

Transformation: A Model for Restructuring the Preparation of English Teachers in Ecuador¹

Un Modelo para Reestructurar la Formación de Profesores de Inglés en Ecuador

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Abstract

As English has become the language of business, the economy and social media around the world, it is more and more necessary to start teaching English in schools. Countries such as Ecuador have seen the immediate need to review how they prepare teachers of English to meet this new demand. This article shares a reflection on the process of moving from an autonomous university preparation program to a unified approach based on international standards for teachers of English in Ecuador. This transformation is discussed from four perspectives: the US Embassy in Quito that organized the effort; the facilitator who guided the process; the universities that train English teachers and whose programs were to be revised; and the language institutes that provide intensive English instruction to all university students. These last two points of view are provided by two academics that have been part of the group that collaborated in the creation of the proposal. The end result is a new curriculum based on international EFL/ESL teacher standards and, most importantly, created through collaboration among different entities that had not previously worked together.

Keywords: Standards, collaborative educational programs, curricular change, standards-based curriculum, collaborative work.

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Resumen

Ya que el inglés se ha convertido en el lenguaje de los negocios, la economía y los medios de comunicación social en el mundo, es cada vez más necesario enseñar inglés en las escuelas y colegios. Países como Ecuador han visto la necesidad de revisar la forma en que preparan sus maestros de inglés para satisfacer esta nueva demanda. En este artículo se reflexiona sobre el proceso de pasar de programas individuales de cada Universidad a un programa unificado basado en estándares internacionales para la enseñanza de inglés. Este cambio se lo analiza desde cuatro perspectivas diferentes: la de la Embajada de los Estados Unidos en Quito que organizó este esfuerzo, la de la especialista que guio el proceso; la de las Universidades que preparan profesores de inglés y cuyos programas debían ser revisados y la de los institutos universitarios que dan clases intensivas de inglés a toda la comunidad universitaria. Estos dos últimos puntos de vista son proporcionados por dos académicos que colaboraron en el proceso de construcción de la propuesta. El producto final es un nuevo plan de estudios basado en estándares internacionales de EFL/ESL resultado del trabajo colaborativo entre diferentes entidades que no habían trabajado juntos previamente.

Palabras clave: Estándares, programas educativos colaborativos, cambio curricular, programa de estudios basado en estándares, trabajo colaborativo.

Resumo

Já que o inglês se converteu na linguagem dos negócios, a economia e os meios de comunicação social no mundo é cada vez mais necessário ensinar inglês nas escolas e colégios. Países como o Equador tem visto a necessidade imediata de revisar a forma em que preparam seus professores de inglês para satisfazer esta nova demanda. Este artigo dá a conhecer uma reflexão sobre o processo de passar de programas individuais de cada Universidade a um programa unificado baseado em padrões internacionais para o ensino de inglês. Esta mudança se analisou desde quatro perspectivas diferentes: a da Embaixada dos Estados Unidos em Quito, a qual organizou este esforço; a da especialista que guiou o processo; a das Universidades que preparam professores de inglês e cujos programas deviam ser revisados e a dos institutos universitários que oferecem aulas intensivas de inglês a toda a comunidade universitária. Estes dois últimos pontos de vista foram emitidos por dois académicos que fizeram parte do grupo que colaborou no processo de construção da proposta. O produto final é um novo plano de estudos baseado em padrões internacionais de EFL/ESL resultado do trabalho colaborativo entre diferentes entidades que não tinham trabalhado juntos previamente.

Palavras chave: Padrões, programas educativos colaborativos, mudança curricular, currículos baseado em padrões, trabalho colaborativo.

Introduction

The teaching of English around the world has inspired the creation of new models for preparing those who will teach English in the public schools (Burns & Richards, 2012; Burns, 2005). In Ecuador, until recently, universities were both independent and autonomous in how they prepared their teachers, but that has changed. From 2011-2015 teacher educators from across the country have come together as unlikely collaborators to create a new international standards-based (TESOL, 2010) curriculum. Through the sponsorship and guidance of the U.S. Embassy in Quito and several of the educational agencies in Ecuador, this model represents a mind-set change that may result in more effective English teachers capable of increasing the language proficiency of their students.

