



A school director's teacher training experience

María Eugenia Serrano Vila
Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas

Abstract

The present summary intends to explore my personal experience during my five-year tenure as Director of the Language School (LS) of the Autonomous University of Chiapas (UNACH) from July 1999 to August 2004, time during which the LS underwent many significant changes, and evolved and developed according to government and institutional policies. A great number of events took place in the five year period; most of which were undesired changes and the implementation of innovations which were not positively welcome by the majority of the faculty. In this article I will explore this situation and how it affected the LS's environment. At the time that the ELT opened a B.Ed. in ELT program, the ultimate need was to keep up with both federal and institutional policies and to start thinking about teacher training because the faculty in the LS had a great variety of academic backgrounds but they were not suitable for the appropriate training of future English language teachers; hence Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses were implemented to train our existing staff which had only had experience in teaching foreign languages. The purpose of these was to achieve two main objectives: to unite and foster cooperation among the faculty and to encourage academic improvement in order to consequently have a more powerful school. The program consisted in supporting faculty members in applying for masters programs in the United Kingdom and in bringing an M.Ed. program to our own school, This article will explore how the planning was conducted, the program's benefits, and the outcomes. The present is a summary of chapter four of my dissertation A Personal Inquiry of the Role of Leadership in the Language School Campus Tuxtla of the Autonomous University Of Chiapas, submitted for the M. Ed. in ELT program.

1 How Everything Started

The current LS used to be a Language Department (LD) that still continues to exist and provide its services to the university community. The LD of the UNACH has its history. It has a long successful academic trajectory and widespread recognition in the life of the UNACH and in the state of Chiapas. Because the role of the LD is to provide UNACH students and staff, and the community in Tuxtla, with formal instruction, as far as learning foreign languages is concerned, students



must acquire a certain level of knowledge regarding a language different from their mother tongue. Alumni, staff and the community have the opportunity to choose whatever language they want to learn and the level of command of each language they wish to achieve.

A B. Ed. in ELT program (LEI) of the Language School (LS) of the Autonomous University of Chiapas (UNACH), opened in January 1999 and the former LD became a School in 2000, and, despite the fact that the teachers involved in the LEI program, were all experienced teachers – English, French and German – who had been working in the LD for many years, at that time, only a few of us had actually been trained in ELT (English Language Training and Teaching), or had been involved in CPD courses to become teacher-trainers. Nonetheless, we did not have the necessary experience since some of us had just finished our studies. In addition, a great number of the faculty had different academic backgrounds: dentists, lawyers, accountants, engineers, who have been teaching ESL for years and thus have the experience but perhaps not the necessary training. Before we started working in the LEI we all were LD teachers. Our main issues were that we “had inappropriate notions of the relationship between theory and practice in teacher [training]; [we] had a simplistic view of what [training] involves, and lacked the reflective skills and autonomous dispositions required for us to function as English Language Trainers” (Artigas 2004:35), therefore it was necessary to start a teacher training program.

In the early years of the LD, and because of the service it provided to the UNACH, there was no need for teachers to hold a B.Ed. or BA degree, as Wright and Bolitho (in Van Lier 1997:173) point out, in Chiapas we “entered the language teaching profession on the basis of a “philological” first degree, in some cases topped up with a concurrent or subsequent initial training (ITT) program”. For most of us working in the LD, it was our first teaching experience and our initial training as well.

In order to be able to offer the community in Tuxtla Gutierrez with a B. Ed. program that met its expectations it was necessary to have a suitable teaching staff. Because of the reason stated above, by the end of 1998, the Language



Departments' General Coordinator assigned a few full-time teachers from the LD to work in the LEI. Because of the great varieties of academic backgrounds, the criteria for the selection also included the following:

- Full-time teachers
- Teachers with an MA., M.Ed., B.A. or B. Ed. degree
- Teachers with more than five years of teaching experience
- Hard-working committed teachers
- Command of English

We were not just English Language Teachers anymore, we also became inexperienced trainers.

