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TEACHER TRAINING IN MEXICO:  
MEETING OUR NEEDS

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During the last ten years, public schools offering English courses have been confronted with ever-increasing numbers of students requiring instruction. Not only has the student population in secondary schools grown, but new schools where English is a part of the compulsory programme of studies are constantly being opened all over the Mexican Republic. This situation has led school authorities to employ teachers who can understand English and make themselves understood in the language only at a very elementary level. Furthermore, these teachers have little, if any idea of English teaching methodology. Most of them are aware of their limitations and lack of preparation, and sooner or later seek assistance in dealing with the problems that arise daily in their classrooms. They usually feel that a teacher training course is the solution. They may or may not be correct, depending upon the type of training course they select.

In general, existing teacher training courses are unsuitable for these teachers, because of factors such as their cost and schedule, their focus and duration, and the level of English which is required of the students. Training courses often require a team of trainers, thus making them less profitable for institutions to provide. The higher cost is usually passed on to the students. Moreover, the courses are often general in design and spend a lot of time dealing with matters not directly related to the needs of practising secondary teachers. Finally, the level of English required for a lot of courses is quite high; not only are lectures and discussions conducted in English, but the techniques and activities provided also presuppose the teacher's ability to control his classroom English.

After an examination of existing courses, including those offered at their own institution, the authors concluded that there was a need for the creation of an in-service training course which would address itself to the problems of secondary teachers who have had little or no previous training.

#### GENERAL DESIGN

At the present time, the course consists of one hundred hours of instruction and observed practice, spread over a four-month period. No more than thirty students are permitted to enrol in a given course and each course has two full-time trainers. Early afternoon was found to be the most suitable time for secondary school teachers. A minimum "elementary" level of English was set as a pre-requisite; lectures and discussions are conducted in either very simple English or in Spanish. The latter language is also used for clarifying concepts other than those directly related with the English language itself. The aims of the course are

- (a) to improve the teacher's control and understanding of the limited structures and vocabulary included in the three-year syllabus for Educación Media Básica (Secundaria) published by the Consejo Nacional Técnico, S.E.P.;
- (b) to provide him with techniques for efficient practice of those structures; and
- (c) to offer activities which are entertaining and yet feasible for him to organise, given a large class and his own limited flexibility in the language.

#### CONTENT

The first of these aims is perhaps the most essential. The second and the third depend rather heavily on the control of structures and vocabulary. For this reason, the analysis of structures together with intensive practice became the core of the course. Through a thorough study of the patterns covered in the official syllabus, the teachers are taught to plan their lessons in such a way that chances for mistakes and problems are reduced to a minimum. The teachers in training learn to look at a

given structure with the eyes not only of the teacher but of the students as well. They gradually develop an awareness of problems in phonology, lexis, morphology, syntax and spelling and learn to distinguish between a simple "grammatical" mistake and an interference problem. To help teachers analyse the patterns which they must teach, a special form was designed. An example is reproduced on the next page.

Column one of the form deals with the structure itself and the logical sequence of its transforms. In the sample given, for example, the next transform dealt with will be

Are they books? Yes, they are/No, they aren't.

Phonetic representations are given under each transform and simple symbols for stress and intonation are included to help the teacher give natural models.

Column two deals with the concept or usage of each structure. There are usually three numbers in columns two, three and four. In column two, number one attempts to clarify the idea expressed by the structure; number two points out the problems of concept or usage which may arise either because of a similar structure in English or because of first language interference; number three lists the possible solutions to such problems.



Column three deals with the form of the structure. In this column, number one tells the teacher in grammatical symbols what elements the pattern consists of. The number two in this column present possible problems of form, pronunciation, stress or intonation. As before, number three suggests solutions.

The function of the fourth column is to offer situations (contexts) for the presentation of the structure and some suitable aids for practising it. Problems of finding suitable situations often arise and these are pointed out, as well as their possible solutions.

