



## A 'tailor-made' teacher training for EFL teachers

A case study on teachers with no prior language teaching preparation of  
´nivel medio superior´ in the state of Quintana Roo México.

### PRELIMINARY REPORT

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#### **Abstract**

In an increasingly globalized world, addressing the need to produce trained teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a priority for educational administrators. This priority is most urgent in regions where socio-economic growth depends upon activities such as tourism, i.e. the "Riviera Maya" region in the southern in the state of Quintana Roo, México. Official statistics show that here less than 50% of the current EFL teachers working in pre-university (e.g. high school) levels possess a degree in English language teaching (ELT). The picture looks even more dismal when these teachers' academic standards are considered. The remaining percentage is composed of teachers holding degrees in other fields. (i.e. literature, mathematics, sciences, computing sciences, tourism) but forced to teach ELT by necessity.

These contexts call for the rapid implementation of ´tailor-made teacher training programs´ to provide immediate, feasible, and efficient training and instruction to these ´emergent´ EFL teachers, particularly those in remote and rural areas. This paper reports a study that analyzed the characteristics of tailor-made teacher training programs that could provide such a service to teachers currently teaching without formal ELT credentials. The study was conducted over a 12 week pilot program in which the participants received specific instructions in ELT methodology, pedagogy and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). The present paper first identifies the strengths and weaknesses of tailor made teacher training programs and then presents ways to address these weaknesses. It also reports its findings about teachers' attitudes and perceptions prior to and after the training. This type of program is not being proposed as a permanent solution for teacher training, but as a tool to help those already in service, while waiting for new generations of EFL teachers to become qualified for and be incorporated into the labour market.

#### **1. Introduction**

The present study aims to identify the current state of the EFL teacher education for the "Módulos de Educación Superior a Distancia" [nivel medio superior] (high school level/pre-university level education), hereafter "EMSADS", in the state of Quintana Roo in the southern part of the Yucatán Peninsula.



This study provides an insight into what the EFL teachers have to offer in terms of this context; and it also aims to identify where teacher educators must re-direct their training approach according to the local and regional needs of our EFL teaching reality.

Quintana Roo is the leading state in the tourism industry in the country generating the highest foreign currency income to Mexico through this activity<sup>1</sup>. The tourism industry is one of most predominant economic activities in México just after the oil industry and money drafts from Mexican immigrants in the USA. As a result, the relevance of the tourism industry demands that the workers have the necessary English language proficiency to incorporate themselves within this services sector (i.e. hotels and restaurants management, administration and services, touring services and all of its intermediate positions). Many students graduating from high school and vocational schools, especially in the rural areas (predominantly Felipe Carrillo Puerto and Jose Maria Morelos), have the tendency of emigrating to the tourism poles known worldwide such as The Riviera Maya, Cancun, Cozumel, Isla Mujeres and Tulum among others. Thus, the necessity of providing them with at least the basic tools of the English language is a priority. The Minister of Education (Josefina Vazquez Mota, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007, t.v. Azteca “e.3.” interview) underscored the urgency to re-enforce and increase the educational quality of education at this level which is at a historical ‘momentum’, meaning that statistically and historically, entry into the high school level of education in Mexico is facing its highest demand ever in history. This is an indicator that the population in the country and indeed in Quintana Roo is predominantly young. This concurs with the national statistics of economic growth which indicates that for 2006 the state of Quintana Roo showed an economic growing rate of 8% while the Riviera Maya municipality itself showed an economic growing rate of 20%. Considering the picture in which the state is divided into 8 municipalites, four of them being devoted only to the tourism industry and where most of the population is concentrated (Cozumel, Isla Mujeres, Cancun and the

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Secretary of Tourism, for the year of 2005 Quintana Roo contributed with the 30.26% of the total foreign currency income to the country through tourism.



Riviera Maya) whereas Felipe Carrillo Puerto and Jose Maria Morelos are rural municipalites devoted predominantly to agricultural activities.

Within this scenario, the University of Quintana Roo is identified as one of the leading institutions in providing training for current and future EFL teachers. At the moment, the University of Quintana Roo offers a bachelors degree in English Language focused on teaching and a masters degree in education with a major in EFL (this MA. program just opened in the fall of 2006). Since the university is fairly young (16 years old) the number of students that have graduated from these programs over the years is not yet enough to meet the demand of EFL teachers in the state.

