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Robert A. DeVillar
Kennesaw State University, rdevilla@kennesaw.edu

Binbin Jiang
Kennesaw State University, bjiang@kennesaw.edu

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Professional Development of EFL Teachers in Mexico: Examining Cross-Cultural and Global Linkages, Influences, and Outcomes

Robert A. DeVillar
Binbin Jiang

During the past twenty years, the paradigm of professional development in U.S. education has shifted from an analytic-incremental model to an integrative-systematic model. The integrative-systematic model focuses on the whole-scale improvement of general student performance through the articulation, implementation, and assessment of standards that apply to teachers and teacher preparation institutions as well as to students. This article addresses the basis for this paradigm shift in the U.S. and the global expansion of the professional development mandate. The authors describe the first phase of a three-year, cross-cultural professional development program involving English-as-a-Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at a private school in Mexico.

The national paradigm of professional development within K–12 U.S. educational contexts has experienced a dramatic and critical shift in the past twenty years as students' general academic performance has not responded positively to school reform measures and, therefore, national expectations. This shift is one of kind rather than degree and is termed here integrative-systematic. It is contrasted with an earlier model which we refer to as analytic-incremental. The integrative-systematic model has three major interrelated elements which characterize it, two being: (a) sustaining the economic primacy of the U.S. and (b) implementing standards regarding the performance of students, teachers, and institutions of higher education, particularly those that prepare teachers. The third element is a corollary of the second: (c) long-term, sustained U.S. linkages and influence with respect to identification of, and adherence to, educational performance standards by developed and developing countries, conjoined by geography or specific interest within the global arena. This paradigm shift and the major elements that
comprise it are influencing, if not changing, the face of educational practice and outcomes, including professional development endeavors and expectations, both in the U.S. and globally.

This article addresses three interrelated points surrounding professional development: (1) the basis for the paradigm shift in the U.S.; (2) the early transmigration of the shift to the global arena; and (3) associated first-year research findings of a three-year, cross-cultural, professional development project conducted by the authors involving English-as-a-foreign Language (EFL) teachers at a private pre-K–12 school in central Mexico. The first-year research findings indicate that key elements associated with the integrative-systematic approach—essentially developed to respond to the combined need for equity and quality schooling within the highly diversified and differentially performing student populations in U.S. public schools—had positive effects on EFL teachers and their students within a private school context in Mexico.

The U.S. National Context: Professional Development Shift and Oscillation

The Call for Performance Improvement and Standards of Performance

The paradigm shift we examine took root in the early 1980s in light of persistent underperformance by students in general, but particularly those designated as poor or minority, or both, resulting in research-informed recommendations by nationally commissioned policy-influencing bodies to achieve, in the words of A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, April 1983, p. 5), the “twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling.” A Nation at Risk, including its seven-part recommendation with respect to teacher preparation, presented by the National Commission on Educational Excellence in 1983, and the standards-influencing A Nation Prepared published by The Task Force on Teaching as a Profession in 1986, were, arguably, the progenitors and catalysts of the new movement. The collective response to the call for heightened general student achievement tended to contain the assumptions and recommendations embodied within the above two reports, resulting in scores of reports, mostly research-informed, over the following decade-long period (see review by Rossi & Montgomery, 1994).

Paradigms: Characteristics and Politico-Economic Implications

The reports mentioned above serve as seminal indicators of what has since emerged as a radical shift, widespread in the literature if not yet in common practice, from an analytico-incremental model to an integrative-systematic model. The latter paradigm is concerned with the whole-scale improvement of general student performance through the articulation, implementation, and assessment of standards that apply not only to pre-K–16 students but also to teachers and teacher preparation institutions (Darling-Hammond, 1999, 1997; Finn, 2003; Harwell, 2003; Whitehurst, 2002). Specific disciplines have also devised standards that students, teachers, and institutions are expected to meet, including those targeted
toward math (Louck-Horsley, 1998), science (National Research Council, 1998), foreign languages, both domestically (Bott-VanHouten, Hoyt-Oukada, & Scow, 2003; Diaz-Maggioli, 2003) and abroad (TESOL, 2003), and occupationally-related education and training programs (NCEE, 2003).

