

Exploring Options for *Titulación* in *Licenciaturas* in ELT in Mexico: A Case Study¹

By Peter Sayer, Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca (UABJO), Mexico. Peter.Sayer@asu.edu

Abstract

Recently there has been a move towards making the curricula of tertiary education in Mexico more flexible (*flexibilización*). Among the recommendations for making the curricula of undergraduate degrees (*licenciaturas*) more flexible is the expansion of options for the final degree requirements (*titulación*) beyond the traditional thesis. This paper reports on one particularly successful experience we had with a group of students at the language department of the public university in Oaxaca who opted for one of the “new options”: developing a professional project. This suggests ways that the professional project can engage students in creating an experience that gives them the opportunity to use creatively the knowledge developed during their years in the program, and as well, can have a positive impact on English language teaching in the communities that our universities serve. It is meant both to illuminate how a range of different theoretical aspects of applied linguistics and language pedagogy can be contextualized and integrated into one project, and to suggest ways that university language departments can better connect to local schools and teachers.

Keywords: Options for *titulación*, professional project, *telesecundarias*, Oaxaca

Exploring Options for *Titulación* in *Licenciaturas* in ELT in Mexico: A Case Study²⁹

With the surge in interest in English language learning in Mexico in the 1990s, and the corresponding efforts to professionalize the field of ELT, many Mexican universities initiated *licenciatura*³¹⁰ programs in teaching English as an additional language (BA TESOL). The curricula of these programs have been

¹ This is a refereed article.

² The success of the project reported on here is due to the diligence and excellent work of the students: Jacqueline Alcocer Huerta, Hildeberto Cruz Torres, Gibrán García Mendoza, Edgar Martínez Santos, Marta Ortíz González Mariana Selina Pérez Méndez, and Ana Edith Tomás Ramírez. Special thanks to my colleague Donald Kissinger, who took the lead on the final stages of the project, and to Ángeles Clemente for her invaluable collaboration. As well, I'd like to recognize the original work done by Prof. Leticia Morales Flores, the efforts of Mtro. Inocencio López and the teachers of the La Cañada region in Oaxaca, and the excellent editorial team at the Fondo Editorial: Fidel Luján, Cuauhtémoc Peña, and Claudia Guichard Bello.

³ There is a “Glossary and explanation of terms” at the end of this article for words in Spanish that are particular to the Mexican educational system that may be unfamiliar to readers.

heavily influenced by the input of the British Council, both directly by involvement of BC staff in the development of the *planes de estudio*, and by the influence of the COTE- and DOTE-trained teachers who are teaching in these programs. Still, although the content of Mexican BA TESOL programs has been influenced by applied linguists and ELT professionals from abroad, their organization and structure fit within the traditions of the Mexican university system. This has included the requirement, for students to graduate from the rank of *pasante* to *titulado*, of completing a thesis.

Recently, however, there has been a move towards the *flexibilización* of tertiary education in Mexico (SEP, 2001, pp. 183-218). Among the recommendations for making the curricula of licenciaturas more flexible is the expansion of options for titulación beyond the traditional thesis. This article reports on one particularly successful experience we had with a group of students at the public Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca (UABJO) who chose one of the "new options": developing a professional project. While it may be hard to duplicate the fortuitous combination of timing, the "onda" of the group of students, and the enthusiasm of the school administrators, I offer this story as a case study to suggest ways that a professional project can engage students in creating an experience that gives them the opportunity to creatively use the knowledge developed during their years in the program. Additionally, and ideally, professional projects should also have a positive impact on English language teaching in the communities that our universities serve. As a case study, it is meant both to illuminate how a range of different theoretical aspects of applied linguistics and language pedagogy can be contextualized and integrated into one project, and to suggest ways that university language departments can better connect to local schools and teachers. I leave it to the reader – especially if you are an asesor or administrator in a language department – to look for ways this contextually- and historically-situated story may be of relevance in a specific setting.