For a better understanding of what was happening I will examine my colleagues', academic backgrounds BACK IN 1999:

Chart 1: A KALEIDOSCOPE OF FORMAL TRAINING

	NAME	ACADEMIC DEGREES			
		B. Ed. Or B.A.	Lang studies and/or international examinations	ESPECIALTY	MASTER
1	Bellahcene Sadki Amina	B. Ed. In FLT	DALF		
2	Bories Maury Catherine +	Teaching Philosophy	DALF		Language Science
3	Castineira Benítez Teresa Aurora				Applied Linguistics
4	Chanona Pérez Oscar Gustavo	Accounting	DALF		
5	Dettmer Rogall Martín	Sociology	ZD-B1/ZMP-B2		Sociology
6	Domínguez Aguilar Ana María	Computer Engineer	COTE	Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages	
7	Gómez Morales Esther	Education Sciences	COTE	Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages and ELT Training	
8	Mekki Castillo Rachid	B. Ed. In FLT	IELTS/DALF BELC		
9	Moreno Gloggner María Elizabeth	Tourist Administration	COTE	Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages	
10	Palacios Rodríguez Beatriz	B. Ed. In ELT	COTE/DELF	Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages	
11	Pérez y Pérez Hugo César	Communication Sciences	COTE IELTS		
12	Serrano Vila Ma. Eugenia	B. Ed. In ELT		Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages	



13	Trejo Sirvent Ma. Luisa	Hispano-American Language and Literature			
----	-------------------------	--	--	--	--

The teachers chosen to collaborate were from each of the three different sections – English, French and German. The Language Departments' General Coordinator wanted experienced, responsible, committed, hard-working teachers, who would do anything in order to foster the program's development. At least this was the first approach; however, because of the lack of qualified teachers some other colleagues were soon invited to teach different subjects in the Teacher Training program.

No matter the criteria, the school rapidly began to grow, we had more students, and federal policies were demanding up-dated and qualified teachers, hence, it was compulsory to meet them as soon as possible.

My tenure as a Director started in July 1999; it was now my turn to decide on what teachers would join us as trainers. We were in need of capable teachers and it was hard to get teachers with a suitable bachelor's degree, not to mention a postgraduate one, in Chiapas. Unlike what is required in the LD, full-time or tenure LEI positions candidates must hold a B.Ed. degree, preferably in ELT and follow the UNACH's teachers hiring requirements set in its Rules and Regulations. In addition, federal policies stated it was compulsory to hold a masters degree by 2006. On the other hand this was a difficult and touchy issue because LD teachers, with no suitable background and who did not have to fulfill the hiring requirements, became aware of the benefits they could gain if they collaborated in the LEI and began to request becoming LEI trainers. As a result, we had no option than to open courses to LD teachers to meet our needs.

2 Continuous Professional Development: A Rough Start

In the early years of the LD the tradition was internal staff development; this is that colleagues shared their knowledge and their experience. The issue was that most of these courses had to be delivered in Spanish since that was the language shared by all. In addition there were few courses held by colleagues from other schools in the UNACH, these were all delivered in Spanish as well and were not



relevant to us since nobody is considered a prophet in own land. Because of this a new tradition was born, eliciting support from outside Chiapas and later Mexico.

Fortunately for the UNACH because of the national context development, the LD began to change as well, and with the support of the British Council (BC) and Federal Ministry of Education (SEP), in-service teachers (INSETs) were offered courses on a regular basis in order to establish Continuous Professional Development (CPD). The most relevant ones during my tenure are listed below:

- a) **French Didactics:** Course for the French Section no matter which program. The course was planned by this section. April 15-19, 2002.
- b) **Cognitive Strategies for Language Learning: How to promote their use:** As part of a research project held by three of the LEI teachers, in which they had to share their knowledge and findings with the faculty. The project product was a Cognitive Strategies Manual which was used in the course, it was offered to the entire LS faculty however only a small number of teachers enrolled. The ones who attended said it was productive and actually tried to put what they have learned into practice. June 10-14, 2002.
- c) **Certificate for Overseas Teachers of English (COTE):** Held by the British Council. The course provided in-service training for teachers who already had experience and felt the need for further development, specially a greater awareness of how practice in teaching relates to theory. Fifteen teachers enrolled in the course and started the first module in June 17, 2002; twelve successfully completed it on April 11, 2003.
- d) **In Service Course for English Language Teachers (ICELT):** A revised edition of the COTE course. Because of the COTE's success this new course was implemented in May 2005 and completed in May 2005; there were eleven candidates enrolled, seven of them from the LS.

What really triggered the need for more relevant CPD courses was the opening of the LEI program which caused us to become aware of how much we needed to develop our knowledge, awareness and skills (KAS).



3 Reasons for CPD in the LS

We were aware of the great need for CPD courses not only for the LEI but for the entire LS faculty for two main reasons: change and school development. We all needed to change because with the development and improvement of our academic backgrounds we would have a more powerful school. "School reform [is] one of the espoused purposes of professional development" (Lieberman and Miller 2001:23).

