

Is English Teaching a Profession? Three Mexican Case Studies

PETER HUBBARD, UNIVERSITY OF GUADALAJARA¹

The following article describes three teaching institutions and the attitude they adopt towards teachers of English. If the case situations in this article bear any resemblance to actual institutions that readers are familiar with, we can surmise that they are not arbitrary figments of the author's imagination. However, if the reader detects differences mixed up with these resemblances, then this may be taken, if wished, as proof that the cases described are merely hypothetical examples adduced for discussion purposes only. In either case, the intention of this article is to criticize--but criticize fairly--certain situations and practices affecting the language teaching profession. And, as is the case with any academic publication, the article itself remains open to criticism and comment.

Case Study 1: A Private Language Teaching Institute

In this institution, higher academics are well-qualified professionals, but are not allowed to apply their professional knowledge and judgement to the teaching taking place under their supervision. Mid-level academic supervisors enforce the policy that teaching must rigidly follow prescribed procedures, with institutional materials. There is no valid and reliable evaluation to show that this approach to teaching English is in fact successful. Evaluation is carried out only in terms of financial success, and the school can be shown to be financially successful. However, it can be demonstrated that approximately one-third of the students drop out before completing the first three courses (about 90 hours of instruction); and the attrition rate above this level is much sharper. Nevertheless, upper management prefer to maintain the policy of leaving the academic curriculum intact, but investing in massive advertising to make up for the loss in student numbers. They are not so much concerned with student learning as with operational efficiency.

Teachers are recruited from any sources available. Qualifications are not regarded as important or even desirable. The institution actually prefers teachers without background experience or training that might interfere with the institutional method. (Close parallels could be drawn between this

¹ The author can be reached at Fax: (913) 647-7258/(913) 854-1594. e-mail: peter@fuentes.csh.udg.mx.

attitude and that of a previous era of behaviorist language teaching towards “bad habits” caused by mother tongue interference. This institution is obviously influenced by behaviorism. The idea that a new trainee should be a *tabula rasa* is an example of classic empiricism.) Much more weight is placed on prospective teachers’ levels of English, especially their pronunciation., Mexicans with a good level of English are recruited, but native speakers are received with open arms.

Once accepted, new teachers are required to undergo a 30-hour training course that initiates them into “the method”. Thereafter, they are closely supervised by mid-level academics (themselves, the majority ex-teachers) to make sure that the institutional materials and methods are strictly adhered to. Teachers’ performance is evaluated by these supervisors and the evaluations affect their salaries. However, supervisors are encouraged by management to keep their ratings of teacher performance low so as to avoid the additional burden of bonus payments.

Under these stressful conditions of employment, it is not surprising that teacher turn-over is high. It can be shown that approximately half the teachers who work for the institution have done so for one year or less. However, once again, this does not appear to worry upper management, who attach little importance to seniority or experience. Teaching is regarded as skilled labor, and skilled laborers can easily be replaced.

Case Study 2: A Private University

This institution places a high value on postgraduate qualifications. In fact, because of commitments made to foreign institutions, they are under an obligation to ensure that, within a limited span of time, all staff teaching at undergraduate level have master’s degrees and one quarter doctorates. However, within the conditions that prevail and curricular pressure, it is doubtful to what extent these qualified teachers are able to make use of their specialized training in the workplace.

In this institution, the directors are managers at heart and highly conscious of what they are paying for each hour of staff time. This is dedicated primarily to teaching, There is little encouragement within the highly vertical structure to consult at all levels and less time to put such consultations to good effect. The upper management is extremely jealous of the institution’s reputation and wish for nothing less than total commitment from their

teachers. Holding more than one job is made practically impossible by the high number of hours that teachers have to put in on campus.

Staff have to put in a fixed number of hours in staff training, The management seems to be unconcerned about the quality or relevance of this, provided that the quantity is right.

It is significant that, despite this strong effort to secure institutional loyalty, backed up by high salaries, a considerable number of English teachers have decided to leave after one or two years working there. Reasons cited for leaving are mostly the heavy demands on staff time, lack of professional autonomy, low intellectual challenge and the continual awareness that their students (or their parents) are paying clients and must be satisfied at all costs.

Case Study 3: A Public University

Fifteen years ago, the teaching of English was condemned by some extremists in this institution as a practice that betrayed the nation to the “enemy of the North”. A student leader (who subsequently became Rector) successfully campaigned to have the *Licenciatura* in English Literature closed down for ideological reasons. English in the high-school curriculum and in other programs was accorded minimum priority. It is not surprising that, when the university belatedly recognized that English was essential for practically all successful education at *Licenciatura* level, English teaching approaches were found to be wanting and 30 years out of date. The rector, who was the former student leader, took great pains to learn English himself and also began learning French.

Under the administration of the above-mentioned Rector, experts were brought in to set up basic teacher training programs and later establish a *Licenciatura in Teaching English as a Foreign Language*. The *Licenciatura* program was supported by a cooperation agreement with a foreign university. It went into effect and produced graduates. Some of these worked in their own *alma mater*, but many entered the services of private universities, started their own schools or went on to postgraduate studies.

