Reculturing Teachers as Just the Tip of the Iceberg: Ongoing Challenges for the Implementation of Student-centred EFL Learning in Mexico

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Abstract

Mexico has followed global trends in emphasising the need for its citizens to learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Unfortunately, the percentage of students who reach desired levels of English in the public education system is currently far from satisfactory. One way in which the Mexican government has tried to address such poor results has been to encourage new teaching approaches. There are certain similarities and differences between these approaches, but arguably the majority of them fall into the general bracket of "student-centred learning". However, despite several of these approaches being introduced over the last few decades, many Mexican EFL classrooms remain largely teacher-centred. When both beliefs and behaviours are required to change as part of an educational reform, a process called "reculturing" is said to be necessary. This paper suggests that Mexican educational leaders should consider how this reculturing process might be better supported for those teachers who currently believe in more teacher-centred approaches. However, it also strongly emphasises that some form of reculturing must also take place for all the other participants who have a stake in this educational change. These people might include students, parents, teachers of other subjects, school leaders, teacher trainers, educational leaders, designers of high-stakes examinations, employers, and admissions personnel at local and foreign universities.

Resumen

México ha seguido las tendencias mundiales en destacar la necesidad de que los ciudadanos aprendan Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL, por sus siglas en inglés). Por desgracia, el porcentaje de estudiantes que alcanzan los niveles deseados de inglés en el sistema de educación pública es actualmente poco satisfactorio. Una forma en que el gobierno mexicano ha tratado de abordar los malos resultados ha sido la de alentar los nuevos métodos de enseñanza. Hay ciertas similitudes y diferencias entre estos enfoques, pero podría decirse que la mayoría de ellos caen en el rubro general de "aprendizaje centrado en el estudiante". Sin embargo, a pesar de la introducción de estos enfoques en los últimos decenios, muchas aulas mexicanas permanecen en gran parte centradas en el profesor. Cuando se tiene una reforma que demanda modificar tanto creencias como comportamientos, se considera necesario recurrir a un proceso conocido como "reculturización". En el presente artículo se propone que los líderes educativos mexicanos valoren el modo en que pudiera respaldarse mejor este proceso de reculturización entre aquellos maestros que actualmente trabajan con enfoques más centrados en el profesor. Sin embargo, también debe hacerse especial hincapié en que alguna forma de reculturización también es necesaria para todas las personas que tienen un interés en este cambio educativo. Estas personas podrían incluir a los estudiantes, de familia, profesores de otras asignaturas, líderes escolares, formadores de docentes, líderes educativos, diseñadores de certificación, empleadores y personal de admisión en las universidades locales y extranjeras.

Introduction

This article relates to a significant educational problem in Mexico: the lack of success of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in the public education system. Specifically, it focuses on a general change which has been encouraged over the last few decades: the movement from "teacher-centred" to "student-centred" EFL learning. It attempts to illustrate the complexity of such a change, and argues that teachers represent just a small part of what will need to change in order for it to be implemented successfully.

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EFL Learning in the Mexican Public Education System

All over the world, learning English as a Foreign Language is considered extremely important. Most countries in the world, including every country in Latin America, now include English in their public curricula, tending to justify themselves by emphasising the important role English is expected to play in an increasingly globalised world (see Argentina Zappa-Hollman, 2007, Argentina; Matear, 2008, Chile; Herazo Rivera, Jerez Rodríguez & Lorduy Arellano, 2012, Colombia, among others).

Mexico has followed largely similar patterns to the rest of the world in this respect. English has been taught in public secondary schools since at least 1954, and in many areas of the country, English is now taught as early as primary or even pre-primary education (SEP, 2010b). What this means is that potentially millions of Mexicans have taken or will take English from kindergarten right through to the end of their university degrees.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of Mexicans emerge from the public education system with relatively low levels of English (Davies, 2009; Ramírez Romero, Sayer & Pamplón Irigoyen, 2014; Rodríguez-Ramírez, 2014; Sayer, 2015). Indeed, González Robles, Vivaldo Lima and Castillo Morales (2004) assessed the English proficiency of 4,960 students at nine universities in the Mexico City area, and found that only 8% of those who had entered university from public high schools could be classified as intermediate level or higher. This figure increased to 25% for those at the end of their degrees.

