A FRAMEWORK TOWARDS EDUCATING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS RIGHT AWAY UNIVERSITIES IN MEXICO



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Annotation

This work evaluates the preparation of English language teachers at Mexican universities. In order to develop a model for training future English language teachers, curricular, operational, and contextual factors are analysed. Extensive professional teaching of English in Mexican universities is necessary given the extensive social, economic and cultural exchanges within North America that require workers to speak English with a certain level of proficiency. The preparation of English language teachers in Mexico has not been adequately researched and there islittle objective data on its status. Therefore, there is a need for systematic empirical information to fully understand the status quo of English teacher training in Mexican universities. A case study of a typical university English teacher training programme provides curricular considerations and information from faculty, students and administrators. As a result, this work proposes a model for English teacher training at the university level and discusses its implications for curriculum development.

Keywords: English language, English language teaching programmes, English language proficiency.

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, Mexico has experienced significant economic growth, and the country hassuccessfully overcome high unemployment rates. English has become a key factor for employment due to the economic interdependence with the United States of America and Canada, the other two North American countries. Near shoring has created new jobs, increased foreign investment, and boosted economic activity.

However, business leaders in Mexico, particularly in the Yucatan, have expressed concern about the lack of competent English-speaking workers (Garza, 2023; UADY, 2018; Zumárraga & Sánchez- Escobedo, 2023). Higher education must be a mechanism to respond to these labour market demands(Egert et al., 2022; Formichella & London, 2013) and the teaching of English in Mexican universitiesis strategic for social and economic development.

This work focuses on the preparation of English language teachers at the university level and proposesa model to enhance the effectiveness of existing programms, considering the Mexican context, resources, needs and culture. To achieve this, we have carried out an in-depth systematic analysis of atypical programme in a Mexican public state university. A review of the curricular objectives, operational requirements and the opinions of both faculty and students was used to develop a three- stage model for effective preparation of English Language Teachers (ELT) in Mexican universities.

Literature

Teaching English is an increasingly important educational activity that requires careful examination from an educational perspective, especially when at the university level. In Mexico, English is taughtextensively in language academies by native speakers without specific teaching training, or through one of the many online language learning programmes. Given that English language is included in thecurriculum at all levels of the Mexican education system, research into the status quo of English teacherpreparation is warranted.

Learning English as a foreign language is an important curricular trait in most public education systems throughout Latin America. In Mexico, English language is taught from kindergarten to preparatory school, yet only eight percent of students admitted to a Mexican university have an intermediate or above level of English language proficiency (Bremner, 2015).

The apparent failure to achieve adequate levels of ELP may be due to poor teaching strategies, a lackof systematic learning assessment, and the absence of an effective pedagogical model in the formal education system. In Mexico, for instance, the most common language teaching practices tend to be lecture-based and include outdated methods that emphasise translation, memorisation, long explanations, and solving textbook exercises (Lara et al., 2015). In this scenario, "teacher training programmes can play a pivotal role in bringing about a change for the better" (Choudury, 2022, p. 29).

Beyond teaching techniques, the failure to meet minimum English proficiency benchmarks at the university level can also be explained by emotional factors such as shyness, insecurity, fear of communication, fear of being ridiculed, and lack of motivation. These common psychological barriersare barely addressed in most current pedagogical models. "Learning a new language is a journey withhighs and lows and it is normal to feel fear and uncertainty about the next step" (Iturria-Cedillo, 2023,p. 10).

Attention to the English language learning environment is also important. For example, Krashen (1982) asserts that low levels of anxiety in learning English as a foreign language foster students' feelings of efficacy and increase their motivation for language acquisition. Research has confirmed that better outcomes are achieved when students feel welcome and included (Ovink et al., 2024).

However, existing pedagogical models rarely consider the affective characteristics of students, the social context, or the nature of the specific language learning environment. Both the social, contextualand individual variables modulate English language learning (Lara et al., 2015; Iturria-Cedillo, 2023).

