

Falling into the EFL Job in Mexico¹

By M. Martha Lengeling, Universidad de Guanajuato
lengeling@hotmail.com

I was ten when I had my first English class and since that day I started to love it... One day when I was taking one of my English classes many years ago, I heard one of my teachers say that he had improved his English by teaching. Then I decided to be one. I started giving private classes to a friend in my house, three times a week, two hours a class, with a grammar book, songs and videos and at the same time I was hired in a bilingual elementary school to teach second grade. That's how I became a teacher. (Maruja, teacher-learner journal entry during an in-service training course)

I started by accident. Someone listened to me speaking English and he offered me a job as a teacher. After the first class, I loved what I did and here I am. (Felipe - teacher-learner journal entry during an in-service training course)

The narrative accounts above are from Mexican non-native speakers who excelled in language learning. Language was their entry into the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) profession. Following the suggestions of others, they became teachers. Their experiences seemed somewhat haphazard. In the first case, the person became a teacher after overhearing her English teacher comment on how he had improved his English by becoming an EFL teacher. If he had bettered his language by teaching, so could she. She began teaching in an improvised manner using whatever materials she had at hand, offering private classes at home and simultaneously she gained a more formal job in a school. In the second case, the individual was overheard speaking English; he was offered a class. Instantly he was impassioned with teaching.

Both teachers entered the profession with no prior formal language teaching education. Their expertise was their command of English, which was instrumental for gaining entry into the EFL profession, not their knowledge of teaching skills and techniques. They survived the beginning years of teaching and relied on their instincts and their past language learning experiences. What is obvious is that both of these people enjoyed and excelled in English. It is as if at one moment they never looked back at what else they might be doing.

¹ This is a refereed article.

Methods

In this article, I will be examining life experiences such as the above to reveal how some teachers in Mexico 'fall into' the EFL job. This article describes this phenomenon of falling into the job using data from journal entries. The data forms a narrative of voices: a figurative representation of how they became teachers.

Participants

I will use data that I have gathered from 18 teachers who were in a teacher training course (COTE-Certificate for Overseas Teachers of English) at a university in central Mexico from the academic year of 2002 to 2003. The COTE is a one-year EFL in-service training course offered by the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES), through the British Council in Mexico. The Mexican Ministry of Education officially recognized this course in 2000. The teachers ranged in teaching experience from 1 to 20 years. They taught EFL from the primary level to the university level in public and private institutes. The majority of the teachers were non-native speakers and two native speakers. Many had had out-of-country language or teaching experiences mostly in the United States. All participants from the training course gave their written consent for me to use their voices in my research.

Having described briefly the participants of this study, I now turn to the literature of native and non-native speakerhood. In addition I shall show how native speakerhood (in this case native speaker of English) has influenced teachers' entries into the EFL profession and also look at how training relates to this within the context of Mexico.

Native and Non-Native Teachers

At this point, I would like to discuss the two terms native and non-native. Traditionally individuals are either one or the other based on their birth country. For many years, the two terms have been seen as binary opposites and did not allow for other variations. Common ideological examples in the TESOL profession, according to Holliday (2005) are: 'us' - 'them', 'western' - 'non-western', 'knowledgeable' - 'non-knowledgeable', and 'in' - 'out'. Holliday (*ibid.*) characterizes native speakerism this way:

...as an established belief that 'native speaker' teachers represent a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology. (p. 6)

In the above quote, Freeman makes reference to the common myth of 'if you can speak English, you can teach it' (p. 2) once associated with the EFL profession. As well he mentions the consequences of native speakerhood as entry into the profession and criticizes the 'knowledge as a product view' because it gives preference to native speakers for teaching positions due to their birth in an English speaking country instead of their professional knowledge. According to Freeman (2000), competent non-native speakers are disregarded due to their native birth country and their competence as a teacher is often ignored. Based upon this, language seems owned solely by native speakers and not by non-native speakers.

Certainly, this was the case when I began EFL teaching twenty-seven years ago in Mexico. As a native speaker, I 'fell into' the job with no EFL training. I was given a job because of my native command of the English language. In cases such as mine native English speakers were hired to teach at local language institutes or universities for six to twelve months, and then returned to their native country. Their aims were to learn Spanish while traveling under the auspices of the EFL teaching support system. Similarly if you were a non-native speaker of English but with basic English competency, you could give classes in similar institutional systems. For both native and non-native speakers no questions arose as to credentials, teaching experience, or background. The only qualification was to speak the language.

