Teacher Training in Mexico and Alaska: From South of the Border the Top of the World [1]

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Moving directly from a cozy Mexican town surrounded by 17,000-foot-high volcanic peaks to the low rolling hills and wide open desolation of Interior Alaska may not have been the most sensible thing I have ever done. The experience did, however, provoke me with vivid personal and professional contrasts--perhaps more commonly known as *culture shock*.

As I wandered around Fairbanks (a town located a mere 150 miles south of the Arctic Circle) during late August 1994, I came up with only two similarities between the life I had just left in Mexico and the one I was to lead in Alaska. The first was that in both places I had been hired by local universities to train public school teachers in the secret art of teaching ESL. Experience, however, soon taught me that the differences separating Mexico and Alaska also extended to the classroom.

Luckily, the second link between my two lives proved more helpful in bridging the vast gap I felt myself teetering on the verge of. I spent hours having my short hair further trimmed by Gloria, a Mexican transplant to Alaska. Gloria was as excited as I was to have someone to talk in Spanish with about the differences between Puebla and Fairbanks, Mexicans and Alaskans. Puebla is crowded and bustling; Fairbanks is a frontier town surrounded by untamed wilderness. Mexicans value interdependency and close ties to others; Alaskans value independence and self-sufficiency. Both Mexicans and Alaskans imbibe Coca-Cola with a vengeance, but Alaskans have become almost as versatile in preparing dishes featuring moose and caribou meat as Mexicans have with beans and tortillas.

My decision to go to Mexico the summer before moving to Alaska was rather sudden. Ron Schwartz, the co-director of the MA program in In-

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structional Systems Design (ESOL/Bilingual concentration) at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), was setting up an exciting teacher training project in conjunction with the University of Puebla, Mexico (a town about 3 hours southeast of Mexico City). When Ron asked me to head a group of teachers form UMBC who would be conducting the summer institute, I was so excited that I accepted the position without a second thought.

The need for special training for Mexican teachers of English resulted from a system-wide shift in the method of English language instruction in the schools in Puebla. Language instruction in Puebla's schools had been focused on developing reading, writing, and translation skills. The need for a population with strong oral communication skills in English became more pressing with the passage of NAFTA and the increasingly pro-market economic policies of the Mexican government. Development of listening and speaking skills, therefore, became a priority.

Many of the Mexican teacher of English (hereafter *maestros*) working in the schools had limited oral skills in English. The maestros lacked the requisite ability and confidence to demand high oral performance from their students. In addition, the maestros had been trained almost exclusively in using the grammar translation and reading comprehension models of foreign language instruction. In order to successfully prepare young Mexicans for careers requiring strong oral skills in English, the maestros needed new training. The university in Puebla hired the team from UMBC to design and implement a summer institute for Mexican teachers of English. The focus of the institute was on providing the maestros with techniques, tools, and ideas for teaching oral proficiency and fluency in English.

The institute consisted of five intensive courses that met for a total of five hours daily for each of the three 3-week sessions. The courses included: English pronunciation, oral fluency/proficiency, language teaching techniques, lesson planning, and supplementary materials development. The schedule proved grueling for all concerned, but the Mexican teachers welcomed us with warmth and participated in the institute with enthusiasm. The level of authority and expertise the maestros vested me with as head of the team of teachers from UMBC, however, was something I was not prepared for.

Many of the maestros I worked with in Puebla had been high school teachers when I was a high school student myself. Yet the maestros ap-

peared to accept my every word as gospel. The deference given me by people who were older and more experienced teachers than I unsettled me. Learning to reflect questions back into the class to gather the maestros' opinions, advice, and experiences before giving my own provided us all with much more interesting and helpful perspectives about issues surrounding teaching English in Mexican schools.

After a summer of intense involvement, hard work, and parties thrown for any reason or no reason at all, the institute received the highest accolades from the maestros and the university in Puebla. Plans were already being excitedly discussed for a follow-up institute as I packed my bag and headed north.

The teacher training I found myself involved with in Alaska was completely different from what I had done in Mexico. The Fairbanks North Star Borough School District hired me to design and teach a course through the University of Alaska for "regular" school district teachers. The course, ESL for Classroom Teachers, provided an overview of second language teaching techniques, second language acquisition theory, and cross-cultural communication. I taught a session of ESL for Classroom Teachers in the fall, spring, and summer semesters.

The need for teaching training in this area has resulted from a slow but steady increase of non-English-speaking immigrants moving up to Alaska. Alaska's public school teachers have had little if any training in how to incorporate the children of these immigrants into their mainstream classrooms. The primary goal of the course I taught in Alaska was to train classroom teachers in the skills necessary to integrate non-native English speakers into the regular classroom community.

Contrary to my experiences in Mexico, I felt more than a little pressure to prove myself and break the "ice" with each class I taught in Alaska. Hearkening back to the warmth and receptiveness of the Mexican teachers helped me develop a strategy to thaw the initial suspicion inherent in the do-it-yourself Alaskan spirit.

The following story about a major miscommunication in Mexico never failed to produce several moments of general hilarity in Alaska. More importantly, the story helped me convey an important message to the Alaskans: I know you know that I don't know it all, but I want you to know that I know I don't know it all.

Here is the story with which I opened each session:

During the year I lived in Portugal teaching English, I became conversant in Portuguese. Upon my arrival in Mexico last summer, I found myself constantly translating from Portuguese into Spanish whenever I had to speak. A common and immediate question from the Mexicans I met and worked with was "How old are you?" I successfully translated most of the sentence from Portuguese into Spanish for almost 2 weeks before one of the maestros finally pulled me aside and pointed out why I always got such odd looks when I announced my age. In failing to incorporate the Spanish "ñ" into the Portuguese word for year (*año* in Spanish vs., *ano* in Portuguese), I had been confidently informing people how many "anuses" I had instead of how many "years" I had!

The telling of this story symbolizes for me the greatest contrast between teacher training in Mexico and in Alaska. In Mexico, the fact that I was from the US and a native speaker of English was enough to ensure my credibility despite any evidence to the contrary. Unfortunately, venturing to Alaska in this frame of mind did not prepare me for the blast of cold air that I met. I found the Alaskan teachers to be suspicious of me for the very reason that the Mexicans had so readily accepted me. As an outsider, I had to prove myself to gain acceptance. I found over-acceptance in Mexico and under-acceptance in Alaska to be the most challenging--and unanticipated--factors to overcome in my role as teacher trainer. Providing effective training that meets the trainees where they are is especially difficult when they are in their home but I am not in mine.