#### LANGUAGE LABORATORY

To consolidate the structures he is studying, the student teacher is required to attend laboratory sessions, which are designed to help him improve his pronunciation, stress



<p>1. Pattern 2. Phonetic script</p> <p>They're pens.    </p>	<p>1. Concept &amp; usage 2. Problems 3. Recommendations</p> <p>1. Identification of two or more objects of the same type.</p> <p>2. The pronoun <i>they</i> is used for things and persons (students may think objects only). Idea of plural.</p> <p>3. Show one object first, then two or three to establish idea of plural. Use both objects and persons. Check questions: "what?" or false statement.</p>	<p>1. Form 2. Problems 3. Recommendations</p> <p>1. P + vb + N</p> <p>2. <b>Form</b>: plurals a) ending: <u>-s</u> or <u>-es</u>, or <u>ves</u> or <u>-oes</u>. b) irregulars: men, oxen etc. c) addition of plural ending. Absence of article. They are <b>o</b>pens</p> <p>3. Group nouns according to endings. Don't mix endings in presentation. Say sentence slowly at first. Repeat at normal speed for choral repetition.</p>	<p>1. Situations &amp; aids 2. Problems 3. Recommendations</p> <p>1. classroom situation realia flash-cards cut-outs blackboard drawings</p> <p>2. Students may think form refers to 2 objects only.</p> <p>3. Be sure to show objects not only in twos.</p>
		<p>2. <b>Pronunciation</b> a) Plurals: /s/, /z/, /ɪz/ etc.</p> <p>3. Repeat individual nouns slowly, etc.</p>	

and intonation. These sessions run parallel with the analysis of structure and practice sessions. The intention is to give the student teacher confidence in his own oral production before he has to stand in front of students and teach them.

#### PRACTICE SESSIONS

The practice sessions are conducted in two ways, namely peer practice and practice with real students. The former is introduced immediately and the latter during the second week of classes.

Peer practice, in the early part of the course, is held after a demonstration by one of the course tutors. During these demonstrations the trainees are exposed to a 'micro-section' of a class and its inherent steps. After the demonstration, the trainees are divided into groups of no more than five to practise in turns the same section they have just seen demonstrated. One of the trainees acts as the teacher, the rest of the group as students. While this is in progress, the trainers circulate from group to group to check whether the practice is accurate, to help and encourage the trainees.

Practice with real students is held once a week. In these sessions, each trainee has to teach a set part of a lesson. The teaching time per trainee increases during the course until trainees teach 30 minutes without interruption. The groups of students are usually secondary school students wanting free, extra English classes. The reality of the situation provides the trainees with the immediate necessity to put into practice what they have been learning.

The weekly practices are immediately followed by a round table discussion. During the round table, each trainee evaluates his own performance. Other trainees then add their observations before the course tutor who has watched the class adds any points which may have been missed. The trainee is given a carbon copy of the tutor's observations, plus a grade. In this way, trainers learn to watch themselves and others critically and to accept criticism from other teachers.

## LESSON PLANNING

About half-way through the course, student teachers are asked to submit lesson plans of their practice sessions. These lesson plans contain detailed explanations of the situation, visual aids and model sentences to be used for presenting a structure. Structural, lexical and phonological problems have to be stated, as well as the solutions which the trainee intends to employ.

Before writing lesson plans, students are also asked to consider the following points:

- (a) the age and sex of the group plus their areas of interest;
- (b) the size of the group and the quantity of material which can be covered in a class of 60 minutes;
- (c) the average ability of the students and the difficulty of the structures being taught;
- (d) the attention span of the students and the possible changes of activity;
- (e) textbook material which can be used for classroom practice or set as homework.

With these points in mind, the trainee is ready to plan the content of his lesson. First, he must think of a situation (or context) in which the pattern he must teach would naturally occur and which transmits the meaning of the pattern clearly. As mentioned earlier, the situation should be one which will interest the students. Next, he must carefully construct his model sentences, paying close attention to sentence length, vocabulary and possible pronunciation problems such as consonant clusters. The following are examples taken from the course material.

To teach the simple past tense a trainee decides that a good situation would be 'Christopher Columbus and the Discovery of America'. This situation seems to clearly demonstrate the use and meaning of the past tense. The student selects, among others, these model sentences:

- a) Christopher Columbus discovered America on October 12th, 1492.
- b) He founded the first city in the New World.

Problems: Sentence a) epitomises meaning but it is too long; the pronunciation of discovered and twelfth are difficult.



The length of sentence b) is acceptable, but oral production will be slowed down because of the consonant cluster in founded the and the pronunciation of first and world. Furthermore, the usefulness of the verb to found is questionable (not to mention the confusion with the past tense of find).

To teach the simple past tense, a trainee chooses the situation: "What Mike did on his holiday".  
One of his model sentences is

Mike skated in Spain.