Having discussed the notion of native speakerhood as entry into the profession, I would now like to address training and how it relates to the native speakerism phenomenon in Mexico.

Training

Williams (1995), an ex-English Language Officer at the British Council in Mexico, also directs attention to the status of untrained EFL teachers in Mexico:

In some ways Mexico is a special case. Although it is not uncommon worldwide for a large number of ELT teachers to be untrained, this situation in Mexico was exceptional. More than in most countries there was a need for mass ELT training. Teacher training for English teachers was almost non-existent before 1990, with the exception of a few excellent courses. (p. 86)

In recent years, the native speakerism phenomenon, as entry into the profession, has declined. More-and-more, an EFL certificate now represents the minimum for entry into the field based upon my experience as a teacher trainer. In the future this minimum will eventually be raised to a BA in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Now I shall clarify the metaphor of falling into the job with the voices of EFL teachers in Mexico.

On Becoming an EFL Teacher in Mexico: Falling into the Job

In 1993 I decided to study English in a formal way. I had problems in my marriage and I wanted to be prepared to support my family and myself if I got a divorce. I did not finish my studies and was living in a town without a university to continue my education...my two children were very young to leave alone for a long time. My two favorite subjects at school were math and English. My choice - English - was to find a good job as a secretary or something, so I started studying English. My tutor told me I had the abilities to be a teacher. I did not believe him much... I received an offer to be a teacher but only on Saturdays to keep an eye on my children. I got a divorce and moved. I never thought that I would enjoy teaching so much and sharing what I know would be so rewarding. (Susana, teacher-learner journal entry during an in-service training course)

In the case above, a non-native speaker motivated by economic need, studied English to acquire a business-world job, yet, she ended up teaching English instead. Entry into the profession hinged on a command of language, not teaching skills. Many individuals have precipitously entered the EFL profession in exactly this manner. I, myself, am an example.

The process of how one becomes an EFL teacher is complex, merits deeper understanding, and varies widely among cultures and individuals. I focus on the Mexican context; how teachers have typically begun EFL careers. A common thread has been a previous exposure to English, usually via an American context. Frequently, future Mexican EFL teachers have lived in the United States for a period of time. Or they have studied several years in the States at primary, middle, or high schools. The following two-part journal entry presents a typical narrative.

I was born here in Mexico. My dad is from Gary, Indiana USA. My mother is Mexican...I went to the States at twelve...for three years...came back to Mexico with my mother...for only 6 months. I went back to the States, finished high school when I was 17 and got married when I was 18...three kids: two girls and a boy...I'm divorced now. (Elena, teacher-learner journal entry during an in-service training course)

The woman returned to Mexico with her children and had to find a job.

I was a hairdresser in the States (Chicago)... and I was very frustrated to find out that hairstyling is not well paid here as it is in the States, so I decided not to work in a beauty salon anymore. When I went to enroll one of my daughters for secondary school, they saw that my daughter was American and the principal asked if

I spoke English. I said yes! He then asked me, if I was interested in working as an English teacher. I told him that I was not a teacher but he asked me for an interview with the English Coordinator, and he hired me. That's exactly how I became or fell in this field. (Elena, teacher-learner journal entry during an in-service training course)

As reported in the above journal entry, at an unplanned pivotal moment, Elena registered her child at school. She was at the right place at the right moment. A teacher was needed and she happened to be there. Due to her command of English, she was offered a position. She began teaching EFL rather than seeking a job as a hairdresser.

The next excerpt describes a native English speaker who fell into the job, and subsequently decided to remain in Mexico. Like the previous example, this individual's command of English prompted a job offer. Eventually, he realized he needed some sort of credential to keep the teaching door open.

I started my profession at the later part of my life at the age of 37...without a clue of what I was going to do, or how long I was going to stay. Destiny answered those questions. Just as I was going to return to the States, I got offered a job teaching...I really enjoyed it. That was when I decided to make that my profession. Consequently that's why I'm here, to get the papers I need to remain teaching. (Manuel, teacher-learner journal entry during an in-service training course)

This is a current trend in Mexico whereby a 'certificate' or 'diploma' is required for professional entry. In Mexico the COTE certificate has become the well-recognized document for such purposes.