To better understand the university programme under scrutiny, an important consideration should be made to help readers unfamiliar with the Mexican higher education system. University degrees in Mexico are more specific and not as generic as they are in the United States (B.S., B.A., etc.). The tacitprinciple of the Mexican higher education system is that universities prepare students for specific jobs.This model of curriculum design is referred herewith as the *goodness-of-fit* model.

We argue that programmes designed according to this model need to be reconsidered, as the labour market regularly requires generic competencies and the so-called *soft skills* such as communication, adaptability, problem solving and time management. Specific professional profiles rarely bridge the inevitable gap between a graduate's supposed specific competencies and the particular requirements of a given job (UADY, 2018). This common situation usually requires workers to adapt, learn or transfer generic skills to meet new job demands not previously envisaged in the curriculum.

In other words, the specificity of Mexican university degrees limits the transversal adaptation to different jobs. For example, a graduate in educational psychology may not be employed in a clinical setting, even though the two programmes share a significant amount of curricular content. Similarly, a graduate with a bachelor's degree in marine biology will not be employable in many other jobs in the growing environmental conservation industry because of the specificity of the degree.

In this scenario, several Mexican universities offer a university degree called *Licenciatura en Enseñanza del Idioma Inglés,* loosely translated as *Bachelor in English Language Teaching (BELT)*. Graduates are expected to teach English at different levels and in different contexts. However, the specificity of the degree may hinder the graduate's chances to work in other related fields such as translation, interpretation or even training tourism or industrial staff.

As in many countries, typical university programmes in Mexico admit young people who are makingthe transition from preparatory school to university and who have little work experience (British Council, 2015). Therefore, training must include supervised practicum to ensure that students have theskills to perform successfully in real-life scenarios (British Council, 2018).

Another prominent feature of Mexican university degrees is little flexibility in curriculum design. Thisimplies that students who already speak English cannot progress at a faster rate than their peers who are still learning English. It is also difficult to transfer credits from other subjects,

either because they were taught in English language or because they relate to teaching and instruction. As a result, most university programmes require compulsory attendance at university facilities, which limits extracurricular and complementary activities and usually wastes the opportunity to accelerate students who are already proficient in English or those who can demonstrate practical experience in teaching (UADY, 2021).

The dilemma of whether to train generalist or specialist teachers is further complicated by the fact thatMexican university programmes are often caught between a rock and a hard place. They are expectedto train English language teachers at the university level through a single and inflexible programme, whereas graduates are faced with a wide variety of potential teaching positions, including but not limited to:

- Primary and secondary schools
- Post-secondary institutions
- Language academies
- Companies requiring English for specific purposes
- Test preparation (TOEFL, Cambridge and other similar test certifications)
- Training workers in touristic and industrial settings

University programmes are systematically evaluated by national accreditation bodies according to national policies. National accreditation is the result of a comprehensive 360° evaluation that considersmany essential features and outcomes of the programme, such as test scores, culture of collaboration,administrative practices, and faculty performance, and graduate certification, among others (Comité para la Evaluación de Programas de Pedagogía y Educación, 2024).

Finally, regarding the graduate certification, there is a nationally standardised test that BELT programmes use to certify their graduates, called EGAL (*Examen General para la Acreditación de laLicenciatura en Enseñanza del Inglés*), which consists of two parts. In the first (EIN), students answera multiple-choice theoretical test in three areas: origins and concepts of English, language, learning and teaching, and teacher practice (sic). The second (EXOAL) involves analysing and solving a practical case and defending it orally before a panel of three lecturers who grade the performance in astandardised way. Graduates are expected to be fully bilingual and to demonstrate competence in reading, writing, speaking, and listening in the English language, as well as the ability to teach the language to different groups of students (Centro Nacional de Evaluación para la Educación Superior, 2024).

Methodology

To develop an appropriate model to train English language teachers, we carried out a case study in a typical Mexican state university. We examined admission criteria, and curriculum design and development. Surveys and in-depth interviews were conducted with faculty, students andadministrators. Transcripts of the information obtained were systematically analysed to identify guidelines, policies and operational issues.

