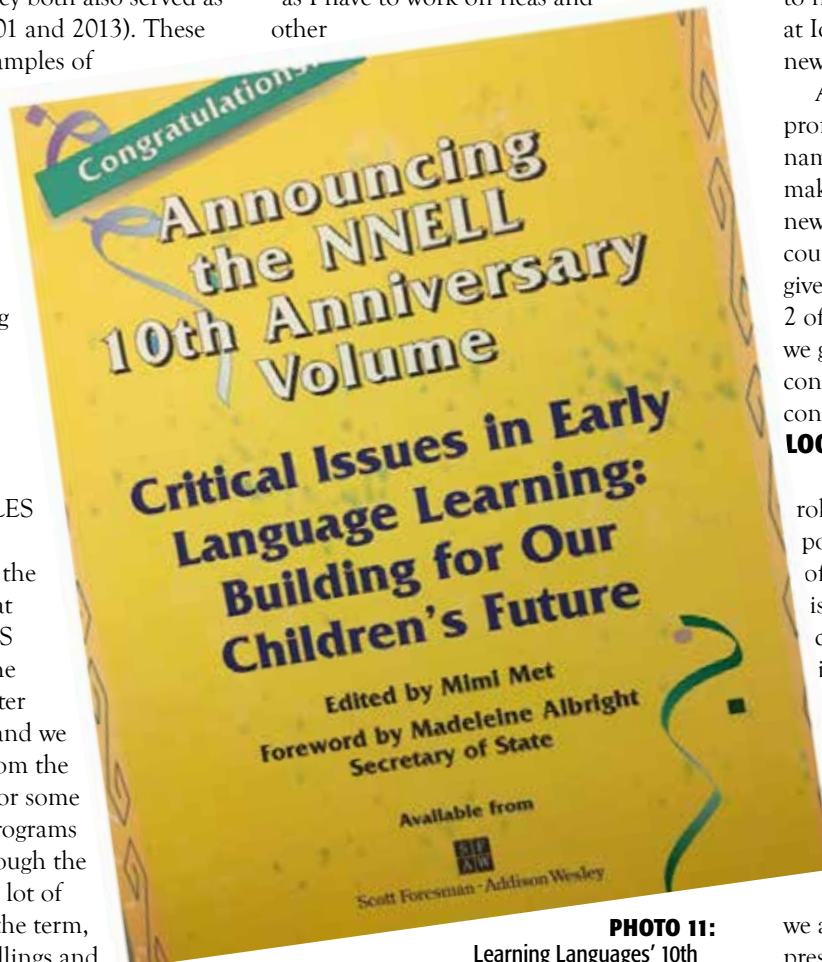


PHOTO 11: Learning Languages' 10th Anniversary Issue, with a forward by former Secretary of State Madeline Albright

parasites of rodents [for the next] 2 years in



PHOTO 13: NNELL President Rita Oleksak (right) received NADSFL's highest honor, the "Foreign Language Supervisor of the Year Award" in 2013 (with NNELL Past President Kathleen Riordan).

Africa, [I appreciate receiving your newsletter]. Editor Marcia Rosenbusch, wondering if he had understood the intention of the articles in our newsletter, was later relieved to find out that the Entomology Department at Iowa State University did, in fact, have a newsletter called FLEA News.

Another request arrived in 1996 from a professor at a university (that will remain nameless) that asked for permission to make photocopies of some materials in our newsletter. They were to be included in a course packet. The request asked that we give them permission to copy Volume 5, No. 2 of FLESH News. Marcia made sure that we gave permission, but the permission was contingent on the university's use of parental controls!

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

What is NNELL's role today and what role will it play in the future? NNELL is poised to play a critical role in the future of language education in the U.S. What is fascinating is that current mission and core beliefs still reflect those of the founding members, with activities designed to implement the mission reflect 21st century educational values, and a focus on interactive webinars, can-do statements for interculturality, summer institutes, an online journal, and far-reaching social-media efforts for effective networking. As we begin our 30th year, we are delighted to welcome our first male president of NNELL, Nathan Lutz, and look forward to many more exciting NNELL endeavors in the years to come.

NNELL's influence has grown immeasur-

ably over these last three decades; it now plays a pivotal role in advocating early foreign language education for all children in schools across the country. We'd like to take this opportunity to thank all the founding members for starting us on the right track, and the current Executive Board for leading the way in social media and online webinars to network with educators of the future in the best way possible.

NOTE

A special thanks to Janet Glass, who interviewed the "founding mothers" of NNELL in 2013 for the 25th anniversary (Glass, 2013), and provided some of the

themes for this keynote. The quotes included here are from her interviews unless otherwise noted.

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Thank You, NNELL's Founding Members!



Carolyn Andrade
Rosemarie Benya
Christine Brown
Helena Curtain
Jack Darcy
Diane Ging
Betsy Grob
Donna Grundstat
Mari Haas
Nancy Hess
Sheri Houpt
Laureen Hurt
Melanie Klutts

Sara Lindsley
Gladys Lipton
Myriam Met
Kurt Muller
Bettye Myer
Carol Ann Pesola
Joy Renjilian-Burgy
Nancy Rhodes
Kathleen Riordan
Marcia Rosenbusch
Elsa Statzner
G. Richard Tucker
Susan Walker

Nancy Rhodes, a founding member of the National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL) and its first Executive Secretary, has spent her career in the study of elementary school world language instruction and in advocating for early language learning. As Senior Language Education Consultant at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), she focuses on foreign language education research, instructional program design, professional development, and program evaluation. As the former Director of World Language Education at CAL, she led numerous language education studies, including a series of federally-funded national surveys of K-12 foreign language instruction designed to provide a portrait of language teaching across the country (Rhodes & Pufahl, *Foreign Language Teaching in U.S. Schools: Results of a National Survey, 2010*, and predecessor surveys in 1987 and 1997). She has also authored *Elementary School Foreign Language Teaching: Lessons Learned Over Three Decades* (*Foreign Language Annals*, v 47, 2014); and *Language Immersion: Celebrating 40 Years of Growth* (2012), with D. Christian, J. Garretson, & A. Bruno. She was raised in Africa and South America, is fluent in Spanish, and has taught Spanish and English as a second language both abroad and in the United States.



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