The rationale for a standards-based model comes from many sources (e.g. Burke, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Genesee & Harper, 2010; Kuhlman, 2010; Kuhlman & Kneževic, 2013; Staehr Fenner & Kuhlman, 2013). In education, standards are generally defined as benchmarks for accountability (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996) or goals that students (or teachers) will attain. Standards call for consistency in what is expected from both students and teachers, and various assessment measurements are developed to determine if standards are being met. Darling-Hammond (1997) suggests that unless we move toward keeping more consistent goals rather than always making exceptions to the goals, our educational reforms “will surely evaporate in a very short time, long before good schooling spreads to the communities where it is currently most notable by its absence” (p. 211). Standards are a way to provide the stability and consistency, Darling-Hammond advocates.

Four perspectives on this process of standards and curriculum development are presented in this article. First, the representative from the U.S. Embassy reflects on how the project started and the role of the Embassy. The ESL Specialist brought by the U.S. Embassy to assist in the project reflects on her role as facilitator. From one of the participating universities, the previous coordinator of the English teacher preparation program reflects on why the project was needed, and how the experience changed the perception of autonomy by the universities. Finally, a coordinator from one of the university language institutes (which provide foreign language courses for all its university students) reflects on the changing role of university language institutes, and how collaboration rather than autonomy has changed their purpose.

From the U.S. Embassy Perspective

In 2011, while performing duties as the Cultural Specialist for the U.S. Embassy in Quito, I was asked to increase the portfolio of English language education programs. The emphasis was to look into ways in which the U.S. government could assist the efforts of the Ecuadorian government concerning English language learning in public schools. Until then, the English language programs portfolio had been reduced and limited to providing specialists to participate in English language conferences, a few professional development scholarships for Ecuadorian teachers, and a few English language-learning scholarships for low-income public school students.

The first steps were to find out the needs of the Ecuadorian government and the resources available from the Embassy, the Regional English Language Office and the Bureau of Education of the U.S. State Department. My research showed that the needs surpassed by far any of the programs, tools, and resources available from the U.S. Government. The Ecuadorian government was looking for ways to bring 7,000 quality English language teachers from abroad to teach in Ecuadorian public schools while training new Ecuadorian teachers to take their place in a few years. These teachers would be teaching high school students to comply with the Ecuadorian government mandate that all Ecuadorian high school students graduate with a proficiency level of English equivalent to B1 in the Common European Framework (2010) (low intermediate).

This goal seemed too ambitious even to try to attempt, not to mention the economic resources it would have demanded. Nevertheless, shortly after the meeting where the needs were expressed by the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ecuadorian government announced and actually devoted enough money in an attempt to accomplish the initial task of bringing well trained English teachers to Ecuador. Unfortunately, the project was not directed to the area of concern but to university level teachers. The program is still known as Prometheus. It is not focused on English language teaching or learning, however, rather on recruiting PhD's in every area of knowledge into Ecuadorian academia in order to increase the quality of university instruction.

106 Shortly after the Ministry of Education's (MOE) request for help, relations between the U.S. and Ecuador were disrupted due to the "wikileaks" of a cable the U.S. Ambassador sent to a colleague that was critical of Ecuador's political climate. The result was for the Ecuadorian government to request the immediate removal of the U.S. Ambassador. This meant an obvious rupture in official relations between the two countries. As a result, English language education became more important than ever before for the U.S. Embassy. This was seen as the only area where cooperation with the U.S. would be accepted

by the Ecuadorian government and was a means to maintain dialogue with government authorities. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the challenge required a creative and possibly long-term solution to the needs identified prior to the political rupture.

Considering the resources available, there was a proposal to offer the Ministry of Education (MOE) of Ecuador a specialist that could help assess the actual needs they had in English language education. The intent was that the specialist would guide the MOE to a strategy that could lead them to a more effective and efficient professional development program, with the ultimate goal of raising the level of English proficiency of Ecuadorian students. The MOE desired that the strategy include international English teaching/learning standards (e.g. TESOL, 2010) that could help bring students to the desired level of fluency by the end of high school.

