

Having a Voice in the English Curriculum¹

By Angeles Clemente, UABJO, angelesclemente@hotmail.com

Abstract

Based on a brief description of the rationale for teaching methodology included in the TESOL B.A. program in Oaxaca, Mexico, this article analyzes the way six students evaluate it. Their suggestions are extremely valuable because they come from the reflection of student-teachers who, taking into account the contextual situation, have experienced the program and assessed it critically. The comparison of both, the institution's and the students' views, has been essential in realizing the importance of listening to the voices of these pre-service teachers for curricular evaluation.

Introduction

During the Spring term in 2006, six young female students from the fourth year of the B.A. in TESOL, at the *Facultad de Idiomas* of the *Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca*, approached me, a member of the faculty, to ask me to supervise their thesis project. As I had been their professor for some of their courses, and I was aware of their commitment and academic orientation, I was very keen to find out what they had in mind. They told me that they were interested in revising the English program of the B.A.

Before introducing the context of this study, let me briefly say something about these students. These young female university students are from 21 to 24 years old. Adriana and Rebeca are from the city of Oaxaca. Dalila, Heidee, Odelma and Angélica⁽¹⁾, are from different parts of the state and moved to the city to study at the university. Odelma comes from the Isthmus. Dalila, Heidee, and Angélica all come from the Mixteca Alta: Dalila is from the city of Nochixtlan, whereas Heidee and Angélica come from the Mixtec speaking villages in that region. From the beginning of their studies, these young women formed a rather tight circle. In their first year, they were quiet and shy, somewhat overwhelmed by the new learning environment; however they showed themselves to be committed and hard working students.

Over this four-year period, little by little, they attained more confidence and assertiveness in their academic and personal lives. Last year they all decided to apply for a place in the national mobility program that allows the UABJO students to study a semester in the UNAM. All of them were accepted and they soon became aware of the academic gap between the UNAM and UABJO students.

¹ This is a refereed article.

That is to say, while the UNAM is considered the best university in Latin America, the UABJO, on the contrary, belonging to one of the poorest states of Mexico, suffers from a shortage of economic and human resources. Thus, these six students struggled to catch up with the standards set at the UNAM. One of the main differences, they said, was the English proficiency level of the UNAM students. But instead of giving up, they worked hard to maintain the average grade they needed. What is more, they returned to the university in Oaxaca with a determination to confront these differences: they wanted to revise the English area of the curriculum at the *Facultad de Idiomas*.

Context

Oaxaca is situated in the Southwestern region of the country. This is the poorest economic region with a large migrating population that leaves the country to look for better opportunities in the United States. In contrast, it also stands out for its richness in terms of ethnic diversity, and pre-colonial and colonial architecture. Its social and cultural diversity anchors Oaxaca's economy in the tourist industry.

Within this context, our B.A. program in TESOL was created in 1992 with the objective of forming English teachers for all levels, from pre-elementary school to undergraduate programs. Due to the socioeconomic cultural features of Oaxaca mentioned above, the program rapidly became popular among the young students that were looking for career options within the state at affordable costs.

In 2002 the English faculty carried out a major evaluation and revision of the B.A. program, which resulted in the first flexible curriculum in the institution, allowing the students greater mobility and more career options. When we finished it, we were really proud of this innovation, particularly of the new English program: a process-oriented syllabus (Graves 2001; Long and Crookes, 1992; Nunan, 1988) open enough to allow teachers to make their own planning decisions:

...we have chosen not to suggest any particular procedures or techniques that teachers should follow. Instead, we want to provide a brief description of what we understand as some of the aspects of communicative language teaching (CLT). The actual teaching practice, of course, is entirely up to the teacher herself, and is heavily influenced by her own personal style and the particular group she is working with (*Facultad de Idiomas*, 2002, p.8).

Responding to this pedagogical orientation, and with the concept of "language as a *set of skills* that ought to be used in real communication" (italics in original, *ibid*, p.9), the program does not prescribe the linguistic content or the specific teaching activities that the professor should carry out in order to teach.

However, it suggests ways to create the necessary communicative conditions for students to develop their linguistic skills:

We have chosen instead to give a list of the elements which teachers ought to include in classroom tasks, projects and on tests. What follows, however, is meant to be suggestive, not prescriptive. These will be general components of a foreign language syllabus that, when taken together, form the basis of a strong and comprehensive EFL syllabus (ibid).

Finally, the program puts special emphasis on students:

... teachers are encouraged, whenever possible; to try and engage their students in a process of negotiating the content of the course, a unit of study, or a specific task. Success in language learning depends greatly on the extent to which a teacher can get the students involved in their own learning; allowing for a negotiation between the teacher and student is a very effective way of fostering this involvement (ibid).