## **2. Statement of the problem**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the EFL teaching situation is that a significant percentage (approximately 50%) of the current teachers in secondary or high school (pre-university education) hold other degrees than English Language Teaching degrees. The situation is such that for these teachers, their knowledge of English is low and in many cases their qualifications for teaching EFL are non-existent. It is very common to see EFL teachers with degrees in Administration, Tourism, Accounting, Spanish or even sciences such as Physics, Chemistry or Mathematics. In these cases they sometimes are able to speak the language but do not possess the pedagogical or methodological knowledge required to teach a foreign language. Usually when teachers are asked about their qualifications or how they got the position they say that "they are there because there was no one with the proper credentials to teach the course and they were offered the responsibility or opportunity of teaching English". Sometimes the picture is even more dismal when the reason given is that teachers got the position simply because the "Union" (or a contact or friend within the Union of teachers) had the position available and it had to be given to a "unionized" teacher even without having the proper credentials for teaching EFL. The problem does not end there; besides not having the proper credentials, the EFL training for many of these teachers in this situation is not enough. Occasionally educational administrators



provide training courses for them either from EFL teacher trainers from the University of Quintana Roo or sometimes from the publishers who offer training on the condition that the school adopts their textbooks. This creates another problem which is that of money, because many students usually cannot afford to buy expensive books and in some cases they are even forced to buy them by the school administrators.

The problem with the management of the EFL teaching positions is beyond the scope of this study, however, by incorporating teacher training projects in those schools where the EFL teachers lack the proper training, as the one presented in this study designed according to the specific needs of the participant teachers, can benefit the teaching of English tremendously. Hence by mere empirical investigation this study provides an insight of what is the current state of EFL teaching at the pre-university level in the state of Quintana Roo and what is being done with regards to teacher training to improve this practice.

### **3. Literature Review**

Much has been said about the 'ideal language teacher', though we have to admit that teaching is a 'chameleonic profession'. A considerable part of the teacher's performance is determined by the context, the place of teaching, the students, and the methodology used among others. The present study does not aim to determine 'an ideal EFL teacher profile', but instead identifies the state of the art of the EFL teachers and their practice in a given context, i.e. a representative sample of teachers from pre-university level in the state of Quintana Roo México.

We teachers worship our profession every time a new term starts, our students always come with different needs and that is what makes our profession so interesting and engaging. Teaching is not but a mere process that is built through the sum of language teaching and learning experiences; and the developing of all kinds of pedagogical and content knowledge through a process of teaching, conflict resolution, reflection, and decision making within the school environment (Watzke 2007). It is taking into account not only our students' needs, but the



context of our teaching (i.e. if it is subject content English course, the level, English, the administrative authorities we are working for, etc) or the nature of the course (beginners, elementary, intermediate, advance, English for specific purposes, etc). "Teacher education is inextricably linked to the in-service classroom", (Watzke 2007 p.75).

Some of the early work on defining the tasks and responsibilities of a foreign language teacher was presented by Freeman (1941). His basic premise was that 'teacher formation' necessarily involves mastering of the target language with requisite knowledge and mastery of components of grammar, vocabulary, culture, and educational and language pedagogy. Freeman stated that "a teacher stays alive and constantly shapes his/her method"; "the language teacher must possess a rich store of mature knowledge, untiring energy and vigour, contagious enthusiasm for his subject and his profession as a teacher, limitless patience, human understanding and sympathy" (p.304). The author went from discussing issues of training, pedagogy, methodology and context to even budget, considering all these aspects as determining factors in the consolidation and preparation of the 'well trained modern language teacher'. It is interesting to note that the work presented by Freeman, early in time, contains most of the recommendations still being proposed by other authors in the field of teacher training; therefore its relevance in being considered as a benchmark within the literature regarding teacher training. Brooks (1966) proposed a framework for the instruction of language teachers advocating the notion that language instruction pedagogy should be studied as an independent discipline in which other components are complementary in teacher preparation. Both authors can be considered as advocators and pioneers within the field of study of 'teacher training'; as well as contributors for the further installation and standardization of language teacher training programs in the United States back in the 1950's and 1960. Much of what these authors proposed then still constitute the baseline for any teacher training process: a) criteria for the selection of candidates, b) prerequisites for entrance to the program of preparation, c) a curriculum content for the period of professional concentration, d) a qualifying examination for permission to practice, e) internship, and f) a code of ethical



standards that participants must adhere to. Brooks goes beyond presenting the specific content for such a proposal of ideal language teacher training considering various aspects such as language, philosophy, literature, psychology, linguistics, cultural anthropology, didactics and pedagogy, to mention some, which to some degree match the general criteria for a language teacher. On this basis, we can look at many language programs and see that most of them aim to cover such basic recommended curricula.