The licenciatura program in Oaxaca: Expanded options for titulación

The UABJO licenciatura program was started in 1992. Ten years later, after five *generaciones* had graduated, and a *semi-escolarizado* program and an extension language center in the Istmo de Tehuantepec had been opened, we were looking for ways to improve. The original *plan de estudios* had been "patched" in various ways: *materias* shifted around, contents changed, and new teachers brought in, but we were still worried that our *tasa de titulación* was very low. After ten semesters of classes, students struggled to finish an 80-page thesis written in standard academic English. Many were taking years, and some were not graduating at all; teachers were putting in long hours as *asesores* working with students to revise, and revise... and revise theses like "How to Use Games to Teach English," or "The Role of L1 in the EFL Classroom." Due to the low numbers of *pasantes* who actually reached *titulación* after several

generations had finished their coursework, the length of the final work had been reduced from an 80-page thesis to a 30-40-page *tesina*. Still, this did not satisfactorily solve the problem, since although some students produced excellent works of empirical research (several are fine examples of reflective action research), we felt that for many, ourselves included, the experience was very frustrating, and did not necessarily make the students better language teachers. In fact, despite not being *titulados*, many were already working as English teachers, and we had observed first-hand the excellent work they were doing in their classrooms with their students.

Writing a thesis, we reasoned, requires mastery of a certain genre of academic writing. It requires skills in doing research. While both of these types of knowledge are important, the amount of attention they received in the *plan de estudios* was minimal. Should we emphasize academic writing and research more than? In fact, except for a handful of students who go on to study a *maestría*, they are hardly likely to use either very much after they graduate. Better, we thought, to spend the time on *materias* dealing with developing English language proficiency, pedagogy, and applied linguistics; after all, our *perfil del egresado* is aimed at the *formación de docentes*, not *investigadores*. So one of our professors, Dra. Ángeles Clemente, took the lead and developed a PIFI-funded pilot project to test the waters for new options for *titulación*. We kept the thesis as an option for those students who found research attractive, but also offered an *examen global de conocimientos, práctica docente, and proyecto profesional*.

Immediately, we found difficulties in implementing the global exam option. Since we had not "standardized" the contents of the courses in the form of *programas institucionales*, it was impossible to establish the minimum knowledge base that we could hold students accountable to in designing a global exam. While the global exam as an option for *titulación* may be more feasible now that the *programas institucionales* have been developed, we still find a tension – perhaps even contradiction – in our move towards a more flexible, constructivist orientation in the *plan de estudios*, and the linear, behaviorist view of learning and knowledge implicit in a standardized global exam and pre-set institutional programs (cf. Freeman & Johnson, 1998, and Tsui, 2003 for treatments of teacher knowledge and expertise). And so although this option exists in theory, no student has yet chosen this option. In Clemente's pilot project (2002-03), the initial group of about 40 students, by their own choosing, split almost evenly amongst the three other options.

The option of *práctica docente* has worked out well. Originally, this option was perceived by both teachers and students as being easier, even considered a cop-out compared to the others. We wanted to dispel this view, to make their first "real" teaching stint rigorous and demanding, while at the same time not losing sight of the fact that the focus was on practical issues of language learning with real students in a real classroom. For the most part, the *práctica* option has

succeeded in requiring students to synthesize knowledge learned as discrete pieces in course design, materials design, lesson planning, teaching methods, and test design. As well, in the discussion groups that accompanied the practicum experience, student-teachers were able to bring to the table and discuss with peers problems that rarely get attention in their formal classes: classroom management and discipline, grading, parents' expectations, and negotiating the politics of the institutions where they were doing their practicum. Finally, by having students engage in forms of action research and reflective teaching (Richards and Lockhart, 1994), for most of the student-teachers the "product" of the practicum – a reflective journal and portfolio compilation of materials – showed clear evidence of the learning process of becoming English teachers. The end product of this option is the *portafolio docente*, which compiles the syllabus the teacher designed, materials used, lesson plans, examples of students' work, a reflective journal, and a short (8-10 page) paper connecting theory and practice. Because the compilation of this portfolio is closely linked to their daily work in the classroom, students who have selected this route have been more successful in getting *titulado* than their *compañeros* doing the thesis.