I was also hoping to bridge the gaps by fostering collaborative work in an attempt that we would all share the same vision and the same goals. Leather (2001:228) refers to the Hollydayan idea "that lasting success of training teachers from different cultural contexts depends largely on finding the methodologies which are culturally appropriate", but because of the small cultures within the LS this was difficult to accomplish due to the variety of practices and characteristics. Furthermore, even though I regarded "teacher development [as] the process of becoming the best teacher one is able to be, a process that can be started but never finished" (Underhill 1999:17), deciding on what courses to offer teachers was also challenging for the following reasons among others:

- a) Faculty's Heterogeneous Backgrounds: We needed to homogenize the faculty's academic backgrounds in order to share the same knowledge, goals and vision to be able to train students properly.
- b) Federal Requirements: The SEP stated that by 2006, all teachers in a bachelor's program must hold a masters degree if they want to continue working, otherwise they will be dismissed. In our case, we could go back and teach in the LD or SAC where no bachelors or masters degree is required. But that is not the case; we need to move forward not backwards, building up out vocation-specific motivation, because of our peculiar situation within an organizational framework (Dörnyei 2001:158), was mandatory.
- c) University's Policies and Needs: The UNACH ethos is similar to the SEP's.



Nevertheless, CPD was not enough and holding courses was not the only strategy; it was also relevant to impel LEI trainers to start participating in institutional and federal policies such as research projects, publication of research outcomes, participation in seminars and congresses as lecturers, and to form and become part of the LS Academic Body (Cuerpo Academico: AB): By participating in these processes trainers develop their practice, grow professionally, and foster a new culture.

“Teacher development activity is likely to become a central means for schools or other educational organizations to deal with change. It will entail an investment in teachers’ development time as part of “staff development”. It may also involve a change in the “culture” of organizations; in order to give teachers more room for their own development.” (Wright 1998:42)

4 M. Ed. Trainer Development in ELT

Due to the LS’ changing needs, we needed to update our EFL and ESL methodology practice, because the teacher’s task is not simply to teach, but to create powerful contexts for learning (Calhoun and Hopkins in Hopkins 2001). Creating powerful contexts meant teachers had to be involved in a process of CPD in order to:

- a) Keep up with changing times by receiving continuous updating
- b) Become involved in federal policies and to accurately respond to their demands.
- c) Become actively involved and contribute to the LS’ development.
- d) Become more actively engaged in our teaching practice in order to provide learners with a better opportunity to be trained by better prepared trainers.

As mentioned before, teacher-trainers at the LEI did not have the same academic backgrounds in 1999 nor did they in 2002. Currently there are three colleagues who have graduated and hold their degree from an M. Ed. in ELT program from Essex University in the United Kingdom and a fourth from a Masters in Applied



Linguistics in the University of Columbia, New York, United States of America. All of them are women and their studies were sponsored by PROMEP.

Even though there were teachers who had already started a process of development and were becoming involved in research, this was still not enough. In an academic meeting held in early 2002, we realized it was necessary to speed up the process of homogenizing our background, not only because there was a need for us to more properly train our students, but also because Federal policies state that all Academic Body (AB) members must hold a masters degree and at least one member of the staff a PhD. Hence, to achieve our goals at that pace, only one teacher or two every year, we became aware that it was going to take a very long time. One day one of my colleagues had a brilliant idea: to bring and run a masters program right in our school for full-time teachers. Therefore this was an idea of voluntarily implementing the ultimate CDP course for LEI trainers, it was a process besought by the faculty in an attempt to change.

Thus, homogenizing our background became a priority and I undertook the task to find out about high quality master programs and came across the M.Ed. in Trainer Development run by Exeter University. From that moment on everything evolved quickly and in June 2003 the program officially started with 22 teachers – eight tenured and four non-tenured from Tuxtla, one tenured and two non-tenured from San Cristobal de las Casas, and two tenured and five non-tenured from Tapachula where we have sister schools. The challenges the program posed included the following:

- The risk and fear of experiencing a new challenge
- The fear of experiencing change again
- The development of an awareness of what this implied and future consequences
- The new responsibilities we would face
- The fear of handling new knowledge
- The fear of not being able to cope with and keep up with the program



5 CPD Contradictions

Since 1990, the UNACH has supported a considerable amount of the LS teachers by sponsoring them, together with either the SEP or the British Council, to enroll in CPD courses:

- B. Ed. programs
- Diplomas
- Certificate for Overseas Teachers of English (COTE)
- In Service Course for English Language Teachers (ICELT),
- M. Ed. Trainer Development in ELT

Unfortunately, even though a great deal of time, energy and money have been allocated to support committed teachers to enroll in high quality programs in order to develop professionally and to bridge the gap from being ESL teachers to becoming trainers, local difficulties of accreditation and validation have proved demotivating.