What is interesting to point out is the extent to which such teacher training programs are adapted to the local needs and context. Even forty years after Brooks' (1966) work, we still underline the importance of the points he made with regards to the 'ideal preparation' of foreign language teachers. Borg (2006) conducted a study in which he identified 'the distinctive characteristics of foreign language teachers'. He investigated 5 different groups of teachers, (1. teachers on a postgraduate course in TESOL, 2. language teacher conference delegates, 3. subject specialists, 4. Hungarian pre-service teachers of English, 5. Slovene undergraduates in English). For the study, the author based his researcher on the distinctiveness of the FL teacher in two areas: the work on disciplinary characteristics, and studies of the good language teacher. In his research Borg (2006) recalls that there are five distinguishing factors that differentiate foreign language teachers from those of other subjects.

Although no empirical strong support is provided for these claims, for the purpose of this paper they will be considered as consistent with and pertinent to our context and will use them in further discussion of teacher education in the context of our study herein; these are:

- 1) ***The nature of the subject matter itself.*** FL teaching is the only subject where effective instruction requires the teacher to use a medium the students do not yet understand.
- 2) ***The interaction patterns necessary to provide instruction.*** Effective FL instruction requires interaction patterns such as group work which are desirable, but not necessary for effective instruction in other subjects.



- 3) ***The challenge for teachers of increasing their knowledge of the subject.*** Language teachers teach communication, not facts. In other subjects, teachers can increase their subject matter knowledge through books, but it is harder for FL teachers to maintain and increase their knowledge for the FL because doing so requires regular opportunities for them to engage in FL communication.
- 4) ***Isolation.*** FL teachers experience more than teachers of other subjects feelings of isolation resulting from the absence of colleagues teaching the same subject.
- 5) ***The need for outside support for learning the subject.*** For effective instruction, FL teachers must seek ways of providing extracurricular activities **through** which naturalistic environments can be created. Such activities are less of a necessity in other subjects.

The nature of the project being described here and the participants themselves create a unique teaching context worth looking at. The literature suggests that each teaching context carries its unique peculiarities, and so do the participant teachers. On this basis the 'tailor-made' project was designed considering the criteria presented by Borg (2006) and other authors incorporating elements that studied the needs herein identified.

Another crucial aspect to consider in our teaching context (pre-university level, state of Quintana Roo, México), is the non-nativeness of the participants, thus its relevance as a determiner in the training being provided for this case study. In trying to identify the trends in teacher training addressed to Non-Native English Speaker Teachers (henceforth non-NESTs) it is relevant to consider what Britten (1988) proposes as the three stages in non-NESTs training. He first points out three conditions proper to the non-NESTs: first, "they need to establish communication in a foreign language (English); second, they need to master a set of professional skills which will probably have to be performed in the foreign language; and third, non-native trainees have to outgrow not only ideas about teaching and learning foreign languages which were acquired as pupils in school



only a few years earlier, but also perhaps previous ideas about the nature of language and what it means to know a language”, (p.3). The importance of nativeness has to do with acknowledging the potentialities of a non-English speaking EFL teacher; for whom Cook (1999) suggests that NNS should be viewed as multicompetent language users, rather than as deficient native speakers. By knowing the target language, non-native speakers possess what is called *multicompetence* which “covers the total language knowledge of a person who knows more than one language, including both L1 competence and the L2 interlanguage ...”the possibility of being able not only to communicate, but to know the rules and systems that govern the target language is by itself a challenge”. The author suggests that “multicompetent language users have the L1 constantly available to them” (p.192) and that “multicompetent minds that know two languages are qualitatively different from those of the monolingual native speaker in a number of ways”, (p.191). The design and implementation of this project has to do with the fact of having non-native speaker of English participants.

Most of the literature in the field agrees that proficiency in the target language is a matter of relevance in the teacher training process, especially during the pre-service stage. However anyone knows that during the teaching process an intrinsic teacher self-apprenticeship process takes place. This is, by studying, analyzing and teaching the language, the linguistic proficiency of the teachers enters into a constant improvement. Bayliss & Vignola (2007) studied a group of Anglophone French as second language teachers in Canada, and in their study they remarked the importance of a high level of proficiency within the teacher training curricula. It seems that possessing a considerable level of proficiency provides the teachers with a strong element of self-confidence which as a consequence brings better results during their teaching practice.

