Student versus Teacher Goals for English Language Instruction in a Mexican University[1]

By Irasema Mora Pablo, Universidad de Guanajuato, imppop@yahoo.com
Brad L. Teague, Vanderbilt University, brad.l.teague@vanderbilt.edu

Introduction

It is common for Mexican universities to require students to take a certain number of English courses before they are awarded a degree. Although many students take these classes, they come with diverse histories, experiences, interests, and needs that influence their specific goals for studying the language. These goals can range from having no desire whatsoever to learn English to wanting to use the language for future foreign travel, jobs, and/or educational opportunities, to cite only a few reasons. Importantly, students' goals regarding the L2 are likely to affect their engagement in course activities and thus their ultimate learning outcomes. In this paper we argue that contextualizing lessons within students' personal, professional, and academic lives will better allow them to use the English language for real-life purposes.

We conducted a pilot study in order to begin to compare and contrast students' and teachers' ideas regarding reasons for studying English as a foreign language in a Mexican university. Specifically, we were interested in identifying the students' own goals for learning the language and in relating them to the kinds of goals held by their teachers. Our guiding research questions were as follows: (1) What are students' goals for studying English? (2) What are teachers' goals for the students? (3) What is the relationship between course content and students' goals for studying English? Given that second language instruction is thought to be most meaningful and empowering when linked directly to students' everyday lives and desires (Auerbach, 2000; Morgan, 1998; Norton, 2000; Pennycook, 2001), we feel that this study has important implications for curriculum design and for the professional practice of teachers of English in Mexico.

Theoretical Framework

Given our interest in promoting instruction that centers on students' own lives and experiences, we have framed this study within a participatory approach to second language learning (Auerbach, 1995; 2000; Frye, 1999; Morgan, 1998; Orem, 2005; Rivera, 1999). According to Auerbach (2000, p. 146), participatory education, which has its roots in Freirean ideas about literacy (see Freire 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987), "aims to empower learners by putting their experiences and knowledge at the center of the pedagogical process. The teacher's task is to

[1] This is a refereed article.

draw out this knowledge and extend it with the learners." Simply stated, the goal of participatory education is to connect the world of the classroom, in this case the language classroom, to the outside world (Pennycook, 2001, pp. 102-3), specifically to the "lived experiences" of the learners. Importantly, students in these programs often choose topics that they would like to discuss and critically analyze with their classmates. In the case of immigrants to the United States, these topics may include immigration issues, discriminatory practices, gender roles, and language barriers, to give some examples. Furthermore, in the U.S. context, these discussions typically integrate L2 practice and may lead to empowerment through collective social action (e.g., writing letters to government officials).

While participatory approaches were originally conceived with regard to disadvantaged populations (e.g., poor groups in Latin America, see Freire, 1970), we believe that many of the premises of this theoretical construct can be applied to learners in general. Thus, in this study we draw on and extend the work of the researchers cited above to examine how second language classrooms in a Mexican university are or are not structured around students' own goals (personal, professional, and academic) for studying English as a foreign language. In particular, we are interested in the notion that language instruction can be organized around topics and experiences that are important and relevant to the students themselves (Morgan, 1998).

Methodology

Participants

With the aim of identifying the goals of Mexican students of English at several different stages in the L2 learning process, we collected data in three separate classrooms in a public university located in central Mexico: beginner (level 1), intermediate (level 3), and advanced (level 6). At the time the pilot study was conducted there were 15 students in the beginner class, 20 in the intermediate, and 18 in the advanced. Ages ranged from 18 to 60, given that courses at this particular university are open to university students, to high school students, and to other members of the local community. University students are asked to complete 6 levels in the language department before they can be awarded a bachelor's degree. High school students usually attend English classes due to encouragement from their parents or because they are interested in studying abroad in the future. Members of the general public typically study the language in hopes of securing a better job or traveling abroad.[2]

Each of the three courses under consideration was taught by a different teacher, all of whom are Mexican. The teacher of the beginner class, Andrew,

[2] For the purposes of this study all three groups of students are considered "university students of English."

was pursuing his BA studies in TESOL and had 3 years of English-language teaching experience at the time of the study. The teacher of intermediate English, Carolina, completed a BA degree in TESOL and had 5 years of teaching experience. Charly, the teacher of the advanced course, earned a BA in Engineering and had 18 years of experience teaching EFL.