The problems here are with the consonant clusters ksk and nsp. Although this sentence is very short, these two clusters will take a long time to produce accurately and the students' attention will be drawn to pronunciation problems, distracting them from the structure.

The following is a sample of the format for lesson plans used by trainees on the course.

SAMPLE LESSON PLAN.

DATE:	February 10th., 1978
LEVEL OF CLASS:	Second year of secundaria.
DESCRIPTION OF CLASS:	55 students, the majority 14 years old. A few good, some slow, the rest average. Class of 50 minutes, three times a week.
PREVIOUS CLASS:	Further practice of CAN/CAN'T
OBJECTIVES:	Present affirmative form of the simple past. Students to produce correct, meaningful statements using some time expressions
SITUATION / MODELS:	An evening in the life of Donny and Marie Osmond. 1.LAST SATURDAY, Donny and Marie went to a restaurant. 2.Donny ate fish. 3.Marie ordered chicken. 4.Etc.
VISUAL AIDS:	Blackboard drawings

ANTICIPATED PROBLEMS  
AND SOLUTIONS:

Here the trainee lists:

- a) lexical
- b) phonological
- c) structural

PROCEDURES:

1. about 5 minutes  
Revision of WAS and WERE while presenting new vocabulary (to lay the ground for the new pattern)
2. 20 to 30 minutes  
Presentation and first practice of the simple past. Trainee gives a condensed version of the steps he will follow.
3. about 10 minutes  
Second practice in a classroom situation, using the same verbs.  
Personalisation (true personal examples). e.g. Yesterday my mother and father went to a restaurant.
4. about 5 minutes  
writing practice

FOR NEXT LESSON:

Further practice of the same pattern in a different situation.

HOMEWORK:

From the textbook if the students are ready for it.

VISUAL AIDS

Training in the production and use of visual aids is an important part of this course. In addition to making classes more interesting and enjoyable, good visual aids help students to associate language items with people and events in the aids, rather than learning them as abstractions.

Teachers in the public secondary system in Mexico generally have very few visual aids at their disposal. It is therefore necessary to give suggestions and demonstrations regarding their design, construction and handling. Throughout the course, trainees are asked to produce their own aids for use in practice sessions. In this way, they build up a bank of visual material for use in their own classroom. Care is taken to ensure that aids are multi-purpose whenever possible so that the benefit obtained from the expenditure of money, time and effort is maximised.

The other obvious solution to the shortage of visual material in schools is the use of the blackboard. Most trainees are afraid at first of drawing on the blackboard. The realisation that they do not have to be artists, that a clumsy drawing can amuse as well as instruct students can bring trainees to see the distinct advantages and many go



beyond a simple rudimentary skill.

#### LARGE CLASSES AND GROUP WORK

In our secondary schools, classes of fifty or sixty students are common. In a class of this size, if the teacher never utters a word, and the class begins and ends exactly on time, the total production time for each individual student will be one minute. Trainees are therefore taught four ways of handling oral practice in large groups. The first is choral work, which should be used in moderation as it has the disadvantages of being noisy and unnatural, causing distortion in stress and intonation. In addition, students can repeat mistakes unheeded by the teacher.

The second is pair work, in which the students practise making statements or, perhaps more commonly, asking and answering questions. Unfortunately, in many classrooms the chairs are fixed to the floor and students cannot move freely to form small groups for pair work or for the third activity, which is group work. In using group work, trainees are shown how to organise group work with leaders, who, if properly trained, can be of great help to the teacher. Finally, trainees are taught to design practice activities which can be performed by leaderless groups, and quickly checked later by the teacher.

Obviously, these activities create the need for all kinds of visual materials, but trainees often find they can teach their students to produce some of the aids for group work themselves. Trainees are also shown how to use the tape recorder for individual practice and group work. Little emphasis is placed on this as such expensive aids are rarely available to the trainees in their own classrooms.

#### FURTHER PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

Communication has become one of the principal aims in language teaching. It cannot be achieved merely by the presentation and controlled practice of language items. Teachers must therefore engage in further practice activities, that is, the combination of newly presented and practised items with better known structures in new contexts and with different vocabulary. Ideally, communication takes place without external props but it is unrealistic to expect students to take part in "free communication". Teachers are

therefore encouraged to use visual aids, everyday situational topics, and specific formats for eliciting longer sentences or multiple responses. Because of the teachers' limitations in English, the activities which comprise further practice have been carefully selected; in general, they are ones in which most language items can be anticipated. They include dialogues, oral and written composition, games and multi-phase drills.