The curriculum revision project

However, in spite of the faculty effort to come up with an updated learner-centered curriculum, the six students that proposed the Curriculum Revision Project (CRP) saw their learning situation in a different way:

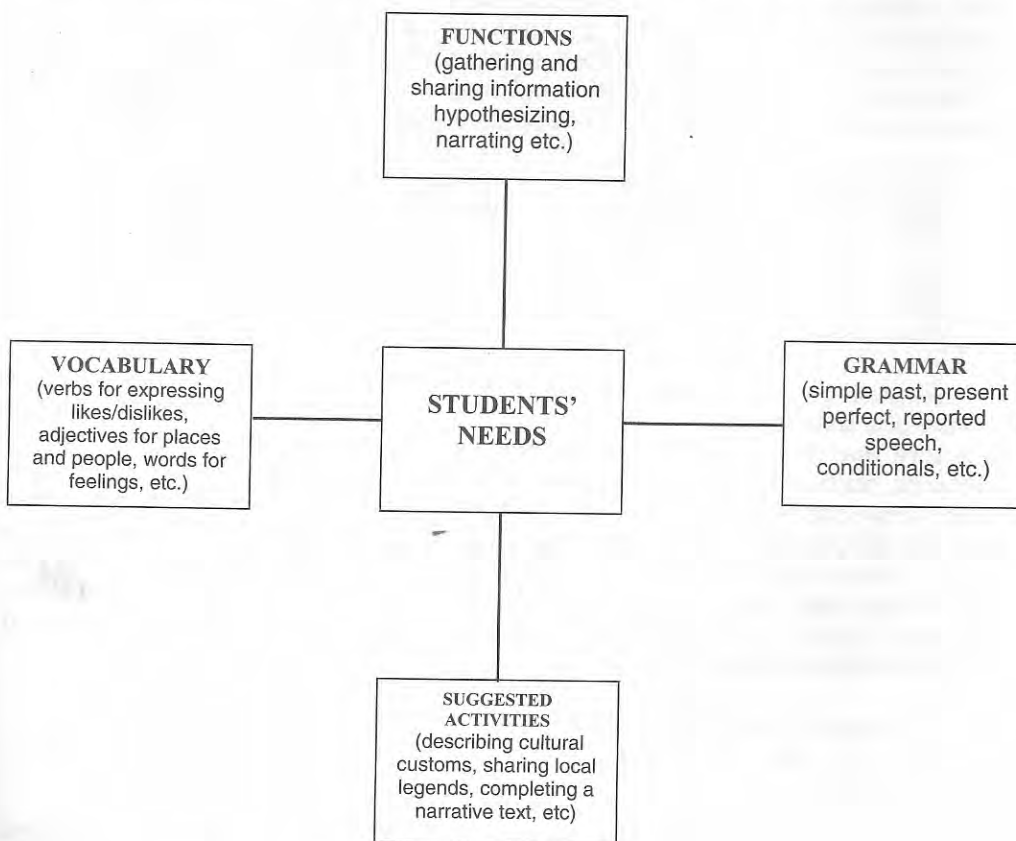
We are about to graduate and we feel like we do not have the proficiency level we should have by now;....professors use the book as their program;....in the classroom students have different levels of English which makes most students have a low self-esteem.... We do not think we are prepared enough to be English teachers (Odelma)(2).

First of all, their comments tell us that their professors may not be following the suggestions of the institutional program, which is quite possible. However, they also make evident that the whole situation engenders in the students' feeling of low self-esteem that manifests itself in being afraid to participate and interact in the classroom, and could encourage long term feelings of insecurity as teachers and inability to perform successfully.

There is some validity to their concerns. Their English skills are not as good as the average level that is found throughout other university programs in Mexico, such as the *Universidad de Guadalajara* or the *Universidad Autonoma de Sonora*, which require advanced English proficiency for their entrance level. This requirement would be impossible in Oaxaca. The majority of students in our TESOL program have had, at best, only basic instruction in English in the public

educational system (where most of the secondary schools belong to the distant learning system called *telesecundaria*). With regard to English, it is hardly a secret that these programs are less than adequate. Being aware of this fact, these six students thought it unfair to impose stronger entrance requirements.

Nevertheless, after their experiences in UNAM, which made them realize that their level of English was below that of the students there, the CRP group analyzed the UABJO English program. They became aware of the advantages of its non-prescriptive nature, but at the same time they felt that it could benefit from some prescriptive elements at the structural, functional and lexical levels. Moreover, they engaged in a study to find out the opinions, interests and needs of students, authorities and English faculty. From this information they formulated a series of proposals (Cruz *et al*, 2006). Because of the limitation of space in this article, I will only focus on their rationale of a teaching methodology whose central element is the students' needs, as the following figure illustrates:



According to the CRP group, the purpose of putting the students' needs in the middle of the model is to make the teacher define and analyze her students' linguistic knowledge, communicative skills, learning styles, etc., in order to decide what to teach (represented in the boxes labeled *Vocabulary*, *Grammar* and *Functions*) and how to teach (exemplified within the box titled *Suggested Activities*). In other words, by having the students' needs at the core of the decision planning process, the professor is able to select (from the lists the CRP group also provides) which functions, vocabulary, grammar and activities are best for his/her students to fulfill their learning needs.