From the outset, the relationship of enhanced teacher preparation and professional development to desired educational outcomes, as exemplified by the integrative-systematic approach, had a far-reaching politico-economic dimension in that the conjoined elements of instruction and learning were perceived as key to maintaining the United States' global premiere economic position. The opening statement of *A Nation at Risk* clearly relates the level of national educational achievement and support to maintaining global preeminence:

Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. . . . If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.” (p. 1; emphasis added)\(^1\)

It was not altogether surprising then, that the above rhetorical emphasis on competitive national educational and professional standards with global implications brought with it a corollary structural emphasis on employment-sensitive curricula and programs to preserve and enhance our global economic position. Marc Tucker, president of the National Center for Education and the Economy—established in 1989 in the wake of *A Nation at Risk*—prominently features this point in his organization’s website’s introductory statement:

Now, more than ever, what you earn is a function of what you know and can do. The United States faces a choice. Either we do a much better job of giving our young people the world-class skills and knowledge they need to compete in a swiftly integrating world economy, or we condemn them to working ever longer hours for ever lower pay. We launched the non-profit National Center on Education and the Economy in 1989 to

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1. Earlier, as a consequence of the launching on October 4, 1957 of the Soviet Union’s artificial satellite Sputnik—the first in history—the United States government immediately invested heavily in science, math and engineering education, and in agencies that developed and published scientific textbooks and related instructional materials (http://www.piedmontcommunities.us/servlet/go_ProcServ/dbpage=page&GID=01302001151017804962040383&PG=013020011510178049622200306).
address this challenge. That goal has led us to examine closely those countries that have the most successful education and training systems, a project that has taken us to more than 20 nations on four continents. (NCEE, 2003)

While both paradigms identify the same goal of maintaining the professional currency of the collective teaching body within the United States, they differ markedly in their means to attain the goal. The analytico-incremental model tends to be characterized by a general laissez-faire approach, that is at once piece-meal, in-put oriented and short-term; that of the integrative-systematic model, by a strategically planned, long-term endeavor, that builds communities of learners, interrelates content knowledge and pedagogy (i.e., philosophy, research, and skills) in a sustainable manner, and is output-directed in that the target of professional development is measurably-enhanced student performance (See Bott-VanHounten, Hoyt-Oukada, & Scow, 2003; National Clearing House for Bilingual Education, 1999; Eisenhower National Clearing House, 1998; Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1995; Consortium for Policy Research in Education/National Center for Education and the Economy, 2002).2

2. The paradigmatic shift to the integrative-systematic approach has not been without its controversy and division, although there appears to be consensus regarding its need and value. This internal oscillation, an unintended phenomenon involving parties adhering to the integrative-systematic approach to professional development, has much to do with the differentiated views toward the question and impact of standards. Finn (2003), for example, notes that the discourse surrounding standards—that is, their aim, mode of implementation, and effect—divides the issue into two major camps: those who desire to improve the teaching profession, and those who have become instead engaged in professionalizing teacher improvement. Finn, a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, places much of this debate in the context of the relationship between standards and instructional practice. Finn, a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, places this debate in the context of the relationship between standards and instructional practice. Finn, a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, places this debate in the context of the relationship between standards and instructional practice.

Still more controversy has been generated with respect to the perceived lack of integrating moral and spiritual values into the general curriculum, in favor of the integrative-systematic approach’s perceived monolithic focus on relating the curriculum to economic development, as the following statement from The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life website (October, 2003) illustrates:

However, the 1995 Department of Education guidelines did not settle all the debates. Issues related to school prayer, the use of school space by religious groups, the teaching of evolution versus creationism, the recitation of the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance and teaching about religion continue to be debated on a daily basis.
The International Context: Global Educational Linkage of the Professional Development Mandate

The relationship of professional development to improved educational performance is a fundamentally vital operating principle that many developed and developing nations currently share with the United States. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperative (APEC) is one such example. Established in 1989, APEC, currently comprised of 21 member countries, held its first meeting in 1992, in Washington, D.C., at the invitation of President George H. W. Bush (APEC Education Forum Documents, 1992–2000). At that time, representatives (“ministers”) from the then fourteen-member APEC body agreed to unite for interdependent educational purposes around the common educational theme of standards, and to explore their pursuit and implementation through the discourse topic: “Toward Education Standards for the Twenty-First Century.” The shared view was that enhanced educational performance through standards was not to be confined to economic development but to include human development elements as well:

Notwithstanding the importance of education for economic development, the Ministers emphasized the crucial role played by education in human development. In particular, the Ministers noted that primary- and secondary-level education is a key to instilling qualities such as flexibility, creativity, and adaptability that will be required in the Twenty-First Century. They affirmed that education plays a valuable role in developing students who are tolerant and respectful of others, view learning as a lifelong pursuit, possess a sense of their own cultural identity, and are responsible citizens of their communities, their societies, and the world. (Education Forum Document No.1, 1992)

Thus, a mandate was given for global understanding and collaboration through the provision of an educational experience that would value, model, and teach flexibility, creativity, adaptability, tolerance, and respect regarding one’s own cultural identity and circumstance, as well as the cultural identities and circumstances of others. Importantly, professional development exchanges and foreign language learning were among the seven priority areas for cooperative activities identified at this first meeting. The above commitment was firmly reiterated by the APEC leadership nearly a decade later in Singapore, as were related values, including the need (a) to provide teachers with career-long professional development opportunities to continue their role “in the education development process” of students and (b)

3. Member countries include Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, United States, and Vietnam.
4. The acute sensitivity to the global need for professors within institutions of higher edu-
for students to learn foreign languages as a means to “help our people unlock new
doors of information and opportunities” (Education Network Document No.1, 2000).