In light of such poor results, Davies (2009) has branded the Mexican public EFL teaching situation a "general failure" (p. 7), and if the figures above are accurate, it is difficult to disagree with him. Wedell (2013) argues that it will no longer be feasible to continue to allocate so much time, effort and resources to the teaching of English in public education systems if programs continue to fail to even come close to their desired outcomes.

Clearly then, something has to be done. A somewhat radical alternative proposed by Davies (2009) is that English should no longer be a compulsory subject beyond the first grade of secondary school, but that affordable English classes should be available through government-run language centres. His argument is interesting and certainly warrants consideration; however, as Davies himself recognises, it seems highly unlikely that this will happen in the near future, given the continued worldwide perception that English is important for development (Davies, 2009; Sayer, 2015). Indeed, in Mexico and many other countries, the exact opposite strategy has tended to be employed, with English being taught at an increasingly young age at primary school and kindergarten (Cha & Ham, 2008; SEP, 2010a).

Aside from introducing English to younger children, the other main focus of action has been to introduce new methodological approaches. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Learning (TBL), Competence-Based Learning and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are just a few examples of the numerous approaches that have been encouraged over the last few decades (SEP, 1996; 2006a; 2006b; 2010a; 2011). There are various similarities and differences between these approaches, but I would argue that most of them embrace the general spirit of "student-centred learning". The next section explores what is meant by this term.

What is Student-centred Learning?

The movement towards student-centred learning, also known as "learner-centred education", "learning-centred education" and several other variations, is one of the most prominent educational changes currently being promoted across the world. It has not only been encouraged in Mexico, but also in many other countries, and has taken place not only in the field of language learning, but in other subjects as well (Schweisfurth, 2011).

The question "what is student-centred learning?" is extremely difficult to answer quickly, given that the term continues to be interpreted in numerous different ways. Over two decades ago, Farrington (1991) claimed that there was "considerable disagreement and confusion about what student-centred learning actually is" (p. 16), and this assertion seems to be as relevant now as it was back then.

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this article, I feel that Lea, Stephenson and Troy (2003) provide a satisfactory definition of some of the most commonly cited features of student-centred learning. Drawing on the interpretations of Fay (1988), Brandes and Ginnis (1996) and Cannon and Newble (2000), they describe the approach as having the following key characteristics:

- Reliance upon active rather than passive learning;
- An emphasis on deep learning and understanding;
- Increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student;
- An increased sense of autonomy in the learner;
- An interdependence between teacher and learner;
- Mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship; and
- A reflexive approach to the learning and teaching process on the part of both teacher and learner.

(Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003, p. 322; my bullets and emphasis)

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore in detail the numerous terms that are mentioned in this list. Indeed, it is not my intention to establish a conclusive definition of student-centred learning, but rather to give the reader a general idea of how I think most teachers would understand the concept.

With this in mind, perhaps the easiest way of understanding student-centred learning is by imagining it as the opposite of "teacher-centred" learning. Of course, classrooms are unlikely to be totally "teacher-centred" or "student-centred", and it might be more useful to imagine a continuum, with the extremes of teacher-centred learning on one side and student-centred learning on the other, but with most classroom contexts falling somewhere in between. Still, for the purposes of illustrating the differences between the more extreme versions of these two, I have created two fictional classrooms. Classroom 1 is a stereotypically teacher-centred classroom, whilst Classroom 2 is a stereotypically student-centred classroom. Some of their main characteristics are listed in Table 1 below:

Classroom 1 (the "teacher-centred" classroom)	Classroom 2 (the "student-centred" classroom)
• The teacher tends to lecture to the students. • The teacher usually bases their teaching on a fixed textbook. • Students only speak when they are asked by the teacher. • Students are correct if they can reproduce what the textbook or the teacher says.	• The teacher regularly invites students to participate. • The teacher may have a textbook but adapts their teaching to their students' needs. • Students are given plenty of opportunities to interact with each other and the teacher. • Students may be invited to offer their opinions and/or come to their own conclusions if appropriate. There is not necessarily one "correct" answer.

Table 1. Characteristics of a Typical Teacher-centred Classroom as Opposed to a Typical Student-centred Classroom

What Might a Student-centred EFL Classroom Look Like?

