

Professional Development and English Language Teaching in Tamaulipas: Describing the Training and Challenges of Two Groups of Teachers

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Abstract

This article describes the training, language experience and proficiency, students, and classrooms of two groups of English as a Foreign Language teachers from schools in and around a major city in the northeast of Mexico. One group is made up of teachers who work in urban and rural public secondary schools; the second group is composed of instructors in private primary, secondary and preparatory schools located within the city limits. By examining the backgrounds, teaching settings, and experiences of these two groups of teachers, this article provides insight into the present state of and challenges posed by the further professionalization of English language teaching in Mexico.

Introduction

As the recipient of a Fulbright-Garcia Robles grant in Applied Linguistics and Teaching English as a Foreign Language, I had the opportunity to work with teachers in the state of Tamaulipas. This article offers an overview of the backgrounds and experiences of two groups of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers with whom I met regularly over the course of an academic year. Group One was made up of teachers from public secondary schools. The participants in Group Two taught in private primary, secondary, and preparatory schools. There were significant differences between the two groups: their language experience and proficiency, their training as teachers, the classroom resources at their disposal, and the socio-economic status of their students. Nonetheless, these teachers shared common concerns regarding methodology and ways in which to motivate their students. Moreover, all of the participants demonstrated a desire to increase their knowledge and skills as English language professionals.

Participants and Data Gathering

The teachers described here were participants in two 36-hour training courses which took place over the course of an academic year. Each group met for two 3-hour sessions per month. Group One met in a public secondary school. Participants were excused from their teaching obligations to attend the course

and therefore compensated for their time. The second group met at the university language center. Participation in the course was voluntary and of no cost to those enrolled or to their employers. The data presented here was gathered from seven public school teachers (Group One) and seventeen private school teachers (Group Two).

At the beginning of each course, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire in which they described their training and experience as teachers, their training in and experience with English, the challenges they faced as teachers, and the topics they hoped to explore during the course. In addition, participants were asked to indicate whether they preferred to use Spanish, English, or both languages when speaking, reading, and writing during the course and which language or languages they hoped the instructor would use. Additional data was gathered during class discussions and site visits to the participants' schools.

Training in and Experience with English

Born and brought up in Mexico, all of the participants spoke Spanish with their families. For most, English had been a required subject in their secondary and preparatory schools. In addition, four of the seven public school teachers and fifteen of the private school teachers had taken courses in private language schools or university based programs. Several participants in both groups reported using books and cassettes to study on their own, and one private school teacher had attended a monolingual school in which English was the language of instruction.

As a complement to their classroom study of English, twenty-one of the twenty-four participants had visited, studied, or worked in the United States or Canada. Two of the public school teachers regularly spent summers working in the US. It is interesting to note that though all but one of the remaining teachers in Group One had visited the US, most had not traveled more than 100 kilometers beyond the US/Mexico border. In comparison, the seventeen private school teachers had more experience living and studying abroad. Fifteen had traveled to and several had family members residing in English-speaking countries. In addition, five of the teachers had lived in the US or Canada for two years or more, working, or studying English.

Finally as part of the initial questionnaire, participants were asked which language(s) they preferred to use during the training course. None of the public school teachers elected to speak, read, write, or have the instructor speak exclusively in English or Spanish. Instead, most chose to use both languages. Twelve of the private school teachers opted to use English throughout the course; the remaining five preferred to use both languages. Several of the members of this group indicated that they saw the course as a setting in which to practice and improve their English.

Training and Experience as Teachers

Though the participants were all teaching English at the time they were enrolled in the course, they had wide ranging levels of experience and formal training as language teachers. Four of the public school teachers had over fifteen years of teaching experience; two of the remaining participants had eight years and one had two years of experience. Of the private school teachers, two had taught for over eighteen years, and six between ten and fourteen years, while four had between one to five years of experience, and three were teaching for the first time.

When asked about their training, six of the seven public school teachers reported having formal preparation as teachers. Three had studied at the "Escuela Normal Superior", two had four-year university degrees in education, and one had a Masters degree in education. Only two had specialized training in English as a Foreign Language. Moreover, several of the participants who worked in smaller schools were responsible for teaching other subjects in addition to English, including geography, history, math, and physical education.

In contrast with the members of Group One, only two of the private school teachers had taken university level courses in education. Most had received their training through courses offered by professional organizations or private language schools, including MEXTESOL (Mexican Association of Teachers of English) and the British Council. Three participants did not report having any formal training in teaching.

Students and Classroom Settings

The settings in which the members of Groups One and Two worked and the students they taught differed in several significant ways. Generally, the private school teachers had access to a wider variety of teaching materials than did the teachers in Group One. For example, one teacher's classroom was equipped with two whiteboards, a television and DVD player, a computer and LCD projector. A second teacher, who taught kindergarten, worked in a classroom filled with toys and games and books in Spanish and English. Most participants who worked in public schools had fewer books and teaching materials at their disposal. One teacher's classroom contained only student desks, a larger desk for the teacher, and a blackboard. Not all the public school classrooms were so sparsely equipped, however; four had televisions and DVD players and two had computers.