6 CPD Outcomes

Due to the fact that post graduate programs are considered to be of great importance, I will mention the outcomes of these CPD courses after their completion. In order to do so a chart is the most suitable tool.

Chart 2: M. Ed. in ELT Program Outcomes

Tapachula				
	Enrolled	Graduated	Submitted Dissertation	Hold Degree
Tenured	2	2	2	1
Non-tenured	5	4	1	1
San Cristobal				
Tenured	1	1	1	1
Non-tenured	2	2	0	0
Tuxtla				
Tenured	8	8	4	4



MEMORIAS DEL III FORO NACIONAL DE ESTUDIOS EN LENGUAS (FONAEI 2007)
ISBN 978-968-9308-13-3

Non-tenured	4	4	1	1
Total	22	21	9	8

As can be observed, not all the teachers who attended and graduated from the program have been able to submit their dissertations and therefore currently hold the degree. Nevertheless, no matter how many actually did, I strongly feel they will in near future and feel contempt with the outcomes because I was able to make it possible for us to increase the number of teachers with a postgraduate degree.

Even though my tenure ended in 2004, the outcomes from CPD courses continue to bear fruit. I hold myself responsible only for twelve teachers that were able to finish and now hold a postgraduate degree: from my school four tenured teachers mentioned in section 4, four tenured and one non-tenured teachers in the present section, and one tenured and one non-tenured teachers from Tapachula and one tenured teacher from San Cristobal. The following chart will compare the faculty's academic background regarding – LEI and LD – from 1999 to 2007 and show how it has changed through the years. I will only consider the teachers who started working in the LEI program and/or have focused on their CPD in this period.

Chart 3: Language School Tuxtla Faculty's Academic Backgrounds up to 2007

	NAME	ACADEMIC DEGREES			
		B. Ed. Or B.A.	Lang studies and/or international examinations	ESPECIALTY	MASTER
Held a Postgraduate Degree in 1999					
1	Dettmer Rogall Martín	Sociology	ZD-B1/ZMP-B2		Sociology
Hold the M. Ed. ELT Special In situ Program Degree					
2	Aceves Gutiérrez Ma. De Lourdes	Tourism	COTE IELTS FCE COLLEGE BOARD CERT. OF MICHIGAN OF ENGLISH LANG.		M. Ed. ELT
3	Díaz de la Garza Ana María Elisa	Nutrition	COTE		M. Ed. ELT
4	Ibarrola y Nicolín Beatriz	B. Ed. In ELT		Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages	M. Ed. ELT
5	Serrano Vila Ma. Eugenia	B. Ed. In ELT		Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages	M. Ed. ELT
6	Us Grajales Elizabeth	B. Ed. in English	COTE	In ELT and in Education	M. Ed. in ELT and



MEMORIAS DEL III FORO NACIONAL DE ESTUDIOS EN LENGUAS (FONAE 2007)
ISBN 978-968-9308-13-3

		Language	IELTS		an M. Ed. (program in Spanish)
Finished the M. Ed. ELT Special In situ Program					
7	Cedillo Gutiérrez Luz del Carmen	History (no degree)	COTE IELTS	Techniques and Procedures in ELT	M. Ed. ELT (no degree)
8	Corzo Arévalo Gloria del Carmen	B. Ed. In ELT	IELTS		M. Ed. ELT (no degree)
9	Mekki Castillo Rachid	B. Ed. In FLT	IELTS/DALF BELC/ IELTS	University Teaching	M. Ed. ELT (no degree)
10	Palacios Rodríguez Beatriz	B. Ed. In ELT	COTE/DELTA	Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages	M. Ed. ELT (no degree)
11	Sánchez Manchinely Enrique Alonso	Odontology	FCE IELTS		M. Ed. ELT (no degree)
12	Ruíz Riverall Paola Concepción	B. Ed. In ELT	IELTS		M. Ed. ELT (no degree)
13	Ruíz Mendoza Juan Carlos	Informatics	Advanced Cert. Univ. of Alabama IELTS		M. Ed. ELT (no degree)
Degrees Sponsored by PROMEP					
14	Cal y Mayor Turnbull Antonieta	Law and B.Ed. in ELT	COTE/ IELTS	Criminal Law	Applied Linguistics
15	Domínguez Aguilar Ana María	Computer Engineer	COTE IELTS	Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages	M. Ed. ELT
16	Gómez Morales Esther	Education Sciences	COTE IELTS	Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages and ELT Training	M. Ed. ELT
17	Moreno Gloggner María Elizabeth	Tourist Administration	COTE/ IELTS	Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages	M. Ed. ELT
Degrees held in Spanish					
18	Chanona Pérez Oscar Gustavo	Accounting	DALF		Linguistics (Program in Spanish)
19	Pérez y Pérez Hugo César	Communication Sciences	COTE IELTS		Education Sciences (program in Spanish)
20	Trejo Sirvent Ma. Luisa	Hispano-American Language and Literature			Education (no degree/ program in Spanish)