Bachelor in English Language Teaching (BELT)

In Mexico, a Bachelor's in English Language Teaching (BELT) is usually a four-year university programme. To date, there are 171 BELTs in the country, offered in private colleges (46%), in teacher preparation colleges called *Escuelas normales* (44%) and in public state universities (10%) (UADY, 2021). Admission criteria vary widely between systems and schools. Some universities require a minimum level of ELP or none at all. Similarly, some programmes claim to prepare students for specific job positions such as English for academic purposes, or to teach at different levels of education(primary or secondary), or to teach in specific fields such as health, sports, marketing or tourism.

The BELT under study is a four-year programme established in 2005 in the largest public state university in the South of Mexico. It has produced more than 215 graduates and currently it has 136 students enrolled. The programme is divided into three pedagogical areas: English Language Teaching, Curriculum and Educational Administration, and Humanities and

Methodology. As there is no ELP admission criterion, students are placed by cohort rather than by language level. As a result, groups combine students of different levels of ability and most classes are taught in Spanish for the first two years. This programme uses the EIN part of the EGAL for graduation purposes, although students canchoose to write a thesis instead (UADY, 2016).

Participants

Fifty currently enrolled students (37%) volunteered to participate in the study without any type of compensation. They completed an online survey and 26 of them agreed to take part in in-depth interviews. In addition, five faculty members (four senior lecturers and one recently recruited) were surveyed and three of them were interviewed. The Associate Dean and the Programme Coordinator were surveyed on a voluntary basis.

Results

Students

From a total of 136 students currently enrolled in the BELT under analysis, fifty (37%) volunteered toparticipate without any type of compensation, making a total of 37 (74%) women and 13 (26%) men.Table 1 depicts participants by level and sex.

Level	Men	Women	Total (%)	Mean Age
Freshmen	6	13	19 (38)	18
Sophomores	2	8	10 (20)	19
Juniors	2	4	6 (12)	20
Seniors	3	12	15 (30)	21
Total	13	37	50 (100)	19.5

Table 1. Participants by level and sex

Most of the students (96%) come from the capital city of Merida, and 84% still live with their parents.They are all single, have no children and they are on average 20 years old. Three students claim to speak another language in addition to English and Spanish.

Fifty participants completed an online survey, and 26 of them agreed to take part in an in-depth interview in English to determine their oral ELP. Fifteen (42%) had an A1 or A2 level, eight (22%) had a B1+ level, eight (22%) a B2+ level, and five (14%) had a C1 level, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020).

Upon admission, only 18% of students had a sufficient level of English language proficiency, while 72% had a B1 or B2 level, and 10% had an A level. Twenty percent of participants claim to have a positive or neutral attitude towards learning English, while 80% claim to have a very positive attitude.

Open-ended questions explore students' motivational factors and expectations of their chosen career path. Analysis of the responses reveals four major categories. The first is a passion for the English language, the second is a vocation for teaching, the third is the perception of a wide range of job opportunities and the fourth is the value of the degree in facilitating future study or work abroad.

Another important finding was the broad horizon of work opportunities, with students expecting to work in different places, either in private or public schools, at different educational levels, from pre- school to higher education, especially with teenagers and adults. There are different preferences for working in public and private schools. In general, this indicates a diversity of interests among students,and it may have implications for curriculum design.

As the differences in ELP between the students was a major issue, we decided to analyse the differencebetween the perceptions and expectations of already highly proficient English language speakers and those who were still limited in the language. Table 2 compares the results.

High proficiency (≥B2)	Low proficiency (≤ B1)
Higher positive attitudes	Lower positive attitudes
Boredom	Challenged

Willing to practice, role playing and conversation in English	Feelings of anxiety and lack of confidence
	More comfortable with other students with the same level, conversation in Spanish preferred

Table 2. Perceptions and expectations of students with high and low levels of proficiency

All participants expressed satisfaction with the BELT programme. However, they highlighted that the variety of pedagogical methods, microteaching practice, instructors' preparation, opportunities for personal and academic growth, and strong sense of camaraderie among classmates were the most valued and useful.