Despite the expenditure of money and time on this teacher education program, there was institutional resistance to the idea that teaching foreign languages merited the status of professional studies. Even now when the *licenciatura* graduates have established for themselves a reputation for pro-

professionalism at a national level, there are “experts” in the university who maintain that teaching languages is a “technical level” occupation. It is even possible that the above-mentioned licenciatura will be closed down on the grounds that it is not producing a large enough number of graduates and that starting salaries of those who do graduate will not be high enough to merit professional status.

Strong support for this idea has come from the fact that another branch of the university set up its own language teaching operations as a commercial enterprise. Recruiting “teachers” from the university’s student body and from foreign students who visit to study Spanish, it has run a successful commercial operation at low cost with non-professional teachers, using the university as a tax shield. If this operation can be “successful”, why do we need professionals? At least that is the way the argument seems to run. (Students in the program nevertheless complain that their native-speaking teachers speak their own language beautifully, but cannot explain it when asked to do so.) So the university in question is both producing professional teachers and operating a policy that denies the need for professional training.

Another factor that works against the idea that teachers need professional training is the long-standing tradition in this university that holders of a degree in a subject are automatically *ipso facto* qualified to teach that subject. Since there is a shortage of jobs for graduates of any professional course, a certain proportion opt to enter into teaching in the faculty they have just graduated from. They therefore begin to teach professionals studies without the least bit of experience. At the same time, the idea is reinforced that higher education is merely a process of absorbing second-hand knowledge. If this idea is to be applied to language teaching, the only requirement for teaching a language is knowing the language.

What Can Be Learned from These Case Studies?

These studies clearly illustrate the predicaments of the English teaching profession in Mexico. Although students generally treat their teachers with great respect, teachers’ employers seem to regard them as relatively low-level workers, who can easily be replaced and are therefore of no consequence. Language teachers have an especially hard task in convincing society that they are professional. Language teaching institutions seem to regard ability to speak the language as the most important qualification available. If the prospective teachers have a native-speaker-like accent, this will

almost certainly guarantee them a job. It is a fact that the majority of language teachers in this country do not possess a Licenciatura. However, even those who do are facing a difficult task in establishing their professional status.

Teaching is a profession only in theory. It is much more like a vocation, such as the priesthood. People certainly do not become teachers through financial ambition. In some cases, people drift into teaching by default: they do not find anything else they want to do. Teaching seems to satisfy their simple necessities. In other situations, teaching is an option on the road to social respectability, even if it does not bring with it financial rewards. However, teaching for most of us is a highly fulfilling occupation that makes great demands on our time and intellect. It is moreover an occupation that gives us the satisfaction of knowing that our work has an impact on the growth of society, if not today then at least in the future.

Teaching differs from other well-established professions in one important respect. Teachers do not enjoy professional autonomy. Whereas most professionals are accorded absolute authority in questions relating to their area, teachers are nearly always supervised by school authorities, government agencies and, even, the parents of the children they are teaching. Teachers, may, in the best circumstances, be allowed autonomy with regard to what happens in their own classes. Nobody may question what they do in the classroom. However, there is always a degree of supervision and on those occasions when a complaint is made it is significant that the school authorities often side with the students or parents, rather than supporting the teacher's position.

What the case studies also show most clearly is the ambivalent attitude towards academic training or teaching qualifications. These qualifications are welcomed as long as they enhance the prestige of the institution in question. However, they are not regarded as particularly necessary for successful teaching to take place. Teachers are not accorded higher status within the institution, if they possess academic qualifications; and they are certainly not paid more. Advancement results from institutional loyalty or personal connections, rather than from demonstrable professional certification.

What Can Be Done to Improve the Situation?

There are a number of measures that could be effective in improving the situation in Mexico, but action would have to be taken in harmony by

all English teaching professionals. A concerted effort is required. Here are a number of suggestions:

- * Teachers should make every effort to become more highly trained academically and keep up to date with their profession. To this end, they should be active members of professional associations, such as MEXTESOL. They should also read as much as possible of the academic and professional publications available. They should adopt a critical attitude to all innovations and published materials.
- * We need a concerted information campaign to convince employers, students and parents that being a native-speaker of a language is not enough: teachers need professional training. The more this message can come across the radio, into newspapers or television transmission, the better. English teaching institutions should include in their advertising material a list of their teaching staff with their qualifications.
- * Those teachers who do not have a professional degree in teaching English or a subject related to this, should seriously consider enrolling in a degree course. A number of “open” licenciaturas are either in the planning or the implementation stage.
- * As professionals, we need a fully accredited Mexican professional association. This will need careful consideration, since many of the professional associations in existence are merely political springboards for the ambitions of a few colleagues. As a first move, efforts are already being made to bring graduates of English teaching licenciatura programs together to form some kind of loosely structured association at a national level.

If readers of this article wish to respond to the ideas presented here, correspondence or further articles in this journal would be most welcome.