For this reason, the English Language Programs Office of the U.S. State Department provided an ESL Specialist to work with MOE, with prior experience in various countries, and specifically, having developed a similar project in Uruguay (Kuhlman, 2010). This collaboration re-established a fruitful dialogue between the U.S. and Ecuadorian governments that later on helped to normalize their bilateral relations.

The specialist's work with the MOE over a six-month period demonstrated that it would not be enough simply to create standards for existing teachers. A long-term solution was necessary to address the lack of well-prepared teachers. Consequently, the U.S. Embassy-Quito submitted a request for her to return, this time to address the source of the problem that the Ecuadorian MOE faced, specifically that English teachers graduating from Ecuadorian universities were generally unprepared. This was the first step to a four-year project that resulted in the production of a universal curriculum for English language teaching majors in Ecuador. This became a collaborative project in which 32 universities initially signed on to participate, and 17 actually presented the proposal to the education authorities in charge of its validation, evaluation, and adoption.

When I submitted the proposal to the U.S. Embassy-Quito for consideration, I did not anticipate it would become almost a full-time job to lead the participating universities, coach the participants, lobby with the university authorities, and mediate with the government institutions. Time was devoted to having the large and always changing number of participants agree to collaborate for the greater good, to obtaining the economic resources from the Embassy and the participating universities, and maintaining hours of discussions with participants and the specialist. Nevertheless, all the work paid off when the proposal was officially introduced to the Ministry of Education

to all the participating universities, government education entities, and general public on January 30, 2015. This huge collaborative project is an example that with devotion and patience, agreements can be reached.

The process, however, was never free of difficulties. The biggest were created by the continuous changes in higher education regulations announced by the higher education council (CES), a newly created board that did not demonstrate a strong understanding of the needs and specifications of learning of a second language by both educators and learners. Beyond this obstacle, which in my opinion was the most critical one, were those created by the uncertainty and fear of change that most of the participating academics exhibited while the process was carried out. This was an exercise in patience for both the specialist and myself. I also had to continuously seek support from government institutions.

Despite all these and other minor challenges, I strongly believe that this process was educational beyond its final objective. It helped people understand that academic work is a mandatory contribution, a right, and a need. It helped institutions to agree and collaborate to obtain mutual benefits and to contribute to society at large. It created a collaboration model that was unknown in Ecuador before the group started to work together, which is now considered as a model for other academic areas that are currently collaborating under similar conditions and for similar purposes.

Based on the above, I can say that the experience was highly beneficial for all of those who participated directly or indirectly. Unfortunately, the anticipated results were not as foreseen. Due to the continuous process of change in the regulations pertaining to education from the higher education council, the proposal was not accepted in full. Nevertheless, the contents of the work are widely used by both the universities that worked on it as well as others who did not have an interest in creating an English language teaching major. Therefore, we can say that the impact of the project was greater than expected.

108 Results of the implementation of the project are yet to be measured and evaluated. My recommendation before I left the position of Cultural Specialist at the U.S. Embassy- Quito was to bring in the specialist at least two more times to evaluate the actual impact of implementing the proposed curriculum and to see its effectiveness or what areas might need to be modified in order to validate the project further. Complementary projects should also be carried out. The most important include professional development for those who will prepare the new English teachers under this plan, and for in-service teachers in order for them to reach a high level of English language proficiency and be able to use current methodologies.

From the Facilitator's Perspective

In April, 2011, I was invited as an ESL Specialist by the U.S. State Department to work with the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Quito in developing standards for in-service English teachers. At the same time, the universities were asked to revise their curriculum so that students could transfer to other universities without losing credits. My original expectation was to help create standards for in-service teachers. We accomplished that within six months, using an adaptation of the TESOL p-12 ESL Teacher Standards (TESOL, 2010). These were adopted and published on the MOE website (MOE, 2011). I never expected the project to become a national one, expanded to all universities that prepare English teachers or that it would be a four-year project, but that is what happened.