Data Collection and Analysis

As mentioned above, our main purpose in conducting this study was to begin to understand the similarities and differences between the goals of students and those of their teachers. According to researchers (e.g., Auerbach, 2000; Morgan, 1998; Norton, 2000; Pennycook, 2001), language instruction seems to be most meaningful and empowering when directly linked to learners' own goals, interests, and desires. With this aim in mind, we decided to collect data in two ways. First, we distributed a brief questionnaire to the students at each level and to their teacher. We asked the students questions such as 1) Why did you decide to study English, and 2) How do your goals and expectations relate to what you are currently learning? We asked the teachers to comment on issues such as 1) How do you think your students will use English in their own lives, and 2) Who should decide what and how students learn in your English classes? Given the limited proficiency of some of the students, as well as their common native language, all questionnaires were read and answered in Spanish. A complete list of the questions for both students and teachers can be found in Appendix A.

In addition to collecting data through questionnaires we also observed each of the classes on three occasions throughout the fall 2006 semester. Our reason for observing was to document whether teachers elicited students' goals, interests, experiences, and backgrounds in class and, if so, how they utilized this information while teaching them English. Specifically, we were interested in identifying instances when the teachers related instructional topics to students' actual lived experiences (Orem, 2005). Of course, it was also possible that the teachers would make *assumptions* regarding students' goals or that they would not take them into account at all. Thus, observational data were analyzed together with what teachers reported on the questionnaires.

We analyzed the data in three phases. First, we compiled the answers to each question for both students and teachers, noting the level (beginner, intermediate, advanced) for each response. Second, following the recommendations of Strauss and Corbin (1998), we compared and contrasted all the responses in order to determine the major themes and patterns in the data. Third, we related the participants' answers to our field notes from the classroom observations as a means of triangulating the questionnaire data. The results of this analysis are presented in the next section.

Results and Discussion

Regarding students' reasons for studying English, most of the learners provided at least one of the following responses: studying abroad, securing a good job, traveling to an English-speaking country, and/or taking the course because it is a university requirement (the latter being reported only by degree-seeking students). These responses were common across all three classes, suggesting that students come with a limited number of different goals for learning the language. When asked what role they thought English would play in their future lives, almost all of the students, regardless of class level, replied that knowing English would allow them access to better job opportunities. Consistent with the finding presented above, a few others noted that English was important to them for foreign travel and study. Thus, it can be asserted that, in general, the students perceived a real need (beyond the university requirement) for learning English in these classes.

Interestingly, the teachers tended to make the assumption that the learners were there primarily as a result of the university requirement. For instance, the intermediate-level teacher, Carolina, commented that the students take English "*porque es un requisito en la mayoría de las facultades. Los menos están aquí porque les gusta o porque los mandan sus papás.*" Nevertheless, the teachers pointed out (later) that the learners would probably need to use the language in their future academic and professional lives. We argue that this belief opens up the possibility of linking L2 instruction to real-life uses of English. Nevertheless, when asked what they expected students to learn in their courses, all three teachers offered responses dealing with decontextualized grammar, such as "*los verbos básicos*," "*verbos en presente, pasado y futuro*," and "reported speech *y* verb patterns" (original in English).