The professional project as an opción de titulación

Of the four choices, the *reporte de proyecto* was the most nebulous. The idea was to have an option that was somewhere between the theory and empirical research of the thesis, but not limited to classroom teaching as with the practicum. It would – we hoped – be practical, but informed by theory (or theoretical, but grounded in practice if you like.) We didn't want to define exactly what it was supposed to be, however, since we hoped that students would see opportunities in things they were already working on that they could turn into a *reporte de proyecto*. Good examples of some of the initial proposals students brought were "An English course for Oaxacan travel agents and hotel workers," or "A teacher's guide to on-line resources for learning English in high school."

So we intentionally left the *proyecto* open-ended. Originally, we had thought that the *proyecto* topics would be based on proposals brought to us by the students. However, we found that it also provided a way for greater collaboration between students and professors, since as teachers we are often approached by persons involved in education at some level who want help with some aspect of language teaching. Because we believe very strongly that, as a public school of higher education, it is our duty to serve the community, we try to get as involved as we can. The day Mtro. Fidel Luján from the *Instituto Estatal de Educación Público de Oaxaca's* (IEEPO) *Fondo Editorial* called me asking if I'd take a look at a manuscript for an English textbook proved to be the beginning of one such opportunity for students and professors to collaborate and make a contribution to the community.

The IEEPO telesecundaría project

Mtro. Fidel is the director of the *Fondo Editorial* of the IEEPO. When we met, he explained that the manuscript was a Spanish translation of the English-as-a-Foreign-Language section of the SEP's "Basic Concepts" or *Conceptos Básicos* book for the *telesecundaría* schools. I had heard of the *telesecundaría* system – where lessons are transmitted via satellite from Mexico City – but since my work mainly kept me in the capital city of Oaxaca, I had never had the chance to actually go and visit one of the many "satellite schools," most of which are in the outlying, mountainous areas of Oaxaca, in communities where there are between 10-25 *egresados* of the primary school. The *telesecundaria* system:

*Atiende a alumnos de 13 a 15 años y está diseñada para funcionar preferentemente en comunidades rurales que tienen menos de 2500 habitantes y en las que no es posible instalar escuelas secundarias generales o técnicas por que hay un número reducido de egresados de primaria. [...] Combina elementos de la modalidad escolarizada con aspectos específicos de la educación a distancia*⁴¹¹. (IEEPO, 2005)

Unlike other *secundarias*, the satellite schools have only one *maestro* per group. Although the curriculum is exactly the same as non-satellite schools for each grade level, during the first 20 minutes of each 60-minute block the students watch a video-lesson beamed from Mexico City, and then spend 30 minutes doing textbook activities that correspond to the video-lesson. Martínez-Vásquez (2004) explains that: "El modelo de la telesecundaria trata de propiciar el autodidactismo, concibe al profesor como un 'facilitador', un orientador del aprendizaje del alumno⁵¹²" (p. 138). The *telesecundaria* system was established in 1968 and during the 2002-03 school year had 15,204 classrooms and over a million students throughout the country and, since *secundaria* (grades 7-9) became obligatory in 1993, now enrolls 47% of all *secundaria* students (Cortéz Valadez, 2004; see also the EduSat website, which broadcasts the transmission on-line at http://edusat.ilce.edu.mx/canal_11.htm). In Oaxaca, the *telesecundaria* system continues to expand rapidly; in during 2004-05, 55 new schools were opened (Ruíz Ortiz, 2005).