Table 1 above suggests some general characteristics of student-centred classrooms. These characteristics are not subject-specific; that is to say, they might be largely applicable to classrooms in general. However, within the EFL field, there are a number of more specific approaches which I feel are consistent with the general aims of student-centred learning. I have attempted to summarise some of these in Table 2 below:

Classroom 1 (the "teacher-centred" EFL classroom	Classroom 2 (the "student-centred" EFL classroom)
More of a focus on: • Grammar-based teaching • Structures of language • Accuracy of language forms • Content which may not have any direct relevance to learners' lives • Memorisation and rote learning • Deductive reasoning (teacher explains linguistic rules to learners) • English for General Purposes (EGP)	More of a focus on: • Communicative Language Teaching • Communicative functions of language • Fluency and communicative competence • Meaningful, authentic content which is as relevant as possible to learners' lives • Task-Based Learning • Inductive reasoning (teacher facilitates situations in which learners are able to discover linguistic rule by themselves) • English for Specific Purposes and its variations, e.g. Content-Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

Table 2. Characteristics of a Typical Teacher-centred EFL Classroom as Opposed to a Typical Student-centred EFL Classroom

Some would argue that my interpretation of student-centred EFL learning does not go far enough. For example, advocates of the Freirean pedagogy might contend that Classroom 2 above is still largely teacher-centred, given that the teacher still makes most of the decisions and evaluates most of the outcomes. This is certainly food for thought, and further highlights the difficulties in defining such a disputed term. As mentioned previously, I believe that many teachers around the world would identify with the distinctions I have made between Classrooms 1 and 2, but my understanding must nevertheless be recognised as only *one of many interpretations*. In fact, given the difficulties in reaching a unified understanding of this concept, perhaps it would be more useful to cease viewing student-centred learning as a clearly-defined "end product", and start seeing it as a more general willingness to move away from solely teacher-centred practices in a variety of different ways.

How Student-centred are Mexican EFL Classrooms?

Before attempting to answer this question, it is important to reiterate that it would be an over-simplification to define a lesson or a teacher as *either* "student-centred" *or* "teacher-centred". Teachers use a variety of approaches in their classrooms at different points in time; some of these might be considered more teacher-centred and others more student-centred.

Having said that, studies from across Mexico indicate that teacher-centred practices still tend to predominate over student-centred ones in many EFL classrooms within the public education system. Recent studies on Mexican EFL teaching (Ramírez Romero & Pamplón Irigoyen, 2012; Ramírez Romero, Sayer & Pamplón Irigoyen, 2014; Sayer, 2012, among others) cite examples of these typical teacher-centred practices, among them memorisation, drilling of isolated vocabulary items, grammatical explanations, and a reliance on the textbook. While it would be unwise to state that this applies to all Mexican EFL teachers, it does appear that a considerable number of them continue to teach English in this way.

Why Are Many Mexican EFL Classrooms Still Largely Teacher-centred?

Why is it, then, that so many Mexican EFL classrooms still show more signs of teacher-centred approaches than student-centred ones? One theme that regularly emerges from the educational change literature is that a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning implies not only a change in teachers' behaviours, but also a transformation in their fundamental beliefs about education. The literature suggests that these beliefs tend not to change quickly or easily, given that they represent the pillars of these teachers' professional (and personal) stability and security (see Day, 2002; Cross & Hong, 2011; Geijsel & Meijers, 2005; Kelchtermans, 2009; among others).

Consider the example of teachers who are asked to adopt a student-centred learning approach after having taught all of their lives in a generally teacher-centred way. This change implies that they adjust their role from a transmitter of a set body of knowledge (e.g., vocabulary, grammatical structures) to a facilitator of learning environments in which the students are able to practice using the language in more authentic situations. It requires them to shift their priorities from a sole focus on accuracy (i.e., correctly producing the linguistic forms) towards fluency and the appropriateness of what learners are able to communicate. For someone who has taught in a teacher-centred way throughout their whole life, it is understandable that change might not happen quickly, if at all.

When an educational reform requires teachers to change both their behaviours and their beliefs, Fullan (2007) argues that this represents a "complex change", and suggests that in these situations, a process of educational "reculturing" is necessary. A change from a teacher-centred approach to a more student-centred one must therefore be recognised as a *complex change requiring at least some degree of reculturing*, especially for those teachers who more strongly identify with teacher-centred approaches.