These ideas correspond with what we observed in the classrooms throughout the semester, particularly the finding that the teachers tended to focus on the formal aspects of the language as opposed to actual use/application in authentic contexts. In particular, instruction centered on sequenced grammar points and vocabulary items that were often contextualized only within the scope of the textbook (e.g., verb tenses). Students were not usually asked to go beyond these exercises to use the language they learned as part of meaning-based activities such as role-plays, oral presentations, written letters, or essays. Importantly, instruction seemed to be designed around curricular constraints, such as the teachers' perceived need to cover a certain number of units in the textbook in preparation for exams. This finding probably indicates that English teachers at this university have relatively limited freedom to change the direction of their classes due to departmental constraints. Indeed, Andrew (beginner-level teacher) was quick to point out that "*aquí el libro tiene mucho peso.*"

In addition to the students' overall goals for studying English, we were also interested in the relationship between these goals and what was going on in their respective courses at the time of data collection. Our main finding on this issue

was that, although many of the learners seemed generally satisfied with their English courses, they admitted that their teachers rarely demonstrated an interest in their personal reasons for studying the language. For example, one student (beginner level) responded that he wished the teacher would *"tratar de conocernos más, preguntándonos qué queremos y esas cosas, porque luego se pone a hablar pero nadie le entiende y él no hace nada para que le entendamos."* Indeed, when asked whether the teacher ever attempted to find out about their particular learning goals, all of the students replied either (1) not at all or (2) only to find out if they were taking the course because they had to or because they actually liked the language. Another interesting finding was that, even though the students considered that they were learning *something*, some of them were uncertain as to whether they would be successful when they actually had to use English. To give an example, one student (advanced level) responded *"yo siento que estoy aprendiendo, ipero igual y cuando tome el TOEFL no sé nada!*[3] These comments provide further evidence for the finding that language learning in these courses is frequently divorced from contexts in which it is really needed (outside of the actual language courses themselves). This lack of contextualization based on student goals and needs appears to be causing at least some of the learners to feel insecure about their developing abilities.

The teachers likewise felt that they themselves were the ones who should make the decisions regarding the content and teaching methodologies in their classrooms. They seemed to agree that the students did not know what they wanted and needed to learn and that it was the responsibility of the teacher to "guide" them to success. The intermediate-level teacher, Carolina, stated the following: *"cuando se les pregunta a los alumnos muchos de ellos no saben ni qué quieren y eso hace más complicado el poder ayudarlos."* The teacher of the advanced course, Charly, similarly commented that *"definitivamente si le das el poder al alumno no va a saber qué hacer, porque así somos."* These beliefs help to explain why, during the observation sessions throughout the semester, we never witnessed any of the teachers ask their students what they wanted to learn or how they preferred to learn it. Instead, the teachers consistently followed the curriculum set by the course textbook, which, as mentioned above, focuses on the different aspects of grammar. Significantly, these findings parallel those of other studies that have documented the ways in which content (i.e. topics, competencies) and teaching methods are imposed on adult learners of English without consideration of their goals and needs (see Auerbach (1995) and Orem (2005) for further discussion and some examples).

[3] Of course, it may also be the case that students are unfamiliar with items on standardized tests such as the TOEFL. We argue that teachers who have students planning to take these exams need to incorporate practice that makes them aware of what to expect and how to be successful.

Implications and Recommendations

The results described above illustrate how the participating EFL teachers at this particular university focused on the acquisition of decontextualized skills without much consideration for how the language may actually be used in students' personal, professional, and academic lives. On the one hand, the teachers seemed to agree that they themselves were ultimately responsible for determining their students' learning needs, which would explain why they rarely asked the students about their goals, interests, and experiences. Specifically, teachers perceived that the students did not know what they wanted and needed, even though some of the students expressed a desire to talk more with their teachers about the direction of the class. On the other hand, the teachers felt that they needed to cover a certain amount of the textbook material in a limited amount of time, especially since this material would be included on departmental exams. In our opinion, these findings taken together, account for the highly form-based focus of the three classes that we studied. Importantly, our own experiences teaching and studying in a number of Mexican universities (both public and private) indicate that such curricular constraints are quite widespread and need to be considered more carefully.