Regarding barriers to advance in the programme, the major reason was psychological: lack of confidence or low self-stem (68%), followed by lack of sufficient time (42%) and finally lack of ELP(32%). An important number of students (46%) expressed dissatisfaction with mixed-level classes.

While some students feel responsible for improving their English skills on their own, many students specifically requested access to study abroad programmes, as well as to opportunities to converse in English outside of class, including interactions with native speakers where they can discuss both personal and academic topics.

Faculty

Five in-depth interviews were conducted with one recently recruited lecturer and four senior lecturerswho have been involved in the programme since its inception. Three lecturers voluntarily completed an online survey.

The majority of the lecturers are senior and close to retirement, their first language is Spanish and onlyone is a native English speaker. They are all involved in the development of English language competences from the first to the seventh semester. All perceive that between 30-50% of their studentsenter their class without the minimum level of oral English proficiency to succeed, while 20-40% of students leave their class without reaching the target oral proficiency benchmark.

In general, lecturers complained about a certain work overload. However, despite being very busy theyare motivated to participate in professional development through public recognition, certification, andcareer advancement.

In general, their complaints focused mainly on the social atmosphere in terms of motivation, compliance, and interaction between students, although they also emphasised the limitation of an overload of subjects that are dictated in Spanish. Some of the programme-level suggestions that they made were:

- encourage students to participate in practice opportunities to build their confidence;
- carry out diagnostic tests to accurately assess students' proficiency levels and organise themaccordingly;
- establish oral production support programmes through tutoring sessions involving both studentsand instructors;
- facilitate communication with electronic peers or English language partners to connect studentswith native speakers; and
- encourage student participation in (oral) activities such as conversation time, the Two LanguagesOne World project and storytelling to further develop language skills.

Administrators

Two administrators were surveyed about their perceptions regarding instructor profile and training. Both are concerned about operational issues and lack of resources. The results suggest that there is a need to improve curriculum and instruction. They recognise the challenges of time constraints on lecturers, but see them as committed and with a desire to excel in their roles.

They see public recognition and professional certification as incentives for instructors, along with thepossibility of flexible working hours or integration of training into existing duties.

They report that lecturers are extremely busy and suggest that training should take place during regular working hoursat the beginning of a term, rather than at the end, to avoid fatigue and overload. These responses highlight the importance of resource prioritisation, flexibility, clear communication, and thoughtful team selection in facilitating effective training and support for lecturers.

Discussion

The analysis of this programme highlights its strengths and limitations. The programme places a strong emphasis on pedagogical content and includes practicum in the curriculum. Additionally, external organisations have evaluated and approved the programme. Objective indicators of achievement include standardised language test results for each student and national accreditation exam results forgraduates.

The mixing of students with varying levels of English in the same classroom is a significant issue thatrequires attention. This is because it can have psychological consequences for those who are aware oftheir limitations in the language (Barrantes, 2013). Students with low ELP are more likely to have lowexpectations, high anxiety, poor performance and are at a greater risk of failure. Conversely, students with high ELP may experience boredom and lack of motivation. The proposed model aims to addressthis issue.

Another limitation of the curriculum is its inflexible view of student placement and progression. Evenif students meet relevant proficiency benchmarks, they are unable to move up levels. Furthermore, there is a need for further development of work experience opportunities. These limited opportunities to accelerate student progress may contribute to mixed-level classrooms, which can hinder proficiency gains, reduce motivation, cause classroom management issues, lower attendance rates, increase anxiety,add to faculty workload, and contribute to higher student dropout rates.

Implication to Research and Practice

Curriculum design in Mexican universities to effectively prepare English language teachers requires an examination of current programmes. Identifying resources and strengths provides the basis for

improvement. In this case, the use of standardised tests to determine ELP levels, the possibility of external accreditation by national agencies regarding the quality of the programme, and the existing network of schools that accept students for the practicum must be maintained in future programmes. It is also necessary to establish the requirement of minimum ELP levels in order to ensure the effective achievement of competencies. Higher education decision-makers must consider not only labour marketopportunities but also the views of faculty, administrators and students.