Note: Two teachers were not considered in this chart because one of them has left us and the other is now working in Puebla.

CONCLUSION

I have explored the faculty's academic background, CPD courses and professional development strategies, and the importance of CPD for the LS and its impact on its culture and development. Hargreaves and Fullan (2002:1) point out that "in some ways the logic and evidence linking teacher development to successful implementation of innovations is relatively straightforward, although there are a number of subtleties and complexities in the process" and as can be



seen, there were issues such as the kind of courses to implement and how beneficial they could be.

I did not plan and did not originally have the idea to implement change; nonetheless I had to cope with it, thus it was my responsibility, and I embraced it, to lead both the LD and the newly opened LEI program, converting it to a changing school without having had any experience in leadership and management. I was not only an English teacher anymore; my horizons were widened with new responsibilities.

My ultimate purpose was to foster an awareness that the more prepared we were, the more professional and academic opportunities for development we would receive, and the more open we would become to change and innovation as we would be the ones who now would be able to propose and implement them. In retrospect, I feel pleased that I was able to pave the way in a process of raising self-awareness, reflection and professional development for the LEI faculty, but absolutely failed in fostering this awareness in LD teachers and SAC counselors. My major failure was to only focus on and give importance to the LEI program trainers.

References

1. Artigas, A. (2004) Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in Initial Teacher Education. School of Education University of Leeds: IATEFL TTEd SIG Newsletter.
2. Dörnyei, Z. (2001) *Teaching and Researching Motivation*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
3. Hargreaves, A and M. Fullan (2002) (eds.) *Teacher Development and Educational Change*. London: Routledge Falmer.
4. Hopkins, D. (2001) Powerful Learning, Powerful Teaching, Powerful Schools. *Journal of Educational Change*.
5. Leather, S. (2001) Training across cultures: content, process, and dialogue. *ELT Journal* 55/3. Oxford University Press.
6. Lieberman, A. and L. Miller (2001) *Teachers Caught in the Action. Professional Development that Matters*. New York: The Series of School Reform.
7. Underhill, A. (1999) Continuous Professional Development. IATEFL Issue 149. June/July.



8. Van Lier, L. and D. Corson (1997) (eds) *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*. Vol. 6 Awareness of Language. The Hague: Kluwer.
9. Wright, T. (1998) *Teacher development. A personal view*. Plymouth: *College of St. Mark and St. John*.

Biodata

Full-time teacher at the Language School Tuxtla from the Autonomous University of Chiapas since 1988. Academic Background: Regional Diploma (1991-1993) from the Autonomous University of Yucatán (UADY), B. Ed. TESOL (1995-1998) from Canterbury Christ Church College, University of Kent, M. Ed. in ELT (2003-2006) from the College of Saint Mark and St. John (MARJON) from the University of Exeter, United Kingdom. Former coordinator for the PET and FEC exams and current Oral Examiner from the University of Cambridge. Has held different positions in the Language School such as Academic Assessor of the Language Departments, Language School Coordinator, Director and President of the “Consejo Técnico” of the Language School, “Consejera Universitaria”. Has also been responsible of the development of the PIFI’s (Programa Integral de Fortalecimiento Institucional) 2.0, 3.0, 3.1 and was a former member of the Academic Body “Language Didactics” and current member of the “Applied Linguistics: Second and Foreign Language” one. Has developed research projects and written research articles in Mexican magazines, and attended several courses in ELT.

contact: marusvila@hotmail.com