As English has become the lingua franca around the world (Burns, 2005), the social and economic reasons for Ecuadorians to learn English have increased substantially. At the same time, the majority of English teachers in Ecuador have neither the language proficiency nor the methodologies to teach English effectively in the schools. Further, before recent reforms in government regulations, universities were autonomous in their teacher preparation programs. Change was needed, and a standards and researched-based approach was required by the authorities. All the universities that originally participated agreed that a common curriculum was overdue. There needed to be consistency so that students graduating from any university in Ecuador would have the same competencies. By doing this, there was a better possibility that the English taught in the schools would improve.

The first meetings that were held with the universities were in December, 2011. They were in the form of five-day retreats, fully sponsored by the U.S. Embassy-Quito under the guidance of the Cultural Specialist. Half of the universities met in the north in Ibarra, and half in the south, in Cuenca. At these initial meetings, I introduced the entire concept of standards (benchmarks to be achieved), which was new to most of the participants, and I also shared the adopted Ecuadorian Ministry of Education in-service teacher standards. Perhaps one-third of those present were from the language institutes at their universities, not from teacher education programs, and even the concept of teacher preparation was new to them. As we progressed during the week, the group began to understand the complexity of the problems that they faced in changing how English teachers were prepared in Ecuador. What followed was four years of meetings in which university representatives created a complete curriculum, with standards aligned to courses aligned to an exit-portfolio. 109

While the university participants did the majority of the work, as the facilitator, I oversaw the project, made suggestions, provided feedback on the overall plan, kept the groups on track, and edited the documents. The new

standards-based curriculum that was created would never have happened, though, if there had not been substantial collaboration. As the facilitator for the project, I have seen collaboration in various forms, but each one is unique. Similar to Uruguay (Kuhlman, 2010), the project in Ecuador involved a large number of participants. However, while some key people remained throughout the four-year process, many participants changed, and so the act of creating collaboration had to be continually revisited. Further, while some participants came with an attitude of compromise, others had their own agendas and were firm about what they thought the new curriculum should include. Agreement regarding the standards, however, was easily attained since the group found that those already adopted by the MOE could apply to both in-service and pre-service teachers.

Several things have changed as a result of the project, and yet some remain the same. A new curriculum, with syllabi, assessments, a final portfolio, and timeline by semester are complete and ready to be used. Intensive English has been included in the curriculum to ensure the language proficiency of the new teachers. Previously, some universities had no requirements for language proficiency, and others had very high requirements. Now they would be all the same.

The possibilities for a major change are there, and the authorities, while not mandating the new curriculum, have agreed that universities can implement it if they choose. One of the major changes that has occurred, though, was having teacher educators from universities from all over Ecuador talk to each other, share their perspectives and create the new curriculum. The resulting product has the possibility to change significantly how teachers are prepared in Ecuador. The question is whether it will actually be implemented, and whether there will be sufficient professional development for the instructors in the program for real change to occur.

As a result of this project, I see many new teachers being better prepared to teach English. However, without the support of the educational authorities, both nationally and at the universities, this will not happen. The U.S. Embassy-Quito has been instrumental in providing needed support, not just to bring me as the facilitator over the four years, but also in organizing, pushing and encouraging all the participants. It is hoped that the U.S. Embassy will continue to provide this support.

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For me personally, this has been an amazing experience. In 2011, there were some 30 universities that were autonomous, preparing teachers however they felt was right, and language institutes teaching university students English without special attention to those who would become teachers. Four years later, we have a core group of 17 universities who have agreed on this new way of preparing teachers, integrating the teaching of English with preparing teachers to teach English.

From the University Perspective

Out of my 34 years as a university professor, I have been a member of the teaching staff of the School of Languages at the Universidad Laica Vicente Rocafuerte (ULVR) in Guayaquil, Ecuador for 27 years. I have also had the opportunity of serving as the Assistant Director from 1992 to 2007 and as Director from April 2011 to July 2014. It was while I was in charge of directing the school that I participated in the project started by the U.S. Embassy to bring together the directors from the institutions that train English teachers to analyze the possibility of creating a universal curriculum for the preparation of English teachers at the universities in Ecuador.