Unfortunately, few educational leaders acknowledge that this reculturing might need to happen, and even fewer put in place appropriate measures for it to be supported over time (Fullan, 2007; Wedell, 2009). It is therefore vital that Mexico invests in ongoing, long-term support for teachers as they experience the transition from teacher-centred to student-centred EFL learning. Short, superficial workshops that

merely tell teachers *about* student-centred learning are not going to be anywhere near sufficient to facilitate long-term changes in beliefs and behaviours.

Planning for the reculturing of teachers must therefore be recognised as an important priority for Mexican educational leaders if they are genuinely interested in making more Mexican EFL classrooms more student-centred. But what happens when teachers have already changed their beliefs? And what happens when teachers believe in student-centred learning in the first place? It is not my intention to argue that all Mexican EFL teachers would fall into this category, but I have observed enough of these teachers in Mexico to convince me that a change in teacher beliefs does not necessarily translate into change at the classroom level. I have worked with teachers who understand and believe in student-centred EFL learning, but many of them (including myself) have not been able to (fully) implement student-centred approaches in their classrooms. So what is stopping them?

To answer this question, it is necessary to explore some of the factors affecting the implementation of student-centred EFL learning that are *beyond the direct control of teachers*. Fortunately, there have been a number of studies published relatively recently which highlight these issues, for example: Alcántar Díaz and Montes Reyes (2013), Mendoza Valladares and Puón Castro (2013), Pamplón Irigoyen and Ramírez Romero (2013), Ramírez Romero, Sayer and Pamplón Irigoyen (2014), Rodríguez-Ramírez (2014), Sayer and Mercau (2013), and Salas Serrano and Sánchez Hernández (2013), among others. Although all of these articles focused on the frankly disastrous implementation of the now defunct National English Program in Basic Education, I feel the points they raise are relevant to all levels of public EFL learning in Mexico. Some of the main obstacles they identify are:

- Insufficient and/or inappropriate training for teachers;
- Insufficient and/or inappropriate resources, e.g., textbooks and didactic material;
- Insufficient class time dedicated to English;
- Overpopulated classrooms;
- Highly heterogeneous classes (students not divided into appropriate language levels);
- Insufficient incentives for individuals to become English teachers or to remain in the profession.

The issues mentioned above are relatable to what Wedell (2013) calls the "parts" of the EFL system. Wedell argues that these "parts" must work in harmony if the hoped-for outcomes of educational changes are to have a greater chance of being achieved.

So why might the "parts" not work together in order to facilitate more student-centred EFL learning in Mexico? I believe that the answer lies in what Wedell (2013) calls the "partners" of the EFL learning system. Here, it is important to envisage "the system" not as an independent entity in itself, but rather as a complexly interconnected web of people, all with their own motivations and beliefs about education. It is these people who, in theory, could make adjustments to the "parts" in order to create the conditions for EFL teachers to teach in a more student-centred way.

To illustrate this point, I have included some examples from the preliminary findings of my doctoral studies, which is exploring teachers' and students' experiences of student-centred EFL learning at a Mexican university. Below I present just a few

examples of situations which have taken place, even when the teachers are making a real effort to teach English in a more student-centred way:

- Some students resist the change as they feel they need a more structured, teacher-centred approach. When they participate in communicative activities, they do not feel they are learning. They make this known through student feedback questionnaires.
- Some students complain to the Head of School that they do not feel comfortable with communicative activities. The Head of School asks the teacher to change back to a more teacher-centred approach.
- The teacher asks for a different classroom in order to create a more interactive, group-oriented environment. However, the teacher is made to feel uncomfortable by administrative staff for making such a request. The same thing happens when the teacher wishes to move the tables around in one of their classrooms.
- The Head of School asks the teacher to apply a grammar-based exam, meaning they have to focus their classes on grammatical accuracy instead of fluency-based communicative activities. Especially towards the end of the semester, they feel that they must teach "exam classes".
- The Head of School asks the teacher to use a particular textbook and to cover a certain number of units per semester. However, the pedagogical approach of the textbook is not consistent with the aims of student-centred EFL learning.
- The teacher's colleagues (teachers of other subjects) complain that there is a lot of noise coming from the classroom during communicative tasks. The Head of School asks the English teacher to maintain more discipline in their class.
- A teacher of another subject tells the students that they do not agree with student-centred learning. Another teacher mentions to their students that learning English is not important. The English teacher becomes aware of this.