Conclusion

Creating an English Language Learning Environment

The process of language learning extends beyond the limited interaction between lecturers and students in a classroom. Curricular and extracurricular activities, school culture, student community, learning environment, and other factors can positively or negatively impact results, depending on how well theyare addressed to promote language learning.

In-depth English language learning should be complemented by a variety of experiences that immersestudents in an English-speaking environment exclusively. By providing them with favourable learningconditions and continuous exposure, their ELP will be strengthened, and they will be compelled to usethe language naturally.

To foster English language learning, the environment must be conducive to English language activities.For instance, we observed a lack of English signage, meetings between faculty and students are conducted in Spanish, and there are few recreational activities for students in English.

In addition, the high number of classes taught in Spanish in this programme may hinder the development of English language skills. The proposed *three-stage* model (ELP, theoretical foundations,and practicum) anticipates all subjects to be taught in English, creating an English-language environment that extends beyond the classroom and fosters confidence. To access the

practicum stage, students must demonstrate proficiency in both ELP and teaching competences, which will mature andflourish with adequate supervision.

Providing Extensive Flexibility

Curricular flexibility should be addressed in three main avenues. The first avenue involves categorisingand grouping students according to their ELP level. In this sense, the proposed model suggests a first stage that focuses exclusively on developing ELP. This stage provides ample opportunities for studentswho enter with an A1 ELP level to achieve at least a minimum B2 level in two years of study. Groupingstudents based on their proficiency level may enhance learning outcomes and mitigate negative psychological effects that arise when students compere themselves to others. In addition, proficient students can be fast-tracked to the second stage of the programme, resulting in reduced time and costs.

The second avenue of flexibility pertains to elective subjects that can help students to focus on particular fields of work. For example, those interested in teaching young children may benefit from courses in speech development and behaviour management, while those interested in teaching at the secondary school level may find courses in adolescent psychology and social network management tobe useful.

The third avenue of flexibility is to recognise the teaching experience or current work of students. It isimportant to note that many students are not high school seniors, but rather instructors or language

lecturers seeking academic recognition and professional development. These students bring valuable experience to the programme and should be taken into consideration.

In summary, the pathway to graduation can be facilitated by recognising existing competencies and allowing students to construct their own professional profile by choosing specific subjects of interest.

Enabling Acceleration

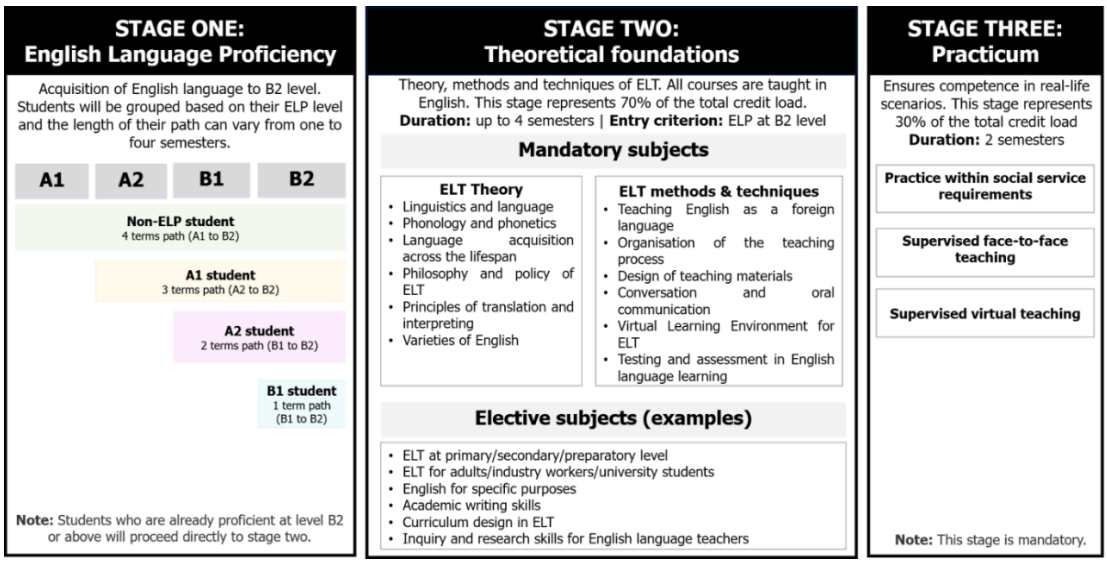
In the strictly rigid Mexican university model, it may seem audacious to suggest that some students could skip one or two years of university training, or advance on an individualized pathway. However,it is worth considering this possibility as it could provide opportunities for students to pursue their academic goals more efficiently. Regarding the BELT programme, it should be accepted that some students may have prior knowledge of English. This could be due to living in an English-speaking country, completing an academic programme, or being a native English speaker aspiring to become aninstructor. In any case, these prospective English language teachers have acquired a significant percentage of the required competencies through the programme. They can commence the theoretical subject load immediately and complete their studies in a shorter time and at a lower cost.

