Reflection on Robert Fischer in France

Robert Blake
University of California, Davis

I had never been to a language technology conference in France before, but when I saw the 2005 ad for the “Use of New Technologies in Foreign Language Teaching,” know as UNTELE for short, I thought this conference looked too good to pass up. (Little did I know that Bob Fischer was already way ahead of me.) I rationalized that I could get by with my French, all one-year’s study of it, supported by my knowledge of Romance linguistics and, as a last refuge, my English, for whatever else I needed. So, I got on the program to talk about CMC and L2 learning.

The long trip to Paris seemed even longer when I also had to negotiate going from Charles de Gaulle Airport to the Gare du Nord, where I could take a train to Compiègne, the summer home for Louis V and Louis VI and the site of the final capture of Joan of Arc. I reached the Gare du Nord at midday in awe of all of the hustle and bustle (just like something out of Scorsese’s film Hugo), one day before a general rail strike, feeling totally lost and overwhelmed. Even though the trains come right up into the station’s floor, I could not find which train was the one that went to Compiègne.

That’s when I heard someone calling my name in English in a persistent way: “Bob, over here, it’s Bob Fischer.” Yes, Bob Fischer was also in the station on his way to Compiègne to represent CALICO at this very European conference hosted by the late Abdi Kazeroni at the Université de Technologie de Compiègne. What a relief! Bob’s French was excellent and he had been there before and knew all the ropes. He also was not worried about the impending French rail strike; “happens all the time and it will be over in a day,” he said. So, I just relaxed and let Bob be the guide.

We talked all the way to Compiègne, about an hour and a half, mostly going over topics dealing with the CALICO Journal and his activities to strengthen CALICO’s presence in the SLA world. We shared lots of good-hearted jokes, anecdotes, and stories. In his conversation, Bob revealed his great sense of humor and concern for his peers. I was surprised to find out that Bob had also brought all the articles that were currently being edited for the CALICO Journal. He intended to get some serious work done during the conference. I bring work to conferences, too, but rarely end up doing anything because it is so easy to get swept up in the excitement of the conference itself. So, I thought Bob would behave similarly and leave his heavy briefcase sitting all alone in the hotel. I still had a lot to learn about Robert Fischer.

When we arrived at the Compiègne station, he showed me where my hotel was located near the station on the same side of the river and he then headed off to
his hotel on the other side of the river. We agreed to meet that night at Le Palais Gourmand, a restaurant he knew that was within walking distance for both of us.

We had a wonderful meal at the restaurant; Bob gave me lots of advice about what to order, what to drink, and how to say it correctly. By chance, Bob had chosen the same restaurant where Nick Ellis, our plenary speaker, was also being wined and dined by Abdi, the conference host and we all got together to visit.

At the end of the meal, we mumbled something about getting an after-dinner drink, when Bob firmly said “no”—he was going back to the hotel to continue editing the articles pending for the next issue of the *CALICO Journal*. Yes, he was serious! And that is just what he did, not only that night, but every night of this three-day conference as well. I was very impressed with his dedication and loyalty to the organization and the *Journal*, which had previously struggled so grievously before he took control of its direction.

Throughout the rest of the conference, Bob continued to help me meet the other participants from Europe, and assist me to navigate the streets of this charming medieval town. His company and advice were most welcome and much appreciated, and are typical of the way he treats everyone with consideration and kindness.

Although I have been to many CALICO, AAAL, and MLA conferences where Bob Fischer was also present, the time I spent at this UNTELE conference allowed me to get to know Bob much more as a friend than as the highly successful executive director of CALICO that he was and that we have all come to appreciate over these many years. I salute Bob for the excellent job he has done with the journal and the organization. But most of all, I thank Bob for his friendship and kindness. In the balance of things important in this world, Bob Fischer has made his mark and we continue to be better for it. Merci bien, Bob, bravo!