I hope it is starting to become clear that reculturing teachers merely represents the tip of the iceberg when it comes to implementing student-centred EFL learning in Mexico. The examples above indicate that while teachers are a key factor in the potential success of an educational change, it will be virtually impossible for real change to happen unless all the other people who are connected to it also go through at least some degree of reculturing. This idea might be best summarised by the diagram below:

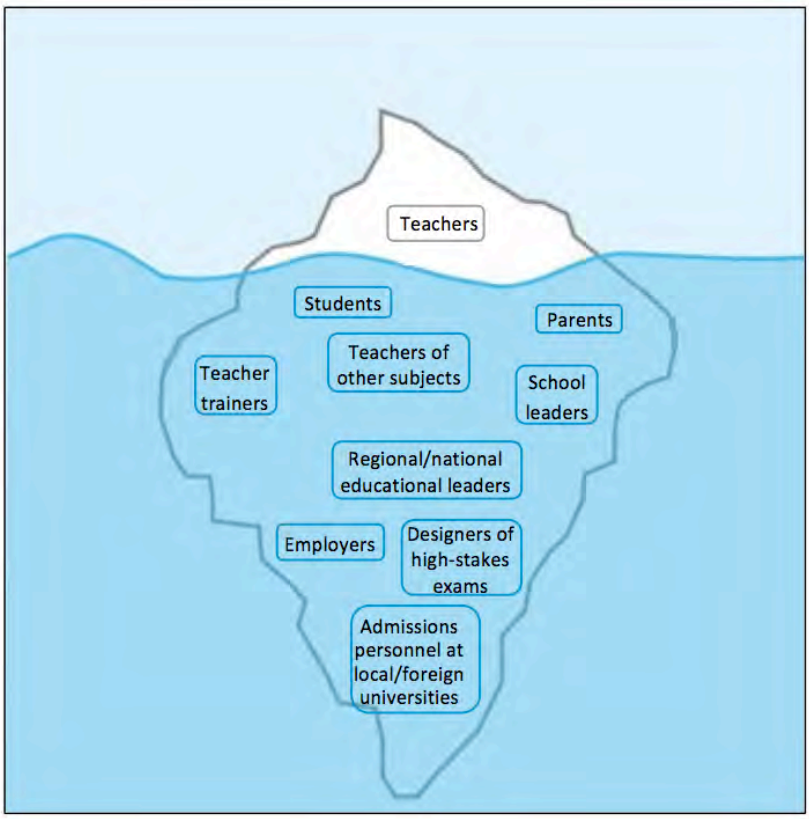

Figure 1. Reculturing Teachers as Just the Tip of the Iceberg

In the figure above, I put forward some of the people who, to greater and lesser extents, might have a bearing on how student-centred EFL classes end up being. In an ideal situation, I believe that all of these people would also need to be "recultured". My interpretation of what this would mean in practice is that they would need to:

- Have a clear understanding of what student-centred learning (for EFL) is;
- Be reasonably convinced that student-centred learning is generally a more desirable alternative than solely teacher-centred approaches; and
- Understand what adjustments could realistically be made at their end in order to help teachers implement student-centred EFL learning in their classrooms.

Unfortunately, there seems to be little evidence that this is the case for most of the "partners" in the Mexican EFL system.

The diagram above is, of course, a gross simplification of the complex web of competing pressures that exist in education systems and societies. However, I hope that it at least highlights that there are numerous other people who have a direct and/or indirect influence on the implementation of this educational change, aside from the teachers themselves.

Reculturing the "Partners"

In this final section, I will consider in a little more detail what might be needed from the different "partners" in order to better facilitate student-centred EFL learning in Mexico. These ideas are suggested rather more in hope than expectation, but potentially any of them could contribute towards improving the implementation of this educational change.

Reculturing students

Just below the surface of the iceberg in Figure 1 are the students themselves. It does seem rather strange that students are rarely taken into account when it comes to reculturing, since they are the ones who will ultimately "experience" the changes, whether these end up being positive, negative, or somewhere in the middle. What often happens is that teachers come into their classrooms and start teaching in a more student-centred way, but do not tell their students what they are going to do, why they are going to do it, and how the students might be expected to act differently under such a new approach.