Although the *telesecundaria* system undoubtedly increases access to education for many marginalized communities, the teachers and students in these schools continue to face significant challenges. In particular, the *Consejo Técnico* had identified the English classes as one area that was especially

⁴ Serves students from 13 to 15 years old and is designed to operate preferably in rural communities that have populations less than 2,500 and where it is not possible to create general or technical middle schools because there are too few students leaving the primary schools. [...] It combines elements of the normal (traditional face-to-face) modality with specific aspects of distance education. (Author's translation)

⁵ The telesecundaria model tries to promote self-directed learning, where the teacher is conceived as a "facilitator," someone who orients the student's learning. (Author's translation)

problematic. The preface of the manuscript Luján showed me explained its purpose, which was a result of:

La iniciativa del Consejo Técnico del Sector 08 de Telesecundarias en el estado de Oaxaca, el cual consideró las necesidades educativas detectadas en la asignatura de Inglés a partir de un diagnóstico aplicado a 43 grupos de las escuelas telesecundarias más marginadas de cada zona escolar de dicho sector; cuyos resultados señalaron que 50% de los grupos omite la clase de Inglés; 40% desarrolla el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje de esta asignatura en forma no sistematizada, lo que genera índices no satisfactorios en el aprendizaje de los alumnos⁵.

The administrators and teachers in Sector 08, centered around the town of Huatla de Jiménez in the Cañada region about 3 hours from the Oaxacan capital, were concerned that English classes just weren't working for their students or teachers. Their survey confirmed this: only 10% of teachers felt that they were able to do a decent job with their English classes.

The most obvious problem was that the materials given to them by the SEP were completely in English. These were not very useful to the teachers, many of whom are in fact bilingual Spanish-indigenous language speakers, but whose exposure to English was limited to what they themselves had acquired in *secundaria*. They decided that the first step was to translate the materials into Spanish so that the teachers could have some basic notion of what they were teaching. One of the teachers on the *Consejo Técnico* had a good mastery of English and had taken on the task of translating every reading passage and cartoon caption from the SEP's *Conceptos Básicos* book, level 1. They passed this translated manuscript on to the *Fondo Editorial* which passed it along to the IEEPO's *mesa técnica* for evaluation and recommendation about suitability for publication. The response in the form of an official *dictamen* of the *mesa técnica* was honest, if not very encouraging. The manuscript had many translation problems, and they could not endorse its publication. Interestingly, their *dictamen* even included a critique of the manuscript's methodology as "*no va de acuerdo a los actuales métodos comunicativos en la enseñanza de segundas lenguas propuestos por la Secretaría de Educación Pública*⁶..." and this despite the fact that the translation had not changed in the least bit the methodology of the original SEP materials!

⁵ The initiative of the Rules Committee of Sector 08 of the State of Oaxaca, which has been concerned to carry out an educational needs analysis of, based on a diagnostic done of 43 groups in most marginalized *telesecundaria* schools in each area of the sector. The results of this diagnostic indicated that 50% of the groups omitted English class, and 40% carried out the teaching-learning of English unsystematically, the effects of which generate unsatisfactory outcomes in the students' learning. (Author's translation)

⁶ It is not in line with current communicative methods in the teaching of second languages as proposed by the Ministry of Education.

When he received the *dictamen* of the *mesa técnica*, Luján took the extraordinary step of not simply returning to the Cañada teachers with a “thanks, but no thanks.” Instead, he approached us at the Centro de Idiomas. “*Veo que sus intenciones son nobles,*” he said of the *telesecundaria* teachers’ efforts. “*Quiero que lo revisen a ver si el proyecto tiene algo de valor, si hay forma de apoyarles*⁷.” His words were rousing: as a teacher dedicated to improving both public schools and English language teaching, how could I ignore a request for help from schools that are among the most marginalized in our state? He told me that if there was something of merit in the manuscript, he’d figure out some way to get it published. How could I say no? I told Luján I’d go over the materials and prepare another *dictamen*.

However, with the reality of teaching an extremely heavy courseload, and with various other projects underway, I really didn’t have the time. Still, I could see that in that pile of type-written pages there was the kernel of a good idea: put together a Teacher’s Guide for them. It certainly wouldn’t solve everything that was wrong with teaching English in *telesecundarias*, but it would at least give something concrete to work with to the 90% of teachers who had admitted they felt frustrated and lost trying to teach English. The manuscript sat on the shelf for a week.