The point in question here is based on the importance of providing in-service teachers with what it is exactly that they need for teaching EFL. Thus the pilot teacher training project herein considered the participants ‘reality’ in terms of ‘what do they really need’ to perform better considering what Borg states: methods, activities and materials, the content of teaching, the nature of language,



relationships with learners, non-native issues, language teachers' treats. "Language teachers' distinctiveness is a socially constructed phenomenon that may be defined in various ways in different contexts" (Borg 2006 p.26).

Due to the characteristics of the participants, the need was that of specifically 120 hours of instruction over a span of 16 weeks. This may raise the question of 'efficacy' due to the 'rush factor' of such training; thus interesting to recall what Ferguson & Donno (2003) point out in relation to short teacher training courses only as the beginning of initial and formal training for subsequent professional development. They advocate the usefulness of this kind of training, but underscore the necessity of considering the specific teaching contexts in which these are implemented proposing the incorporation of aspects regarding EFL methodology and development in the theory and practice of teacher training as well as determinant constituents in any teacher training program.

#### **4. Method**

##### ***Participants***

The participants in the study were 15 EFL teachers both males and females ranging in age between 25 and 29 years old. All of them are native speakers of Spanish, and a few of them reported speaking Mayan language. All of them hold a university degree in various fields but not in ELT or its equivalent, and a few of them are currently studying for a graduate degree in education . All of the participants are currently teaching EFL at the pre-university level in rural schools, have an average of 5 years of teaching experience at this level or secondary level, and all reported having learnt English at school.

##### ***Materials***

The materials used to gather the information from participants consisted of 2 questionnaires and 2 interviews administrated at the beginning and at the end of the training, along with constant participant feedback from which various additional information was obtained as the study was conducted.

##### ***Procedures and Design***



The procedures followed to conduct the project in administering the questionnaires and interviews to the participants were as follows: the participants were placed in a classroom for a period of two hours to answer the first questionnaire which contained 5 different sections. These 5 different sections aimed to identify various types of crucial information for the purposes of the study, i.e. section 1) biographical data, 2) context and teaching, 3) teacher's self diagnostic of their teaching, 4) Goals of English Language teaching at the elementary/high school level as perceived by the teachers, and 5) Linguistic proficiency, self assessed and desired proficiency levels of the teachers. All of this information was compiled through Likert Scale based questionnaires to make the data analysis more precise. As for the interviews, these were conducted by the researcher one teacher at a time in private and these lasted from 15 to 25 minutes each according to the participant (appendix 2). The aim of these interviews was to identify 1) the level of oral English proficiency they had. 2) the interest in and expectations about their profession, and 3) the training they were about to be engaged in.

The training lasted 17 weeks/sessions, (appendix 3) divided into 4 modules, where each session lasted 7 hours (5 hours of directed instruction with the trainer in methodological and pedagogical aspects, and 2 hours focused on language improvement). The sessions were conducted on Saturdays in a language lab with all the necessary equipment, (i.e. computers and internet connection, overhead projector, TV and DVD). Throughout the training period, the participants were always asked to do assignments for the following session and to present these to the class; i.e. a micro teaching lesson, or CALL (computers assisted language lab) activities.

As for the instructor (the researcher), she has a B.A. in International Relations and a Masters degree in Applied Linguistics with more than 12 years of teaching experience in the field of EFL at various levels especially at pre-university and university levels. A second instructor with a B.A. in English Language and an M.A. in Education. dealt with the language improvement part of the training.



## 5. Treatment and Analysis

Based on the initial stage (pre-treatment), which gathered technical and basic information from the subjects of study, the information demonstrated that a third of the participants in the study held a level of English inferior to the ideal needed to teach a basic elementary course. This was one of the remarking aspects considered in the design of the training/treatment. Since this training was ordered by the State's pre-university level School Board, the selection criteria was not that strict; the participants were asked by their school authorities to attend the training and the researcher/designer of the study had to come up with a design specifically suited to the needs of the 'cliente'. This gave the project the 'tailor-made' tissue, in contrast to other teacher training programs where usually the trainers and coordinators select their candidates in many cases according to their skills or other criteria i.e. interest in people, learning styles, language proficiency, professional background or management skills among others. In analyzing Ferguson & Donno (2003) "One-month teacher training courses: time for a change" Macpherson (2003) highlights the importance of the criteria selection i.e. "trainees are encouraged to demonstrate a high level of competence in all skills" (p.298); this was not certainly the case in the present study. Along with the pedagogical and methodological components considered in the curricula the language improvement component was also included. This was based on the results of 1) the diagnostic test which indicated low proficiency scores with a level under the desired to teach at the pre-university level, and 2) the self-assessment the teachers did of themselves. Most of the teachers agreed that their current levels of English (speaking, pronunciation, oral grammar, reading and writing) were low and that needed to be improved. Based on this evidence the training/treatment included a strong component of language enrichment based on the assumption that this is a determinant of self confidence in their teaching.