But act differently they must. Student-centred learning implies a change in the role of the students towards more reflective, autonomous beings who are responsible for their own learning and are less dependent on the teacher to solve all of their problems. The focus ceases to be on specific items of knowledge that students must learn, and the focus moves closer towards students thinking about themselves and their learning. In the more specific context of student-centred EFL learning, students should be more willing to try and practice communicating in English, as opposed to memorising isolated vocabulary items and grammatical rules.

Given that this role is quite different from the one most Mexican students will have been used to, it is understandable that many of them might find it difficult to adapt to the new approaches. It therefore seems logical that they might benefit from some sort of support as they experience the process of transition towards becoming more student-centred learners. In order to facilitate this, I would propose something along the lines of "student training", which I envisage as interactive, reflective sessions that could help students explore how they might best learn languages. Obviously, these would more suitable for older students than younger ones. These sessions could be arranged by the teachers themselves, or organised by regional coordinators and educational leaders. Either way, if any kind of student reculturing is to happen, it will need to be supported by those in positions of higher authority in the EFL system.

Reculturing parents

Particularly in the case of younger children, students' parents might contribute towards undermining student-centred EFL learning, especially if their beliefs about the way languages should be taught are more teacher-centred. In order to try and reduce the possibility of this, I believe that there must be increased communication between schools and parents about why English teachers are going to be teaching in a more student-centred way. Some information that might be worth conveying to parents could be that the classroom might be a bit noisier than normal, and that there may not always be tangible evidence of learning for a particular class (e.g., if a certain page or unit of the textbook has not been completed). Schools might also discuss with parents the idea that not so much importance should be placed on their children's grades, given that under a more student-centred approach to EFL teaching, the emphasis is more on communication skills and less on more quantifiable aspects like grammar or vocabulary.

This communication with parents could be facilitated by school leaders, or as part of more general implementation planning from educational leaders, and could take place via parents' evenings, newsletters, or similar means.

Reculturing teachers of other subjects

Teachers of other subjects need to understand that the classroom setup may have to be moved around in order for the English teacher to implement student-centred activities, and that there may also be increased noise in the classroom. It goes without saying that they should respect English teachers and not do anything that might undermine their teaching.

There should be regular communication with teachers of other subjects so that they understand what the English teacher is going to do and how the content teacher might facilitate (or at the very least not disrupt) student-centred EFL learning. This could be arranged by school leaders and/or as part of more general implementation planning from educational leaders.

Reculturing school leaders

Whilst school leaders may not be able to fix all of the "parts" that have a negative influence on the implementation of student-centred EFL learning, there are many things that they could potentially do to support it. Firstly, it might be within their power to encourage and facilitate the reculturing of students, parents and teachers of other subjects. They might also be able to encourage increased communication and collaboration between English teachers and teachers of other subjects. They should provide English teachers with as many resources as is realistically feasible in their contexts. If possible, they might allow English teachers to have their own classrooms, or at least facilitate the rearranging of tables and chairs within existing classrooms. They should understand that some sort of student and/or parent resistance may occur when students first experience student-centred learning, but they should continue to support the teacher if and when this does occur. They should not force teachers to use a textbook which contradicts the aims of student-centred learning. They should put less pressure on the English teacher to provide them with grades from examinations, especially if these exams focus on quantifiable aspects like grammar or vocabulary. Finally, it goes without saying that school leaders should respect English teachers and make them feel part of the team. The reculturing of school leaders is the responsibility of educational leaders and should be built into the general planning of the educational change.

Reculturing teacher trainers

In order for teachers to both understand and be convinced by more student-centred approaches to teaching EFL, it is vital that the people who train them also hold this philosophy. Many Mexican teacher trainers (including my own) were truly inspirational, and it is on people like these that we must place our hopes. However, I have also known teachers who have had more negative experiences of both pre- and in-service EFL teacher training. In some cases, the content of teacher training sessions has actually contradicted the aims of student-centred EFL learning. In other cases, student-centred learning has been presented as a "topic", but delivered in a largely teacher-centred way, without any connection to the real classroom contexts in which student-centred EFL learning is expected to be implemented. There appears to be little chance of meaningful teacher change if training sessions are planned and delivered in this way.