Likewise, if prospective students are already practicing English lecturers seeking a university degree for professional development, their experience and competencies could be considered and used to offerthem expedited entrance into stage three, practicum. This expands the programme's scope beyond recent high school graduates to include other potential candidates.

To ensure effective supervision of courses, programme administrators must establish and maintain relationships with local schools, language academies, and other relevant organizations. This will enable the implementation of opportunities for real-world observations, microteachings, and English language interactions for students.

A pragmatic and flexible model

Figure 1. A *three-stage* model for training English teachers in Mexican universities.



A *three-stage* model for preparing English teachers is proposed based on the findings of the study. Themodel is designed to replace the commonly used *goodness-of-fit* model in most Mexican universities.It is based on the notion that the lecturers must be proficient in the English language. The first stage isa flexible period of up to two years, during which admitted students should develop a minimum B2 ELP level. To facilitate student progress, groups will be formed based on standardised assessments that measure English Language Proficiency (ELP) levels. Students who are already proficient at levelB2 or above will proceed directly to stage two.

Stage two focuses on theoretical foundations. It covers mandatory subjects related to the theory of English Language Teaching (ELT), such as language acquisition across the lifespan, phonology, varieties of English, as well as those related to the methods and techniques of ELT, such as organisationof the teaching process, design of teaching materials, testing and assessment in ELT, etc. The second cluster of subjects is elective in nature and allows students to specialise or focus on specific areas of professional development, such as ELT at primary, secondary or preparatory level, ELT for adults, industry workers or university students, curriculum design, etc. Every subject in stage two is taught inEnglish, so a minimum ELP of B2 is required. One implicit curricular objective of this stage is to helpstudents improve their language competencies through extensive practice of the four primary languageskills. The goal is to attain an ELP level of C1.

The third stage is dedicated to developing and honing teaching skills in real-world scenarios, both face- to-face and virtual. It consists of a two-semester period exclusively dedicated to supervised practicumactivities. Students who are already employed in English language teaching settings may receive partial credit for this stage. This final stage of the programme requires administrators to utilize their relationships with local schools and other organisations to increase opportunities for real-world observations, micro-teaching, and authentic English interactions.

The model comprises three fundamental principles: ELP, theoretical foundations and practicum. It is highly flexible in terms of both pace and content. Depending on students' competencies, the BELT degree can be obtained within two to five years.

Figure 1 shows the proposed *three-stage* model with the aim of stimulating further discussion about the necessary changes needed in the training of English language teachers.

Future research

Addressing the key findings of this study can significantly enhance the achievement and success of BELTs, particularly in terms of accelerating competent students. Researchers need to generate data on relevant indicators such as employability, national indicators, international demands, programme recognition, student and teacher performance and administrative practices to assess the quality and effectiveness of BELTs and to design more effective programmes.

The flexibility and relevance of teacher preparation at a university level in Mexico is an issue that requires further academic discussion.

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