The next week, Mtro. Inocencio “Chencho” López came to the university to pay me a visit. He was in charge of the *Consejo Técnico* of Sector 08, and it was he who had delivered the manuscript to the *Fondo Editorial*. He reiterated what the preface had said: that about half of the teacher-facilitators simply skipped English class, turning off the TV-transmissions and either dedicating the time to catch up on other subjects, or sending the kids to play in the patio while they worked on something else. López had come down from the Cañada, and had brought the original SEP *Conceptos Básicos* books that the translations had been made from.

He also explained that they had tried to turn the dialogues in the books into recordings, but they had recorded them on aging cassette machines, with whomever they could find who could speak some English, and so predictably the final products were nearly unintelligible and of no pedagogic value. Since I was already working on the translations, he asked, couldn’t I also help do something with the tapes? The project was getting bigger, but at the same time I realized how worthwhile it was. I liked López right away; he was gentle and soft-spoken, but you could tell immediately how enthusiastic and determined he was to try to change things for the better in his district.

I decided to ask other colleagues and students to see if there was anyone willing to help. Donald Kissinger and Ángeles Clemente both offered to serve as *asesores*, and I approached the group of students who were just starting their

⁷ I can see that their intentions are noble. [...] I want you to look it over to see if the project has some value, if there’s some way to help them.

final year and who I knew were fishing for *titulación* topics. I explained about the project and asked if anyone still needed a topic, or would be willing to change. I was delighted when seven students, who I knew were academically very strong and motivated, decided to band together to take on the project. Together we prepared another *dictamen*, which recommended that the manuscript be rescued, and that we were willing to work on it. Luján pledged that if we could give him a quality product, he would find a way to get it published.

Organizing the project

The question then became: how to split the project seven ways and make it all add up to what López' teachers needed and wanted? And furthermore, as *asesores* we wanted to make sure that our students ended up with individual final projects that would meet the school's requirements for *titulación*. Even though the options for *titulación* had been expanded, because of the *reglamento* of the university, the final product still had to resemble an individually-written thesis.

The way we organized the project came to resemble the rock concert production from the Jack Black film *School of Rock* (White & Linklater, 2003). In that movie, each student in Dewey's classroom was responsible for a part of producing the rock concert. (The protagonist's name, Dewey, is a nod to the American educational philosopher John Dewey who advocated precisely this kind of progressivist approach to schooling and the pedagogy exemplified in the movie.) The IEEPO project was very much like Dewey's rock concert: each of the seven students (their official title became "*profesores practicantes*") had a certain role to play, and each was responsible for figuring out how to produce his or her own piece. At the same time, each part had to be coordinated with the others. The ten of us (the three *asesores* and seven student-teachers) decided to divide the project into four distinct parts:

1. Ethnographic landscape: The socio-cultural context of the *telesecundarias* (student in charge: Edith Tomás)
2. Preparation of the Teacher's Guide based on the original translations (students in charge: Jacqueline Alcocer and Marta Ortíz)
3. Preparation of the listening materials from the written dialogues in the book (students in charge: Gibrán García and Edgar Martínez)
4. Organization of in-service workshops for teachers: How to use the materials (students in charge: Mariana Pérez and Hildeberto Cruz)

First of all, we realized that in order to better understand what was working and what wasn't about the *telesecundaria* English classes, we needed to have more background information. None of us had actually spent any time in a *telesecundaria*, and we felt it would be too presumptuous of us to start without becoming better acquainted with what actually happens in a *telesecundaria* classroom. Edith was responsible for and took the leadership role in this part of the project, preparing an ethnographic overview of the English classrooms. She and several of the project members went to *telesecundarias* to observe and film the classes. They brought back their fieldnotes and videotapes for us to discuss as a group. Edith also made the 3-hour trip to Huatla de Jiménez to see the community and meet the teachers, administrators and students who would be using the materials. We felt that this ethnographic survey was an essential first step to understanding how the materials produced could best serve the teachers, and Edith did an excellent job of deciding how to organize an ethnographic survey. For this, she had to read up on what the purpose of ethnography is, as well as make contact with the schools, hone her observation skills, and develop skills with using video recording equipment.