Of course, it is important to mention that EFL teacher trainers often have little choice but to cover the mere basics of student-centred learning, given the insufficient time that is provided for them to do so. This highlights the frustrating reality that Mexican

educational leaders appear unwilling to invest in quality, long-term training for teachers. With this in mind, it may be the case that it is Mexico's educational leaders who need to be "recultured" before anyone else.

Reculturing educational leaders

If educational leaders are truly interested in making student-centred EFL learning possible in more Mexican classrooms, they must provide teachers with the conditions to do their jobs. A few examples of things they could do include:

- Providing teachers with appropriate resources (and if a textbook is provided, ensuring that its methodological approach is student-centred);
- Providing teachers with their own classroom and allowing them the flexibility to arrange it in a way that might best facilitate student-centred EFL learning;
- Reducing the number of students in a classroom;
- Allowing heterogeneous groups to be divided into appropriate language levels;
- Reducing the pressure on teachers to have a certain number of their students pass standardised exams;
- Paying teachers a salary worthy of the profession, including holiday pay, medical insurance and all other fringe benefits.

On top of this, it is vital that educational leaders put in place mechanisms to support the long-term reculturing of:

- Teachers;
- Students;
- Parents;
- Teachers of other subjects;
- School leaders; and
- Teacher trainers.

As mentioned earlier, one-off workshops will not be sufficient in order for this to happen; there needs to be varying degrees of training and support for all of these people over a long period of time. All of these changes would require a substantial commitment of funding, but most importantly, a genuine will for student-centred EFL learning to become a reality in Mexico.

How might Mexico "reculture" its educational leaders? I can only suppose that it is our job as teachers, teacher trainers, educational researchers, or anyone else who is negatively affected by the lack of success of Mexican EFL learning, to do what we can to make educational leaders aware of what is needed.

Reculturing standardised test designers, employers and universities

As we move further and further away from the classroom, it seems increasingly unlikely that we might be able to "reculture" the partners who indirectly have an influence on how student-centred Mexican EFL classrooms end up being. However, I still feel that these "partners" should not be overlooked, because it is through a deeper understanding of the more complete picture that we might be better placed to think about how we could make long-term improvements.

It must therefore be recognised that the people who design standardised examinations such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) are having an impact on how student-centred Mexican EFL classes can be. Despite the fact that these tests are

usually marketed as reliable indicators of students' English competence, they tend to place limited emphasis on real communication skills. If students are under constant pressure to pass these exams, and the teachers are under constant pressure to have a certain percentage of their students pass these exams, then it is clear that student-centred learning will be undermined as teachers will inevitably resort to "exam classes".

Unfortunately, both within Mexico and abroad, employers and universities seem to strongly favour these exams, either because they truly believe that they represent students' communication skills, or because they lack the time and/or resources to assess students' communication skills themselves. It appears unlikely that these exams will change as long as there continues to be such a high demand for them. As long as they continue to be valued by employers and universities, there will always be pressure on those lower down the chain (schools and universities; teachers; students; their parents) to strive towards taking (and passing) them. All this happens, in my opinion, at the expense of student-centred EFL learning in Mexico.

Conclusion

Implementing student-centred learning for EFL teaching in Mexico represents a complex change, given that it implies a change in both behaviours and beliefs ("reculturing") from all those people who are involved, directly or indirectly, in the EFL system. It is clear that teachers have a key role to play in this process, and educational leaders must consider how to support this change in beliefs and behaviours over time. However, there seems to be little point in teachers going through the process if there is not also at least some degree of reculturing from the various other people who make up the system. Without their help in adjusting the various pieces of the jigsaw, I do not predict any improvement in what Davies (2009) calls the "general failure" (p. 7) of EFL learning in the Mexican public education system.

Most importantly, educational changes will never be successful as long as those with the power to make these adjustments continue to fail to recognise the complexity of such changes and what implementing them might imply at all levels of the system. It will only be when these people's beliefs begin to align themselves with the aims of the changes that the reforms will have any chance of success.

Finally, I think it is important to stress that there are many talented and highly-motivated English teachers in Mexico who would love to make their classes more student-centred. Many of them have already abandoned the profession; unless the conditions are provided for them to do their jobs, the danger is that we will lose even more of them.

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