#### EVALUATION AND HANDLING OF TEXTBOOKS

Along with the new syllabus from the S.E.P. have come a number of textbooks approved by the Consejo Nacional Técnico. These two developments have removed the burden of selecting and grading structures and vocabulary from administrators and co-ordinators who were frequently unqualified to make sound judgements in this area. In addition, it is no longer necessary to train student teachers to evaluate textbooks on the basis of the selection and grading of structures. Instead, trainees are helped to evaluate the textbooks approved by the S.E.P. on the following bases:

- (a) Interest: does the content appeal to a wide range of students' interests? Is the interest maintained throughout the book?
- (b) Presentation: is the book clearly organised and laid out? Are the instructions clear? Are the visuals attractive? Are the dialogues and texts realistic and entertaining? Are there vocabulary and structure lists?
- (c) Exercises: is there a variety to develop the four language skills? Is the challenge appropriate? Can some be set for homework? Are the instructions clear?
- (d) Extra material: is the book accompanied by readers, wall-charts, workbooks, tapes, a teachers' book?

Since student teachers in the course are taught to use a basically structural-situational approach, they are given practice in adapting textbook material for suggested activities. Trainees are encouraged to use textbook material as often as possible. A suitable textbook can be of enormous help to a busy teacher.

## EVALUATION AND TESTING

Evaluation is emphasised in this course from the very beginning. Trainees are helped not only to evaluate their students' progress with conventional tests, but to evaluate every step of the way from the planning of their lesson, to the students' daily production, to when the students sit for a final examination. Trainees are expected to be flexible and this depends on the minute-to-minute evaluation of the students' performance. In order to make judgements about challenge, for example, they must constantly be making judgements about the students' ability to understand and to produce reasonably accurate utterances. They learn not to go ahead with the next planned activity if the students are not producing well. They have to be ready to retrace their steps, to re-present if necessary. They are also asked to evaluate students' progress from one class to the next.

Consideration of testing is confined to achievement tests. Again, trainees are confronted with their limited knowledge of the language. Since, however, teachers are often expected to produce their own tests, they are given as much help as possible.

Attention is confined to two types of test item: multiple choice items and fill-in (completion) items. The former have the advantage of containing distractors which are predictable structural items. Such tests can be answered rapidly and thus contain a large number of items. Scoring is also rapid, a great advantage for a teacher with eight groups, each with fifty students. The disadvantage of this kind of test is that it requires considerable skill on the part of the teacher in its preparation.

The spaces in a completion test are also structural items. However, it is difficult to devise a test in such a way that only one answer is possible for each item. Where there are several possible answers for each item, the marking of the test becomes a much more difficult task for the teacher.

The characteristics of a good test (validity and reliability) are discussed in this course. Trainees study sample tests and then produce parallel items.



## SUPPORTING SUBJECTS

In addition to the elements which have been outlined above, the course contains short units on the following topics: language acquisition theory, structural grammar and phonetic transcription. As these subjects are dealt with at length in general teacher training courses, and as their direct relevance to the secondary teacher is questionable, it is felt advisable to provide only an introduction in this course.

## CONCLUSION

The authors are well aware that a course such as this, with limited objectives and deliberate omissions, is susceptible to the criticisms of rigidity, oversimplification and misrepresentation. The authors do not wish to imply that the graduates of such a course are fully qualified English teachers. It was felt, however, that an attempt to deal with the existing situation should be made, and objectives were set on the basis of how much these practising teachers could reasonably be expected to achieve. Their major shortcomings were held to be the inability to understand, pronounce and control the structures they were teaching, their lack of techniques for organising and monitoring practice in large groups and their limited range of classroom activities.

Graduates of the course report that their classes have improved in these areas, and that as a result, they were able to cover the material in the syllabus more rapidly. The students seemed to be more interested and their performance on standard school exams had improved. The trainees themselves are surprisingly keen to continue their English studies and to enroll in a higher level, general teachers course, which they feel may ultimately enable them to teach at a higher level. This latter ambition strikes an ominous note, implying as it does that only inexperienced teachers with a low level of English are willing to put up with the conditions in secondary schools. This, in turn, implies that courses such as described above will be needed for some time to come.

The course is now being offered for the fourth time. Each semester has brought changes in design. It is to be hoped that future basic in-service training courses will become increasingly more sensitive to the needs of the teachers they serve, until such a time when such courses are no longer necessary.