Jacqueline and Marta were responsible for turning the manuscript that the *mesa técnica* had criticized and rejected into a Teacher's Guide – a *Libro de Apoyo para el Maestro* – that could be published by the *Fondo Editorial*. Based on the observations and interviews done for Edith's ethnographic part, they decided that the Teacher's Guide should include more than just a literal translation of the original *Conceptos Básicos* book. They greatly improved the translations, and provided short explanations to teachers about grammatical and lexical points. They also developed a pronunciation guide and compiled vocabulary lists and a grammar reference section for each chapter. Finally, they developed a "Fun Activities" section, showing how the vocabulary lists could be turned into crossword puzzles or word searches, songs, and kinesthetic activities like the "Hot Potato Game." For this, they had to consider what made a good translation, and look into translation theory. Also, they looked at many examples of teacher's editions of popular ELT coursebooks to see what elements to include and how to present them most effectively. They also incorporated what they'd learned from the ethnographic survey so that the activities they suggested could be realistically used by teachers with limited English proficiency, with limited planning time, and in places where material resources are scarce. We also had a formal meeting with the staff of the *Fondo Editorial* to talk about layout and formatting, and learned a lot about the process of editing and preparing a manuscript for publication.

Figure 1: Page from the *Libro de Apoyo* showing the translation of the dialogues.

CHAPTER 2

MULTI-PERSON

4

¡Mira esto!

Nota:	Preguntando a qué te dedicas	Respondiendo
	What do you do? ¿A qué te dedicas?	I am a doctor. Soy doctora.
		I'm an engineer. Soy ingeniero.

Ver Referencias: Presencia simple	Verificando ocupaciones	Respondiendo
Nota:	Are you a dentist? ¿Eres dentista?	(short answer) Yes, I am.
		(long answer) Yes, I'm a dentist.
	Are you an electrician? ¿Eres electricista?	No, I am not.
		No, I'm not an electrician.

Nota:

Ejemplo	A car	A house.
	An apple.	An engineer.

Ver Vocabulario:
Profesiones

Figure 2: Page from the *Libro de Apoyo* showing additional explanations and materials.

REFERENCIAS

SUSTANTIVOS:
FORMAS PLURALES
Y POSESIVAS

**SUSTANTIVOS:
FORMAS
PLURALES Y
POSESIVAS**

Selección

Hay dos categorías de sustantivos en inglés: **comunes** y **proprios**.
Los nombres **proprios** se refieren a individuos, países, ciudades,
mujeres, etc. y se escriben con mayúscula.

Ejemplos:
Pablo Picasso, Brazil, Monterrey, Miami.

Los sustantivos **comunes** no se escriben con mayúscula.

Ejemplos:
book, woman, taxi, money, health, happiness.

A su vez, los sustantivos comunes pueden dividirse en **contables**
(book, woman, taxi, etc.) y **no contables** (money, health, happiness,
etc.).

Formación del plural

- Generalmente los sustantivos forman el plural agregando **s** al
singular: **books, flags, schools, houses, windows.**
- A los sustantivos con terminación **s, z, x, ch,** se les añade **es**:
glasses, quizzes, boxes, sandwiches, bushes.
- A algunos sustantivos con terminación en **o** se añade **es**:
tomatoes, potatoes, heroes, mosquitoes pero hay
excepciones como: **planes, radios, zoos, shampoos,**
avocados.
- En los sustantivos con terminación **en** y (después de una
consonante) se cambia la **n** por **i** y se añade **es**: **babies,**
ladies, countries, cities, excepto: **days, monkeys, boys,**
guys.
- En la mayoría de los sustantivos con terminación en **f** o **fe** se
cambia cada terminación por **ves**: **wives, lives, thieves,**
shelves, knives, halves.
- Los siguientes son los sustantivos más comunes que forman el
plural de manera irregular: **man-men, woman-women, child-**
children, foot-feet, tooth-teeth, mouse-mice.
- Algunos sustantivos tienen la misma forma para singular y plural:
sheep-sheep, deer-deer, fish-fish, series-series, species-species.