The next excerpt - presented in two sections - exemplifies how a casual conversation in English led to a classroom invitation, and eventually resulted in a career decision. Again, language proficiency served as the primary qualification for professional entry.

I had to live in Acapulco...working as a supervisor for a bus company...I remember that Friday very well (1996)...It was a hot day and I was the only Mexican person in the pool...a person from England named Stephen is the reason why I am an English teacher...I had to say I always liked to study English and I continued studying it for many years...Stephen asked me about my English and I answered that...my English was 'dusty'... He asked: Have you taught English before? He said that he needed a teacher for the next following Monday. I said, 'Don't look at me'. He tried to explain to me how easy it was. I gave him a negative answer.

(Gustavo, teacher-learner journal entry during an in-service training course)

Gustavo was convinced to give his first English class.

...I had just two days to try to prepare something...I couldn't sleep that Friday, Saturday and Sunday... My legs were shaking when I went to the classroom...I don't remember how come but after five minutes I was teaching...I looked at my watch. I couldn't believe how the time had gone by so fast...I left the classroom with my best smile. Stephen was waiting for me and he congratulated me... He said that I did it well. That day I reflected about the class and just could conclude that teaching was something I enjoyed extremely. (Gustavo, teacher-learner journal entry during an in-service training course)

Stephen is an experienced professional who served as a motivator and a facilitator for Gustavo, a novice teacher. Negotiation took place; Stephen convinced this young man to give a class. Of keen interest are the displayed emotions. At first, this apprentice teacher felt gratitude and nervousness, but in the end, self-satisfaction and pride.

A strong, positive association with English may serve as a long-term motivator. Enjoyment of foreign language learning prompted the next teacher-learner, Gloria, to continue her studies and make a dramatic career change to the EFL profession. She identified strongly with the language and culture of the United States.

I was 14 years old when I had the opportunity to travel to USA...a special trip...given to me for my 15 years [quince años - fifteenth birthday rite of passage party or gift for Latino women]...so my relatives in California took me to Disneyland, Universal Studios, Great America, San Francisco. At the end, they asked me if I wanted to stay. My answer was totally positive. I was sent to learn English in a high school... a great experience...2 years later I returned to Mexico. My parents did not want me to go back, so I started to study to be a social worker. I finished and I went back to the States because I liked all the opportunities there. I worked but I had to return to Mexico. I started to work as an EFL teacher. Then, I decided to begin preparing myself for what I believe is the activity I enjoy most and this is being an English teacher. (Gloria, teacher-learner journal entry during an in-service training course)

In the above entry, the person was given a trip to the United States instead of the traditional fifteenth birthday celebration for Latino women and stayed on to learn English. This experience proved to be a positive influence on her life and prompted her to return for more American opportunities - to work. Upon

returning to Mexico she made a career move from social work to teaching English.

Frequently, the social-political dynamics between bordering countries can create a lasting impression on Mexicans who live out-of-country, which later sways decisions in the personal and professional arena. Such teachers retain a deeply imbedded lifelong, interest in English (Richards, 1998; Williams and Burden, 1997).

Conclusion

I have provided examples of people in Mexico who have fallen into the EFL job. This represents the primary EFL career entry path. Few teachers begin in the classroom with any formal EFL training. In addition, many had out-of-country experiences in the United States which were influential in their career decisions.

Unfledged entry into the EFL profession carries a psychological burden. Based upon the journal entries and informal conversations during the course and at course end, most of the teachers in this research suffered from low self-confidence. They seemed to have not considered themselves qualified to teach before the course. So it appears inevitable these individuals would eventually seek formal education in EFL. Due to their lack of formal training in this area, they often felt a lack of competence. When taking risks such as this course, they seemed afraid of the challenge and even doubted if they are good enough to be in the course.

Upon completing the course, the majority of the 18 teacher-learners declared they were 'real teachers' in their journal entries and in interviews and they voiced that they felt more secure as individuals and teachers. Because they were looking for something more in their teaching this represents how they view their positions as EFL teachers – more professional.

Within public universities, the push has been toward teacher accountability. Degrees are now essential. At present, the profession seeks individuals with both language competency, and good teaching skills. All the factors above have helped EFL become a more respected profession in Mexico. In retrospect, falling into the job still happens in Mexico, but more and more non-native speakers of English are part of the job force and have training in the area of EFL teaching.

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