

## FORUM

About three years ago, in Volume III, Number 3, Journal editor Jerrilou Johnson included a new feature: "The Forum." Possibly inspired by similar "Forums" regularly published in both the TESOL Quarterly and the bimonthly academic journal of the Modern Language Association, PMLA, the main objective was to "encourage readers to voice opinions regarding specific aspects or practices of our profession, especially when they are relevant to the ESL/EFL teaching experience in Mexico." The Forum also provided the opportunity for readers' questions to be answered by specialists and for "Comments on published articles, book reviews and letters. . ."

Perhaps because of lack of interest, the Forum vanished after its second issue (Volume III, Number 4). We believe, however, that it was an excellent idea and have decided to try it again. We hope that the unsolicited submission published below will elicit some responses from readers interested in the subject.

The general guidelines we have established for the "New" Forum are the following:

Readers are encouraged to submit typed, doublespaced letters of no more than 1000 words on topics of general professional interest. Comments on Journal articles, reviews, other letters and general editorial policy are especially welcome. The letters published in Forum should in no way be interpreted as necessarily representing the viewpoints of the editors. The authors of Journal articles, reviews or letters commented on in Forum will be invited to reply.

## Who's Afraid of María Sánchez?

Methodologically there is now little room for improvement in the field of English textbooks. Functional-notional courses with an adequate grammatical content and minimal dependence on technical equipment exist. A first-rate example are the In Touch and Life Styles series, published jointly by the Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales and Longman.

On the other hand, there is a lot of room for improvement on an ideological level. At the moment the courses are a sellout to the rich. María Sánchez, the "star" of In Touch and Life Styles, is a Mexican girl studying hotel management in New York. Her address in Mexico City is given as being in Lomas de Chapultepec, the most exclusive residential area of the city. She eagerly accepts all aspects of U.S. culture and ends up on the point of marrying an American. She even looks more American than Mexican.

This is all very good, but it should be remembered that the majority of students at public universities, such as the UNAM, which has over 200,000 students, are not rich and are in many cases highly anti-American. Courses which idealize the great American way of life may be fine for exclusive language schools, but are out of context on the campuses, where there are potentially far more students.

A quick check of the population statistics confirms this. Fifty per cent of Mexico's population is under 20, indicating a large potential student population. For the majority of these young people the life style of María Sánchez is unattainable and can only lead to frustration.

It might, therefore, be a good idea to provide a CULTURALLY NEUTRAL course, one that is not so keen to push the cultural values of one country. A course which makes sense for students from "humble" backgrounds, one which does not oblige them to enter a foreign world, would be a godsend. After all, English is a means of communication (maybe with the Japanese or an Arab), not a system of cultural values.

The problem, then, becomes one of making such a course interesting. This could be done, perhaps, by presenting not only the good side of life in the countries where the target language is spoken, but also the problems, such as racial tension and unemployment. These are topics that make sense to the socially aware student and can easily be transferred to the context of his own country.

At the moment the English language is a tool by which the wealthy keep a firm grasp on educational possibilities abroad. The British Council, for example, when awarding grants, insists on a high level of English. Obviously, the children of the rich, who have been sent to study in the States or to expensive language schools, stand a better chance than anyone else of passing the English language exams.

It is time now to provide a more culturally and socially sensitive course to aid less privileged students to learn English, so that ultimately British Council scholarships and other awards can go to those who really ought to get them. How about a course that shows what life is like for a "bracero" arriving to work in the U.S.A.? This is a theme which would automatically grasp the attention of Mexican students who may well have some relative working in the States. The course could be centered around such a character and his efforts to adapt to a new way of life.

At the same time, there is a need at a more advanced level for training in academic English. A course could actually involve listening to lectures. A story could be based around a Mexican student at a British or American university, but concentrating more on his academic than his social life.

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