A second difference between the two groups of teachers was the number of students in each of their classes. In the public schools, teachers usually worked with groups of thirty to fifty students. There was much greater variety of class size in the private schools. Some teachers had as few as ten students per class, whereas other participants regularly worked with groups of thirty students or more.

The socio-economic status of the students with whom they worked represented a third difference between Groups One and Two. Whether in urban settings or in schools located on the outskirts of the city, most of the public school students came from families with limited economic resources and formal education. As evidence of this, though students were required to wear uniforms, there were some schools in which this regulation was not strictly enforced as families did not have the means to purchase the obligatory white sneakers or black shoes. In contrast, the majority of the private school students came from middle and upper class families. Most students had cable television and computers at home and many either had or planned to travel abroad.

Challenges

Despite the differences in their students' backgrounds and the classroom resources at their disposal, the members of Groups One and Two shared several interests and concerns. When asked what challenges they faced as teachers, members of both groups cited a lack of motivation on the parts of their students. Of the topics they hoped to cover during the course, the one mentioned most frequently by members of both groups was new teaching techniques. As one teacher phrased it, these would "hacer atractiva la clase a los chicos" [to make the class interesting to the kids].

Two public school teachers indicated that their own levels of proficiency in English posed a challenge when teaching. Several of the private school teachers indicated that they found it difficult to understand their students' interests and needs. Other topics the private school teachers hoped to explore included the development of teaching materials and visual aids, assessment, lesson planning, and ways to teach grammar, reading, and writing. Several of the public school teachers hoped to learn about working effectively with large groups, and one teacher saw the course as an opportunity to "intercambiar experiencias con mis compañeros para mejorar mi desempeño" [Exchange experiences with my colleagues to improve my development [as a teacher]].

Summary

Overall, the private school teachers had more language training and experience living and traveling in English-speaking countries than the teachers in Group One. In their work, most of the teachers in this group reported using only English in the classroom. Though required by the state curriculum to use English in their classrooms, over half of the public school teachers reported that they often taught in Spanish, sometimes translating each sentence and instruction. Some teachers explained that their reticence to use English came from a lack of confidence in their own language proficiency. Others believed it would be difficult for students to understand lessons given exclusively in the second language.

Differences in participants' approaches to language teaching appeared to be linked to their training as teachers. Perhaps drawing on the training courses or their own experiences as language learners which emphasized a communicative approach to language learning, many of the private school teachers regularly included group activities in their lessons and were interested in developing both their students' accuracy and fluency in English. Among the public school teachers several reported making frequent use of pair work and games and other interactive tasks with their students. However, most of the lessons given by the teachers in Group One could be described as "teacher-centered".

Finally, several of the participants in Group Two cited their students' age as a challenge, while the public school teachers did not. Possibly because as they had little or no formal training in education, these private school teachers lacked the tools to understand the cognitive and psychological development of their students.

At first glance, the contexts in which the private and public school teachers worked appear to be very different. Certainly, many of the private school teachers had access to teaching materials and equipment that the public school teachers did not. In addition, many of the students in private schools had access to English outside of the classroom. They could watch movies and television in English, use the Internet and computer games in their homes, and many had opportunities to visit or live in English speaking countries. However, students in public schools also had ties to settings in which English was spoken as they had friends or family members who lived and worked in the United States.

Implications for further professional development

Despite the apparent differences between the two groups described here, there are several key elements which should be included in any professional development for both the private and public school teachers. First, all of the participants would benefit from ongoing opportunities to deepen their English language competence. Given their present level of proficiency, training for the private school teachers might focus on the exploration of the differences between colloquial and academic uses of English or contexts in which a particular grammar form is used. A course for the public school teachers should provide the participants with activities in which they can develop their fluency in English while developing their knowledge of language teaching methodology.

A second key element in any future professional development course would be the examination of ways in which research and theory can be applied in the classroom. Both the private and public school teachers might be asked to reflect on topics such as the role first language literacy plays in learning to read and write in a second language, or the importance of helping students find links between a lesson topic and their own experiences. Rather than offering teachers "recipes" or tricks, such training would model activities teachers could use to

motivate their own students as language learners, providing teachers with opportunities to discuss why and how each activity could be implemented in their own classes.

Training can provide teachers like those described here with insight into language teaching methodology, classroom management techniques, and language and literacy development. Nonetheless, some teachers face challenges which even the most well-conceived course cannot fully address. For example, in the schools where some of the public school teachers worked, there were classrooms with gaps of several meters between the tops of the walls and the roof. When studying in these spaces, students were exposed to rain, cold, and noise from neighboring classrooms. One classroom in this same school had only three walls, leaving students with little protection from the elements and outside distractions. Finally, for some of the public school students, studying was made more difficult by the fact that they came to school having eaten little or nothing.

Limited material resources should not be confused with limited interest or limited ability, however. All students must be seen as having the potential and the skills to succeed as language learners. Similarly, EFL teachers of all levels of English proficiency and preparation as teachers must be given the opportunity to participate in effective and ongoing training. Each course in which teachers participate represents a small step towards the further professionalization of English language teaching in Mexico.