As the reader can see, although the CRP group's approach is clearly student-centered, there are elements (prescriptive set of linguistic items) that remind us of more conventional approaches (Larsen and Freeman, 2004) known as product-oriented syllabuses (Graves, 2001; Nunan, 1988; Nunan and Lamb, 2001). Actually they were very insistent on providing lists of grammar structures, lexical categories and communicative functions to ensure that the program would include everything they needed to know about the English language. Their rationale was that a process-oriented syllabus in itself was not good enough to provide teachers-to-be with the thorough linguistic knowledge that they will be expected to handle in their professional performance. This is the way they see it:

We mixed both approaches (product- and process-oriented syllabuses) because learners are expected to learn the rules and put in practice the structures. We suggest that students be taught how to operate functions, communicate appropriately in specific situations, and discuss the topics that respond to their main interests and needs (Heidee).

Surprisingly, the teaching content that they propose is not very different from the one that textbooks usually provide. Their argument is that they "tried to make sure that 'everything' was included in the program". Some of their English professors, particularly those that were in favor of a non-prescriptive curriculum, reacted very strongly against this approach. Moreover, they were concerned about the lack of contextualization of the content. They told them that they were expecting more elements of what students need in Oaxaca and fewer about the usual things that are generally included in a textbook: "going on vacation, following a diet or ordering food in a restaurant". However, the students insisted that they needed to know everything:

Our case is completely different (from regular English students) because we are being trained to become English teachers (Angélica).

An important part of the CRP group's rationale on methodology is reflected in the type of assessment included in their proposal, where they managed to contextualize their project connecting it with local issues. This assessment, which goes along with the institutional program, is based on students developing

projects, which allows them to work on their communication skills. According to them, the type of evaluation based on communicative projects fulfills two functions: to place the students in the appropriate class according to their level and to focus the teaching on developing communicative strategies that would respond to the context the students deal with. As they see it, developing projects

will allow students to get involved with real contexts. No matter what level or what age, the most important thing is to connect the new information with their real lives in order to make it more useful and meaningful (Angélica).

Apart from favoring the "integration of the four macro skills", one of the most important advantages of the development of projects is the freedom that the student will have to choose a topic that s/he wants to develop. Here are some examples of projects the CRP group provided:

- Talk about things you want to change in your town, country or the world;
- Prepare a presentation on Oaxacan food, using specialized vocabulary and preparing the food in the classroom using a recipe, explaining the whole process or even proposing an original way to do it.
- Perform a play that you have written.
- Explain a problem in Oaxaca (teachers' strikes, indigenous languages and poor people in Oaxaca, the government, *porros* in the university, etc.), support your ideas with good arguments and propose a solution for it. (Rebeca)

In this way, they managed to include the contextualization their professors were asking for. However, they also managed to keep the students' freedom to decide the content of their English performance.

Conclusion

As the reader can see, the CRP group proposal is not very different from the actual institutional program. Both put emphasis on the students' needs and interests, and both suggest communicative tasks and projects as a means to learning. However, these six students are reminding their professors that the most traditional pedagogies must not, *per se*, be excluded (Canagarajah, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Their pledge for overt prescription of linguistic elements and their need "to know everything" tell us about the necessity of working closer with students, and allowing them to make the decisions we, as professors, are used to making for them.

The experience of working with the CRP group reminded us, the English faculty at the *Facultad de Idiomas* UABJO, of what everybody in education knows: a well-intended and carefully elaborated written program is not enough to assure success in learning. More important is what these students call "committed

English professors" who master the academic and pedagogical aspects but are also concerned about individual issues, specifically, how to increase students' self-esteem. Having experienced a rather long period of insecurity and anxiety, these six young student-teachers want to be sure that English professors show the right attitude towards scaffolding their learning (Donato, 2000), nurturing their styles and capacities (Oxford, 1990) and respecting their own cultures and histories (Clemente & Higgins, 2005):

Our ideal professor should be patient and show empathy towards students. It is relevant that every teacher shows interest in students. They should not forget that they were students once (Dalila).

Underlying their will to improve the program, there is a desire that all the students in the program gain the security and assertiveness that they themselves have so painfully achieved:

Studying the B.A. program was the best thing that has happened to me. In my personal experience...firstly, I have become a multilingual person. Secondly, I am a pre-service English teacher though I feel capable of teaching Spanish as well. Next, during these years I have learned not only the language as it is but have given a high importance to my first and second languages that are Mixtec and Spanish respectively. I am proud of my language, my culture and, above all, my profession as an English teacher (Angélica)

Having a voice in the English curriculum allowed these six students to speak out in their own voice, to exercise their agency as language student-teachers and curriculum developers, and become aware that, in spite of what most conventional educators think:

Education has shifted for good lately. It is not the traditional way of learning and teaching process where students are punished if they don't do something perfectly, and only professors have rights. In the past, students used to play a passive role, sit quietly and receive input. Nowadays we are conscious of the situation and it is our responsibility to improve the teaching/learning process little by little. Let's see how far we can go. (Angélica)

Notes:

1. In order to acknowledge the hard work and high commitment of the six students in the Curriculum Revision Group, with their consent, I am using their actual names.

2. All the CRP group comments were taken from their work in process within the course *Seminario de Titulación*, Marzo-Julio 2006, *Facultad de Idiomas*, UABJO.

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