The results of the initial diagnostic test showed that most of the participants are not concerned with the approaches and/or methods for teaching EFL, and some of them reported not having ever tried Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) before. This appeared to be relevant especially in light of which authors such



as Bell (2007) suggest that "most teachers think of methods in terms of techniques which realize a set of principles or goals and are open to any method that offers practical solutions to problems in their particular teaching context" .The author also points out that "teacher's eclecticism" appears to be based on an awareness of the existence of different methods and a willingness to draw from each of them" (p. 141). Based on this, part of the following treatment offered to the participants included a component in basic theory and methodology of ELT in which a general introduction to the basic notions and theories of ELT were presented. In addition to this, the teachers received instruction on lesson planning, teaching techniques (how to teach writing, reading, speaking and listening), and they had to practice a micro-teaching session in addition to a component of teacher's language management skills. Not only these, but also the inclusion of aspects of second language vocabulary teaching and the use of technology in the language classroom as an innovative and up to date element which dealt with the use of didactic web sites, to the use of email, blogs and software such as hot potatoes useful in the design of diverse types of classroom activities, were also addressed . The inclusion of CALL activities seems to have a strong impact on the teachers who expressed not having ever been exposed to such useful resources from technology. This had the added benefit of encompassing the notion of new trends in communication technology and its usefulness in enhancing the teaching & learning process in ELT education. By doing so the teachers were encouraged to try other creative co-operative learning environments in developing their media competence applicable to language teaching (Shocker-von & Legutke, 2002). It has to be said that this tailor-made teacher training was not aimed at addressing the lack of knowledge the teachers had about the field of ELT, but instead at being a resource to introduce them to it as 12 out of the 15 participants had never received any training in ELT.

During the training/treatment stage (around the 8<sup>th</sup> week) the participants were given another questionnaire that aimed at measuring their evolution throughout the first half of the training. It was surprisingly noticeable that their scores in all of the aspects examined at the pre-training/treatment stage had



changed slightly positively. At this point in the training/treatment, the subjects of the study expressed becoming familiar at least with the basic theories of language teaching as well as being aware of the existence of ELT methods such as the audio lingual method, the grammar translation method or the Communicative Language Teaching method. Along with these principles of language teaching the participants reported feeling interested in exploring and trying the new techniques introduced during the training, and in fact (since the training/treatment) was conducted during the weekends (Saturdays) they even expressed having started "trying" some of the new techniques learned during the previous session in the week that followed. Throughout the remaining 8 weeks of training/treatment the participants showed a constant enthusiasm which eventually manifested itself in the scores they obtained in the final tests. This final assessment of the participants aimed to identify if what they had been asked at the beginning of the training had been understood and learned. At the final stage, the participants had to do micro-teaching and self-evaluate their teaching by writing a report of their reflections as they observe themselves during the pedagogical practice. The participants were free to choose any topic and skill to work on to develop a 45-minute lesson. This micro-teaching project was presented to their peer-trainees who gave each and everyone feedback. The topics presented were of various types, i.e. teaching reading, teaching grammar, teaching vocabulary and even conducting a CALL activity.

## 6. Conclusions

This "tailor-made teacher training" project aimed at identifying the state of the needs of a representative sample of teachers of EFL from a very specific context. Since this is only a preliminary report, the stats, the specific contents of the training program and some other details are not contained; these will be included in the complete and final version. The design of this project was based on the initial findings during the diagnostic stage and was considered as a pilot project to respond to urgent needs in ELT as is the case in areas in México and possibly other parts of the world. In the state of Quintana Roo México the demand for ELT



educators is increasing and those who are able to speak 'some' English are given ELT positions due to the lack of EFL teachers with the proper credentials. The educational authorities have initiated the incursion of training programs of this nature and it is expected that these will help to solve the problem. In the meantime new generations of professionals are ready to join the ELT market.

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