

TRAINING ENGLISH TEACHERS IN MEXICO'S CARIBBEAN STATE

by Robert Mackler Universidad de Quintana Roo ¹

One of the majors offered at the University of Quintana Roo (UQRoo) in MÈxico is an English teacher training program, Lengua Inglesa (LI), that confers the equivalent of a Bachelors in EFL after five years of study. A student may enter the program with no English language skills, though many have had some English language courses in their past. As an LI professor, I came to realize that many of my students were not really interested in becoming teachers of English, but had enrolled in the major to take advantage of what they saw as an opportunity to gain a university degree in "English" that would allow them entrÈe into the lucrative tourism jobs in the Cancun region. Others seemed interested in the perceived opportunities the NAFTA economy has produced for translators and interpreters.

The Caribbean coast of MÈxico, which has some of the world's most beautiful and famous beaches, is contained entirely within the state of Quintana Roo. The state, however, is one of contrasts. In the north of the state is the booming resort area centered on Cancun; northern Quintana Roo has some of MÈxico's fastest growing municipalities. Each year millions of English-speaking tourists flood the area.

In the center and south of Quintana Roo are areas where agriculture is a primary economic activity and Maya is a common language. Also in the south (on the MÈxico-Belize border) is the state capital, Chetumal. Sometimes described as a steamy tropical backwater, Chetumal also has many historic British-colonial-style wooden homes, as well as a world-class Mayan culture museum. In 1991, the state's first public university, UQRoo, was founded here, and a handsome campus has since grown up beside Chetumal Bay.

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I decided to survey the students enrolled in LI in order to determine student desires, with an eye towards possible curriculum revision. A nine-question survey was created and distributed to the students in the major. About 90 percent of the surveys were completed and returned, for an almost complete snapshot of the LI student body.

The LI student body is predominantly female (65 percent) and born in Quintana Roo (63 percent). When LI students were asked, "Why did you select Lengua Inglesa as your major?", 35 percent responded to the choice, "to be an English teacher." Interestingly, 26 percent responded, "to work in tourism." Twelve percent of LI students responded that they were interested in a career in translation/interpretation, while 18 percent responded that they had a "general interest in English" (the remainder responded, "Other").

Lengua Inglesa students were also asked, "If options other than teacher training were offered after the fifth semester, would you be interested?" An astonishing 96 percent answered "Yes." Of those answering "Yes," 45 percent would be interested in "English for tourism," 35 percent translation/interpretation, and 24 percent would be interested in "Business English."

The survey bears out my anecdotal evidence that many LI students do not really want to be English teachers. Of the thirty-two mandatory "English" courses in the curriculum, almost 20 percent are in a teaching methodology block. Many of the LI students dragging themselves through these courses would welcome the opportunity to branch off into sub-majors that would better suit their personal and career interests.

As a result of this survey, a realignment of the LI curriculum is under discussion, with four branches (Business, Teaching, Tourism, and Translation) proposed after a three-year core program. A broadening of the Lengua Inglesa curriculum would better serve the students and the state of Quintana Roo, as well as help the UQRoo better accomplish its mission, particularly its goals of innovation and stronger links to the larger society.

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