Gibran and Edgar took on the task of preparing the listening materials to accompany the Teacher's Guide. They recruited volunteers amongst their *compañeros* in the *licenciatura* program as well as foreign students studying Spanish at the school to make the recordings. They had decided that it would be good to include a mix of both foreign and Mexican accents. Gibran used *CoolEdit* software to mix and format them on the computer, add ambient music and transitions, and finally burn the master CDs. The final product was an

impressive, professional-sounding set of recordings that could be replicated many times for the classroom teachers without losing sound quality. Besides the technical skill involved in mixing and editing the sounds, the students also learned a lot about what makes for good listening materials.

Finally, the group decided that the materials would have more impact if they could present and explain them directly to the teachers. Mariana and Hildeberto were in charge of planning and leading a 2-day workshop. All seven of the student-*profesores practicantes* and one of the *asesores* (Don) went to Huatla and Tlaxiaco in La Cañada and presented the materials to over 300 teachers from over a hundred schools. They showed them the translations, and how they were aligned to each lesson in the *Conceptos Básicos* book. They also concentrated on how the pronunciation guide could be used, and how to use the extra activities. However, before the students could carry out this training, they needed a crash refresher phonology course. The *asesores* led these bi-weekly meetings, and we also discussed as a group how to be an effective trainer and came up with strategies for the training sessions (cf. Woodward, 1990). This was a great culminating event for the project, since the students were able to give their work directly to the teachers. Inocencio López was on hand, and with all the formality and ceremony that is expected at such events, he led the official presentation of the materials and kicked off the training courses.

Postscript

The project, somewhat amazingly, stayed on our anticipated timeline, thanks to the students' hard work and the intra-group peer pressure they applied on each other to get things turned in on time. Fidel Luján had originally contacted us in September. We met with Inocencio and put the team together in October. By Christmas, the students had completed the ethnographic description of the *telesecundaria* English classes, and the preparations of the Guide and listening material were well underway. We hoped to finish the Guide by March, so that the *Fondo Editorial* would have 3 months to get it to press, and have it done in time for the workshops in June. In the meantime, the students would complete the recordings and have time to make multiple copies.

Figure 3: The final product: The *Conceptos Básicos* translation and Teacher's Guide.



Unfortunately, the production schedule for the book was delayed, and not all the CDs could be burned in time for the workshops, but the workshops were successful nonetheless. The seven students had a group *examen profesional* – the “thesis defence” – where they presented the project to 50 of their fellow *licenciatura* classmates. The project was officially capped the following autumn when Fidel Luján, Mtro. Inocencio, the *asesores*, and the newly-*titulados licenciados en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras* attended the book presentation ceremony (IEEPO, 2003).

Conclusions

It is worth highlighting several important aspects of this project:

1. The high level of motivation and investment of the group members: the students were responsible for the success or failure of the project. Though

the *asesores* “scaffolded” important decisions and served as resources for them, it was their project.

2. The project forged ties between the university, the schools, and the state education ministry. Three of the students have since been hired by the ministry, and two of them are working in the Cañada region where the project was done.

3. The learning that the students engaged in was highly contextualized and task-oriented (eg. learning about ethnography, training, observation, or phonology in order to be able to put it immediately into practice).

4. The final products – the guide, CDs and workshops – are tangible things that will directly impact the quality of English teaching where it is most needed.

From a researcher’s point of view, I wish we’d included some kind of follow-up to the project so we could evaluate its impact. For example, I wonder now how many teachers are currently using the materials? What do they think about them? Have the materials increased the percentage of teachers (from 10%) who felt they were able to do a satisfactory job with English class? In what ways? A short questionnaire, coupled with some interviews with teachers could evaluate the ultimate impact the project has had, though unfortunately, there has been neither time nor resources to carry it out.