The first meeting was held in December, 2011 in Cuenca (a second group met in Ibarra a week after). It turned out to be a highly beneficial gathering for those of us who attended. It was the first time we talked about international standards for the teaching of English and the preparation of teachers, something most of the participants were not aware of. Unfortunately, I must say, up to that moment there were no specific regulations as to how to run a teacher preparation program in university departments of languages.

The School of Languages at ULVR offered English as a major for the first time in 1979. The outstanding characteristic was that all the subjects during the four years of study were to be taught in English. As one of the former students, I had the opportunity to experience the benefits of attending a full English program. Most of the students reached an advanced intermediate level after finishing the first two years of studies. In the third year, the students began to study subjects such as linguistics and pedagogy, all of them related to their future profession: to be English teachers. A thesis and oral defense were also required for graduation, and both had to be completed in English. There has always been a high demand from primary and secondary schools in Guayaquil to hire the graduates from ULVR. Most of these institutions send their requests while the students are still in the classroom, thus assuring them a teaching position as soon as they graduate.

The story of the School of Languages at ULVR is a story that was only shared by a few other schools in the country. Most of the university programs were half in Spanish, half in English, perhaps because it was difficult for them to find and hire teachers to teach subjects in English. The result was low English proficiency in their graduates. The attraction of this new project for me was that it might nationalize what ULVR had been doing for the past 30 years. However, even though some of the universities thought they were preparing English teachers “the right way,” none of the programs, including ULVR’s, were aligned with international standards or the fluency levels stated in the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2011).

This background is useful to try to explain the importance of the meetings at Cuenca and Ibarra. Leaders of the different English teacher preparation programs were sitting together at the table talking about international standards for the first time. We were aligning the standards with the Ecuadorian reality and accepting the challenge and the commitment to work as a whole in favor of English language teaching and the preparation of effective professionals in the field.

How do you train teachers if the challenges they will be facing are not known? As a preamble of future decision-making, it was necessary first to learn about the new changes in English language programs instituted by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education. That first meeting was not only about learning about standards. For the first time, it was an opportunity for the participants to learn about each other's programs, as participants made presentations about the programs they ran. We became involved in analyzing and discussing how the various programs did or did not fit Ecuadorian needs.

Six months later, a second meeting was held in Quito. At that meeting, another reality was faced. Most of the universities, if not all, run two different English programs. English as a major, whose purpose is to prepare future teachers of English, and English as a requirement for graduation in any field. This finding caused somewhat of a setback as it was difficult for participants to understand that these were indeed two different programs. Finally, two groups were formed: those who prepared teachers and those who taught English in the language institutes. Both would be teaching English to university students but for different purposes.

112 With the teaching roles well defined, a third meeting was called. This time university representatives met in Guayaquil, a city on the coast of Ecuador. It seemed more inclusive to meet in different places. The main agenda for the meeting in Guayaquil was to do a first draft of a common study plan for the preparation of English teachers. This was the hardest task yet. It was common for participants from the different universities to defend the programs they had implemented for years rather than seek compromise in order to draft a common preparation program for all institutions. Essentially, there were two agendas: those who favored pedagogy as a basis for preparation programs, and those who favored linguistics. This debate was quite serious, but the prompt intervention of the facilitator, Dr. Kuhlman, brought us back together. It was difficult for many universities to accept a new study plan that meant a break with old paradigms. Eventually, most saw this as an opportunity for growth and professional development by sharing the expertise and giving birth to a new proposal that would benefit future English teachers.

After several more meetings, the first draft was finally completed, but future meetings were needed to polish it. After the draft was finally accepted by the whole group as the new study plan, it was then necessary to write the contents of each one of the proposed courses and design a portfolio that would be used to show that teacher candidates met all the requirements (i.e. standards). The final product, signed by 17 universities, was presented at a celebration in January, 2015 at the Ministry of Education, where this project began. Now it all depends on the higher education authorities to accept and implement the program.

