

During a recent English class at the Universidad Tecnológica El Retoño (UTR) in Aguascalientes, the teacher, Celeste Fernández, asked a student a question. When the student paused for a few seconds, other students shouted out answers. Ms. Fernández reminded those students, “Give her time to think, please!”



Celeste Fernández at the Universidad Tecnológica El Retoño (UTR), which opened in 2012.



Ms. Fernández leads a discussion about a video on sightseeing in Washington, D.C.

This short moment shows the heart of Ms. Fernández's teaching philosophy. She wants students to try their hardest and participate, even if they are unsure. She encourages them to think for themselves. She wants every student to have a chance to participate, and she wants each one to feel a part of the classroom and feel excited about the lesson. She says, "I try to transmit the same curiosity that I have about things. I try to put myself in their shoes and try to catch their attention." She always wants to learn more and stretch herself to be a better teacher. She adds, "Some kind of challenge is always appealing to me."

Ms. Fernández took a circuitous path to becoming an English teacher in Aguascalientes. She started her professional life as a chemist working in a research facility in Mexico City. She remembers that job fondly and loved being a researcher. But the twists and turns of life led her to

Aguascalientes, where there are few job openings for chemists. Ms. Fernández has always loved learning languages, however, and so she had other options open to her. Because she had a strong foundation in English, she decided to become a teacher.

She began as an elementary school teacher, and as the years passed, she continued studying and gaining skills and certifications, such as the Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Some of the certifications, including IELTS, simply require passing tests that she could self-study for, but others required perseverance. For example, the TKT requires 90 in-classroom hours. Her dedication to professional development gave Ms. Fernández an edge in the job market, although her main goal was to become a better teacher, not necessarily to make more money.

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Ms. Fernández feels that her science background gave her a strong foundation in preparing to be an English teacher. Nearly all scholarly articles in the field of science are published in English, so as she kept up to date, she was continually reading English and discussing the topics in English with colleagues. As part of her research, she had to give presentations in English about recent scientific advancements. This experience helped her overcome any fear she might have had about speaking publicly in English.

She later worked at a bilingual high school teaching advanced math. She remembers, “It was hard because I often go to bed late, but when I was teaching those subjects I went to bed later! Also, students don’t enjoy those subjects, but they enjoy studying English, so I enjoy teaching it. In fact,

I was asked to teach math [in English] this semester at UTR, and I declined because I love teaching English.”

UTR is the first public bilingual university in Mexico. It is located about a half hour outside the city of Aguascalientes; some of the students take the bus to and from the city each day, while others live farther away, some on ranches scattered throughout the countryside. Many of the students receive financial aid, in the form of reduced-price breakfast and lunch or transportation. Most participate in the Mobility Program, which provides scholarships that cover 100 percent of the costs for students to study in the United States or Canada for a full semester. These scholarships are provided by three entities: the government, Bécalos (a television foundation), and Santander (a bank).



Ms. Fernández’s students work on a listening activity



Part of the UTR campus

Part-time teaching positions are also open to the advanced students. Through UTR's Next Generation Program, 12 to 15 advanced students receive a small stipend and tuition discount in exchange for teaching English classes to the community on Saturdays. The program offers affordable English lessons for four hours every Saturday to students of many ages and proficiency levels. The university students who teach these classes have attained a high level of English proficiency and receive training in teaching skills; often, these students have already studied abroad through the Mobility Program. One full-time faculty member is in charge of choosing and training the students, assisting in writing lesson plans, organizing the class levels, advertising, and so forth.

Ms. Fernández's classes are fully in English. Students come into the room cheerful, and although they speak Spanish at first, Ms. Fernández reminds them in a friendly way, "Speak English, please!" And then they do. The students speak to one another, a little slowly, a little hesitantly, but before class

has even started, they are conversing in English about friends, other classes, and sports activities. Ms. Fernández listens with half an ear while she sets up for class, occasionally joining or commenting on their conversations.

During one recent class, students were thinking about what they like to do while on vacation, and they watched a video showing interviews of tourists in Washington, D.C. This video supplemented normal textbook activities. Searching outside the textbook to find interesting supplemental materials takes time, but Ms. Fernández says she has been teaching long enough that she has built up quite a library of materials. She mentions Cambridge texts as one series of books that she likes, partly because of its interesting videos; she also has a large collection of vocabulary flashcards. Still, she looks online to find ideas each week. She usually doesn't use anything "as is"; instead, she uses the ideas she finds as jumping-off points for adapting materials and techniques to match her students' levels and needs.

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No matter where Ms. Fernández finds her materials, she always works from a lesson plan. She says that in order to prepare for her teaching, she reads the teacher’s manual and then writes a complete lesson plan for the week. This is unusual in the hectic lifestyle of a university professor. “Lesson plans are difficult, and we hate them, but they are very useful. They are like a guide,” she says. She smiles and laughs as she adds, “So, even though they are hideous ... they are useful.”

When students begin their study at UTR, they take intensive English courses; in the first semester, in fact, all students study English seven hours per day. Some students have taken only token English classes since primary school, and others have no knowledge of English at all, so this initial semester is challenging. It is difficult for the teachers, too, as they are with the same group of students for five to seven hours per day. Ms. Fernández often worries that the students are getting bored with her, and to keep them engaged, she plans the daily schedule to be broken into various topics and activities. However, once the studying begins, she allows the students to guide the class. If they are particularly interested in one topic, she allows the schedule to go off-track so the students can focus on that topic. If the students become bored with a topic, she adapts or moves on to the next activity.

By the fourth semester, all the students’ courses are conducted in English. Meanwhile, there are other activities and opportunities at UTR, including educational and celebratory weeks during which students participate in and attend lectures, workshops, and shows. One recent November, Ms. Fernández helped her students write, prepare, and perform an original dramatization about the Day of the Dead, an important Mexican holiday when people celebrate and honor relatives and friends who have passed away.

There are also International Weeks and Beyond Limits Weeks, when students learn about other countries and future job opportunities. These events help students build initiative and creative-thinking skills. For example, the students might work together to gather information about life in Japan, then give a presentation to other students in the auditorium. All of these events are conducted in English.

Ms. Fernández’s passion and encouraging attitude at school rubs off on the students. Even if the lesson is challenging, or if students feel discouraged, they quickly bounce back and enjoy the class. Ms. Fernández would truly be a strong asset to any school, particularly to an innovative and young university such as UTR. She didn’t necessarily start out with a goal to end up where she is now, but as she says—in a comment that can apply to many who are teaching or studying English—“English was not my goal, but it was my savior.”

This article was written by **Sara Hendricks**, an English Language Fellow living in Puebla, Mexico, with her family. She is currently working at a Bilingual Technical University and enjoys learning more about gender issues, brain-based learning, and cooperative classrooms.

Photos by Sara Hendricks