

Professional Practice Issues

University Provides English Classes to Rural Communities

by Jane Mackler, Universidad de Quintana Roo¹

Mexico's youngest public university opened its doors in 1991 in the city of Chetumal, capital of the southeastern state of Quintana Roo. The University of Quintana Roo (UQRoo) has a five year bachelor's degree program which trains students to be English teachers. This university program is two-part: students take English language courses in order to learn the language, and then take teacher training courses in order to learn how to be English teachers. Many of the students are interested in teaching in primary or secondary schools, while others choose this course of study in order to become fluent English speakers, or to work in the tourism industry.

In their fifth year, students are required to take two semesters of Teaching Practicums. These courses allow the students to put into practice all the teaching techniques they have learned. It is difficult to find opportunities for them to do supervised practice teaching; previously their practicums were limited to just shadowing and assisting teachers at the university. In the school year 1999-2000, the twelve students doing their teaching practicums had a unique experience.

This year the students were offered an opportunity in Laguna Guerrero, a rural village about twenty minutes from Chetumal. The village of Laguna Guerrero is located on a lagoon which is part of a manatee sanctuary. The village has great tourism potential due to the lagoon and the wildlife. A group of young people in the village is being trained to become nature guides through the help of a coastal zone management and protection project at the UQRoo.

¹ This author can be reached at: mackler@belizemail.net

The obvious missing ingredient for these guide trainees was English. Because the majority of tourists they will encounter will either be English-speakers, or will use English as an international language, it is vital for this group of nature guides to be conversant in English in order to give tours to visitors.

Putting the budding teachers and the budding nature guides together was a beautiful combination. The results of this endeavor have been manifold:

- 1) student teachers have had the opportunity to practice teach in a nonformal educational setting,
- 2) student teachers have had the opportunity to teach with an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) focus,
- 3) the nature guides were able to begin the process of learning English with classes that were specialized towards their particular needs,
- 4) the student teachers increased their own environmental awareness as they learned more about what the nature guide group was doing and why, and
- 5) the nature guides were exposed to the UQRoo and what it has to offer.

Most English teacher training is usually in the area of formal classroom work; the reality, however, is that there is a growing need for teachers to work in nonformal educational situations as well. This exposure was excellent for the future teachers, as it opened their minds to different work possibilities. It also taught them about the realities and differences of teaching in a nonformal educational setting, and allowed them to do actual ESP teaching.

The village classroom was far different from standard classrooms. In Laguna Guerrero classes were held in an open-walled thatched building. There was one long table with wooden benches and a big blackboard. Sometimes pigs, chickens, and other animals ran through the classroom. At times the loud calling of flocks of parrots overhead, or heavy rains, created so much noise that it was hard to hear. Villagers would wander by and stare, and children would come right in and sit down uninvited.

The methodological approach used was that of ESP. In effect, all of the lessons were designed with the aim of providing the students with the English skills needed to work as tourist guides. They learned how to introduce themselves, how to form simple questions and answers, give directions, as well as the names of certain trees, birds, animals, and other nature-related terminology. Because they entered with no English, there was the necessity of teaching them basic foundations of the language. For this reason, a pure ESP approach was not possible; the approach used would best be explained as an "ESP- modified approach."

The lessons and materials created by the practice teachers were excellent and were geared towards the needs of the group. One practice teacher worked very hard to create a beautiful diorama complete with a lagoon, a bridge, trees, various animals, and a nature guide character, which was used to simulate how the students would guide tourists. The practice teachers also devised creative dialogues from which the students could learn conversational phraseology for tour-guiding.

The project has had excellent results. The young community participants began the process of learning English. They loved the classes, attended regularly and punctually, and participated fully in the sessions.

The practice teachers adored their experience. All of them indicate that they have learned a great deal from this experience and have enjoyed the experience of teaching in a nonformal educational setting. To quote one student:

There are many reasons that make this experience special for me. This adventure I'm going through is very special because of the people involved. I mean they really have the need of learning English and I'm being a tool for them in this project. It has meant a lot to me and has been a great challenge. I was a little unsure about the group but in the moment I stood up in front of them everything turns easier and the class got a natural rhythm and I did all of my activities. I don't know if it was my face but I made them laugh and I liked it.

The Laguna Guerrero students have even begun to make jokes in English. When a teacher asked a student the question "Are anteaters dangerous?" the student responded "If you're an ant!" This gives a brief glimpse into the fun they were having as they learned English.

The program continues through social service work. As part of his social service requirement, one of the practice teachers gave summer classes to the nature guide group in Laguna Guerrero. In addition, he went to a neighboring village, Raudales, where he gave classes to a women's group and some of their children. Three other practice teachers have since been doing their social service requirement through this project. Two of them have branched out and are giving English classes in the primary school in Laguna Guerrero.

This connection between rural communities and the UQRoo is very important, as it indicates a way in which positive links can be created and fostered. It has been a very heart-warming and rewarding experience for all concerned, and one that none of the participants will ever forget.