

Maestra en Mexico

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(Sometimes it is good to see ourselves as others see us. This article is reprinted from TESOL Matters (February/March 1994). It relates the visit of an American teacher to a “secundaria” in Matamoros.)

I recently made a rather unusual “home visit” with one of my English as a second language students from a middle school in Athens, Georgia. After teaching English to María and her brother Juan during the school year, I was invited to their former hometown and school in Matamoros, Mexico. María, her mother and sister, another teacher, and I traveled for 34 hours by bus to reach our destination.

Matamoros, Mexico is a quiet little town separated from Brownsville, Texas by the Rio Grande. Bernardo Gutierrez de Lara, a public school for grades 7, 8, and 9, sits amidst the town. Our host, María’s aunt, is a secretary at this school, so we were invited guests who dropped in many times during our week’s visit.

On my first visit to the school, I was immediately impressed by the overall warm welcome we received. The assistant principal, Guillermo Ceballos, spent several hours discussing the curriculum and answering questions about the school. The students were friendly and polite and tolerant of my rusty Spanish. I toured many classrooms and talked with students and teachers who wished to practice their English and share the practices and customs of their school. I was accompanied by another teacher whose fluent, native Spanish skills were indispensable.

The curriculum at this school includes the usual academic subjects—Spanish, history, science, and math—in addition to vocational classes such as ironworks, sewing, typing and woodworking. I was amazed at the calculus and advanced algebra in the math books. A visit to the small school library, however, reflected the extremely limited resources available in many Mexican schools. Books lined only one wall and were well worn from use. After our initial tour, we were asked to come back the next day and help teach a ninth grade English class.

Eduardo Fernandez, the English teacher, met us at the office and escorted us across a large concrete patio to his class. Because of the warm climate, the school is built California style—all the classroom doors lead to the outside—there are no hallways. When we arrived, all the students stood up and said, “Good morning, Teacher” and waited for Eduardo to tell them to sit down. Students have

a great respect for their teachers, and endure many hardships to obtain their education. The classroom conditions are oppressive compared to US standards. Forty-four students, in six rows, crowded into Eduardo's classroom. His desk was raised on a concrete stage that further limited the area for the students. Windows ran down both side walls giving minimal hope for a breeze of cool air in this unconditioned room. The room was bare except for the students' desks, the teacher's desk, and a blackboard. No supplemental materials, books, or dictionaries were available.

This school runs double sessions: the morning session starts at 7 am and finishes at 1 pm; the afternoon session begins at 1 pm and finishes at 7 pm. There are no school buses to take students to school in Matamoros. The students either walk or their parents bring them. I did see some students taking the Maxi Taxi, which is the city bus. The fare is 1 peso 9, or about 33 cents [*Editor's note: in 1994*]. There was no cafeteria at this school, just a small canteen offering cokes, ice cream, chips, and snacks during break time.

For the first few minutes of class, I went around the room and asked the students typical questions in English: "What's your name?", "How old are you?", "How are you?". Some students were eager to show their English skills, some hoped I would not address them. Overall, the English skills were comparable to the skills of US students in a foreign language classroom. Few students were fluent and most had poor accents. The teacher was not fluent and had studied English only in Mexico. What impressed me was the students' eagerness to use their limited language skills to communicate with me and ask me questions. One student (prompted by the teacher) asked me how old I was, and I replied, "Sweet Sixteen".

The lesson for the day was on the when to use *was* and *were*. The teacher had prepared five questions for the students to answer using the correct verb. "Were Babe Ruth and Beto Avila football players?" the teacher asked. The students replied in unison, "No, they were not. They were baseball players." I was asked to read the questions to the students and have them tell me the correct answer using *was* or *were*. The lesson was well planned and the use of current sports stars for the questions made the lesson interesting for the students. Nevertheless, the focus of the class was on written exercises on grammar.

The students were well behaved and showed a great respect for the teacher. The students called Eduardo *maestro* rather than by his last name it is considered a title of respect. Now I have an understanding of why María's mother always calls me *teacher* instead of *Mrs. Sealy*.

Although we were crowded into a small room. The students' behavior was exceptional. It was clear certain rules had been established. For example, one girl

was excused from class to go to the restroom. Upon her return, she stood at the door and waited until the teacher gave her permission to enter the classroom.

The students were all wearing the required uniform for the public school system in Mexico. The girls wore a pinafore type dress with a white blouse. The pinafore is pink for seventh grade, blue for eighth grade, and burgundy for ninth grade. The girls have their uniforms made for them by a family member or friend. All of the boys, regardless of their grade, wore beige shirts and pants that looked similar to military fatigues.

Students in the US are usually offered a foreign language in high school, but all students in Matamoros are required to take English every year beginning with first grade. Students attend English class three times a week for 1 hour. The focus is more on written grammar and reading than oral skills, as many of the teachers who conduct the classes are not fluent in English. All students must pass a written English exam before graduating from each school—primary, middle and high school.

As I left the school grounds, Eduardo told me I could have a job teaching English at this school anytime. The assistant principal asked if we would be interested in a teacher exchange program. Maybe when I finish my dissertation I will take him up on that offer.

References

Sealy, Sharon Brawner. 1994. "Maestra in Mexico." in *The Exchange*, Bonnie Mennell, de. *TESOL Matters*. 4 (1). February / March. 10.