From the Language Institutes' Perspective

For the first time, in 2011, 30 language institutes and English teacher education programs from different universities in Ecuador received an invitation from the U.S. Embassy-Quito to participate in an English Network that would be created. In Ecuador, university language institutes provide language teaching for the entire university, not just the English teacher preparation programs. The coordinators and/or directors who attended this first of many meetings started working together to understand the reality of the English institutes in our universities, and most of all, the quality of English education in our institutions. One of the important issues we noted were the differences from one university to another.

I wanted to be part of this network so that we could standardize English teaching and teacher education in our country, and produce graduates who would be more proficient English teachers in the schools. For example, at that time, the English program in one university offered three hours of English a week, while others offered ten. Still others taught only English for Specific Purposes (not including education), and some did not even have an English program. The situation was one of chaos, and the diversity of programs was great. Even today, directors of many university language institutes do not support the concept of English teacher education at all.

Another reality was that in our English institutes there was a serious need for qualified English teachers. Most of the universities have the problem of hiring teachers with a low level of English proficiency and without the methodology to teach students at the university level even though they graduated from English teacher preparation programs. One objective of the network then was to find a solution for the lack of qualified teachers. Without them, a new standards-based program would not make a difference.

All the universities that came to those first meetings asked to be part of this dream and started working hard. At every meeting, we worked diligently

to accept different points of view. Everything we did was to achieve a new perspective and a revolutionary change in English teacher education in our country. As the laws and regulations in Ecuador were changing, it was necessary at the same time for universities to work together in order to save time, money and provide a new vision for English education.

My university supported my participation in this project because of the potential results that we could achieve. From my perspective as the Director of the Academic English Institute, we created an English program for students majoring in English language teaching, and we supported the idea that new English teachers needed a strong knowledge of the language they were going to teach. Our role was to create an intensive nine-level, two-year English program, in which the new pre-service teachers would acquire what they needed to succeed and be quality professionals.

Collaboration was a necessary tool to create and standardize opinions from the participants. From my point of view, it was the first time that representatives from the universities across Ecuador came together to work. I could see the willingness towards compromise and an attitude of working towards a common goal that would benefit English education. Of course, there were problems along the way, particularly different opinions, but in the end, the university representatives collaborated in the process. Directors from English teacher preparation programs and from English institutes were working towards a common curriculum for English teacher preparation programs.

The process worked. Now, universities have the option of selecting this curriculum for their programs. It is necessary to insist on the importance of having a standardized and standards-based English curriculum so that Ecuador can develop quality English teachers and professionals in the field. That said, it may be difficult for public universities to implement this program due to governmental regulations, but for private universities it is the best program ever created in Ecuador.

114 After completing this four-year process, I consider that the result is a very comprehensive English teacher preparation program. In my own case, I will use the curriculum to create a new English teacher preparation program in the institution where I currently work. I believe this curriculum can be used as a national and international model to be followed. The exit portfolio for teachers exemplifies the quality of the program.

Conclusion

From 2011-2015 representatives from more than twenty university English teacher education programs and language institutes came together for the first time to collaborate in the transformation of the way that English teachers are prepared in Ecuador. With support from the U.S. Embassy and several Ecuadorian educational agencies, with guidance from an ESL Specialist sponsored by the U.S. Embassy, this group that had previously been autonomous, collaborated, discussed, challenged and created a new curriculum, based on international ESL Teacher Standards, for the preparation of English teachers in Ecuador. It was not an easy task. There were times when the whole project could have exploded, but it did not. The four perspectives presented here represent the challenges and the solutions that this eclectic group was able to accomplish. As a by-product of this work, a new organization, ECUATESOL has been formed for the first time to support the English teaching profession in Ecuador. The possibilities are great. The reality is unknown and it can only be hoped that this transforming model will be implemented and in tomorrow's world the children of Ecuador will have the opportunity to become proficient in English that will open doors to the world.

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