Following suggestions provided by researchers who adopt participatory approaches to education (e.g., Auerbach, 2000; Morgan, 1998; Orem, 2005), we recommend that second language programs in Mexico begin to restructure curricula to allow for more flexibility and student decision-making. This does not mean, of course, that students should control all aspects of the courses or that teachers are not needed; rather, we believe that the content of the classes should draw more explicitly on students' personal reasons for studying the language. As our results show, there was a great deal of overlap in students' goals, which means that teachers could identify a set of shared class goals on which to design and implement instruction. For example, for students thinking about studying abroad and/or completing graduate degrees in English-speaking countries, teachers of advanced levels could design lessons focusing on academic writing practices, such as a comparison/contrast of the expectations concerning "effective" writing in the United States and Mexico. For students in more beginner levels who plan to travel, teachers could expose them to some common expressions and idioms that they could use on their trips. For students who want to learn English in order to obtain better jobs, teachers could investigate some of the English competencies that they will really be expected to have and then incorporate this language into lessons and activities.

The main point here is for instruction to be as closely related to actual contexts of use as possible (Morgan, 1998). We believe that students become more engaged in classes that are explicitly designed with their expressed goals, interests, and needs in mind, and we would likewise anticipate improved learning outcomes and better retention of the material presented in class. Having to learn/memorize grammar structures for an exam is one thing, but acquiring language for meaningful, non-grade-related purposes is another.

Conclusion

The purpose of this pilot study was to begin to delve into the issue of student versus teacher goals for English language instruction in Mexican universities. Our findings indicate that teachers and students may have different conceptions of what should happen in the classroom. Specifically, teachers may have misconceptions of students' needs and motivations for learning the L2. Therefore, we suggest that teachers and curriculum coordinators restructure current practices in order to more successfully tailor second language instruction to students' desires, interests, and experiences. Most importantly, teachers need to engage in ongoing dialogues with learners regarding their reasons for wanting to study English. We hope that this study provokes discussion of these issues in English-teaching settings throughout Mexico and that it generates more related research.

References

Auerbach, E. R. (1995). The politics of the ESL classroom: Issues of power in pedagogical choices. In J. Tollesfson (Ed.), *Power and inequality in language education* (pp. 9-33). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Auerbach. E. R. (2000). Creating participatory learning communities: Paradoxes and possibilities. In J. K. Hall & W. G. Eggington (Eds.), *The sociopolitics of English language teaching* (pp. 143-164). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Seabury Press.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world.* South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.

Frye, D. (1999). Participatory education as a critical framework for an immigrant women's ESL class. *TESOL Quarterly, 33,* 501-513.

Morgan, B. D. (1998). *The ESL classroom: Teaching, critical practice, and community development.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity, and educational change.* Harlow, UK: Longman/Pearson Education.

Orem, R. A. (2005). *Teaching adult English language learners.* Malabar, FL: Krieger.

Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics: A critical introduction.* London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Rivera, K. (1999). Popular research and social transformation: A community-based approach to critical pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly, 33,* 485-500.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Appendix A: Student and Teacher Questionnaires

Alumnos

- *¿Por qué decidiste estudiar inglés?*
- *¿Qué papel juega (o jugará) el idioma inglés en tu vida?*
- *¿Qué esperas aprender en este curso?*
- *¿Cómo crees que el maestro debería contribuir para que se logren tus metas?*
- *¿Alguna vez tu maestro actual intentó indagar sobre tus metas para el curso?*
- *¿Cómo coinciden tus metas y expectativas con lo que estás aprendiendo?*

Maestros

- *¿Cuáles son los motivos por los que tus alumnos estudian el idioma inglés?*
- *¿De qué manera crees que usan (usarán) el idioma inglés en sus vidas?*
- *¿Qué deberían de aprender tus alumnos al final del curso?*
- *¿Qué haces para reconocer las metas de tus alumnos?*
- *¿Quién debería de decidir qué y cómo aprenden los alumnos en sus clases de inglés?*