In sum, I’ve presented this story as a case study of the kind of possibilities that curricular *flexibilización* and new options for *titulación* can provide. Admittedly, it would be hard to repeat the experience. We were incredibly lucky to have enthusiastic and competent collaborators in the *telesecundaria* group as well as the excellent team at the *Fondo Editorial*, and of course we were privileged to work with an exceptional “dream team” group of students whose abilities and personalities meshed in just the right ways, and were dedicated and hard-working. Nevertheless, although it can’t be replicated, the experience points to ways that project work can promote learning in the constructivist sense: the students improved their language skills, engaged in action research, gained experience in real-world contexts, made important professional contacts, and were able to move directly from *pasante* to *titulado* status.

Endnotes

1. The methodology for teaching English tries to emulate the main principles of communicative language teaching (CLT). However, it seems that there has been little consideration of how CLT may be made “context-sensitive” (Bax, 1997) or represent “appropriate methodology” (Holliday, 1994) for the distance and self-directed model that the *telesecundaria* embodies. In fact, there seems to be a

disconnect, which training courses like *SEPAinglés* have not yet addressed, between the tenets (or dogma?) of CLT and the local necessities and realities of teaching and learning English in many rural Mexican communities.

Glossary and explanation of terms

Asesor – Academic or thesis advisor

Compañeros – Classmates or peers

Consejo Técnico – The rules committee

Dictámen – An official report

Egresados – Students who have graduated from a degree program.

Examen global de conocimientos – Comprehensive knowledge examination

Flexibilización – An educational policy instigated by the federal Ministry of Education that promotes greater academic flexibility and mobility. Students studying in flexible, a credit-based system should have more control over their academic trajectory, including the choosing of courses, duration and intensity of studies (ie, a part-time student can take more semesters to finish), and types of activities that can earn academic credit, and ways to increase quality and terminal efficiency.

Fondo Editorial – Publishing office

Formación de docentes – Preparing teachers; teachers' training

Generaciones – A "generation" is a group of students who start and go through the program together as a cohort

Instituto Estatal de Educación Público de Oaxaca's (IEEPO) – State Ministry of Education in Oaxaca

Investigadores – Researchers

Jefas – Leaders (fem.)

Licenciatura – An undergraduate (bachelor's level) degree program

Maestría – A master's degree

Maestro/a – Teacher

Materias – Academic courses.

Mesa Técnica – An expert committee. The state Ministry of Education has a *mesa técnica* for each curricular area.

Onda – synergy, style, or vibe

Opción de titulación – An option for the culminating project

Pasante – Someone who has finished the coursework, but not the final thesis requirement.

Perfil del egresado – The “graduation profile” specifies the program’s objectives. The *perfil* serves to orient means-ends curriculum development by defining the “final product”: the student’s knowledge, dispositions, and abilities upon finishing the program of study.

PIFI (Programa Integral del Fomento de la Investigación) – A Ministry of Education initiative to support innovative research and development projects in tertiary education

Planes de estudio – The curricular map. In most non-flexible Mexican curricula, the plan de estudios specifically exactly for the student which classes she must take, and in what order they must be taken.

Portafolio docente – Professional or teaching portfolio

Práctica docente – Teaching practicum

Profesores practicantes – Practicum teachers

Programas institucionales – Official course description and syllabi for courses within the curriculum

Proyecto profesional – Professional or culminating project

Reglamento – Oficial rules

Reporte de proyecto – Project report

Semi-escolarizado – A modality of study designed for students who are working. A “semi” program usually includes evening, weekend, and/or intensive courses during vacations and breaks.

SEP – Mexican Ministry of Public Education

Tasa de titulación – The index that indicates the percentage of the students completing coursework who have finished the culminating thesis project and received the final degree.

Telesecundaria – A junior high school, equivalent to grades 7-9, in predominantly rural areas of Mexico where lessons are beamed via satellite transmissions into the classroom.

Tesina – A short thesis, perhaps 20-40 pages

Titulado/a – Someone who has finished all the academic requirements of the program, including the thesis.

Titulación – The process of completing the degree requirements

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