The Mexican Context: An Alternative Model to the Current General State of
Professional Development

Mexico and the United States, both as members of APEC and in light of
their historical relationship of cultural-cum-economic contact and common
border status, have a vital interest in their respective populations learning each
other’s language. In the United States, Spanish continues as the most popular
choice among students learning a second or foreign language, accounting for
68.8 percent of all second or foreign language enrollments in grades 7–12, or
some 4.8 million out of slightly more than seven million student (Draper &
Hicks, 2002). English, in Mexico, has recently been characterized as being in
an “expansionist hegemonic phase due to its [global] lingua franca state” and
the “ample priority” that it enjoys within foreign language teaching contexts
(Consejo de la Lengua Francesa, 2001). Moreover, the United States has invested
public funds to foster cross-border collaborations involving educational projects,
including teacher preparation and professional development. For example, at the
higher education level, since 1994, the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary
Education (FIPSE), a unit within the U.S. Department of Education, through its
North American Mobility in Higher Education Program, has allocated some 11
million dollars in grants to higher education institutions involved in academically-
related collaborative projects with Mexico (FIPSE Grant Database, n.d.). The
implementation of the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA), initiated on
January 1, 1994 and whose raison d’être is to “remove most barriers to trade and
cation to have the freedom (read protection) to teach, conduct research, and engage in
scholarly activities as a means to benefit “students, industry and labor” was manifested and
codified in “Recommendations concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Per-
sonnel,” and adopted by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Sci-
entific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in November 1997 (Education International,
n.d.). Three decades earlier, on October 5, 1966, “recognizing the essential role of teachers
in educational advancement and the importance of their contribution to the development
of humanity and modern society,” the same body had adopted “Recommendation concern-
ing the Status of Teachers” by the Special Intergovernmental Conference on the Status of
Teachers, convened by UNESCO, in cooperation with the International Labor Organiza-
tion (Education International, n.d.). Important and unarguably sound as the above recom-
endations are regarding global teacher and faculty rights, they have continued to lack the
actual institutional support, and thus clout, to be implemented, either in 1966 or 1997, in
the U.S. or, much less, at the global level. Rather, U.S. financial aid and political capital are
consistently and progressively invested in establishing and leading organizations globally
that will institute the use of common academic practices and standards linking academic
performance to economic prosperity, political models (market-based democracy, in this
case), and strengthening U.S. pre-eminence.
investment among the United States, Canada, and Mexico” (FASonline, 2001), has, not surprisingly, intensified the demand for English language competence in Mexico among the working populace, including prospective workers such as students, and raised the standard of skill-level expectations for pre-K–12 teachers and university faculty who train them.

Currently, the research evidence points to the need for effective professional development for Mexican teachers, as student-centered instruction is generally lacking in the classrooms of teachers responsible for Mexican basic education (students from 3 years to 16 years old), as are detailed lesson plans, stimulation of higher order thinking skills, attention to reading comprehension and writing abilities, cooperative learning practices, attention to individualized needs, involvement of parents or community, and effective time management—all of which, as a combined problem, are compounded by a reliance on whole class instruction, rote learning and the absence of administrative support (Schmelkes, 1997, 2000; World Bank, 2000, both cited in López-Acevedo, 2002). Included in this research are private schools in Mexico, which account for up to seven percent of the pre-K–9th grade school enrollment and 22 percent of grade 10–12 school enrollments (López-Acevedo, 2002). In sum, the general state of present-day instruction in Mexican schools continues to reflect the analytico-incremental model of professional development, despite that research evidence in Mexico demonstrates that the factor having the single greatest influence in learning achievement is the teacher’s “pedagogical behavior (efforts and performance in the classroom),” particularly content knowledge, clarity of presentation, and intelligent responses to student doubts and questions (Ruiz, 1999; Santons, 1999; Schmelkes, 1997, 2000 all cited in López-Acevedo, 2002).

Background: Evolution and Limitations of the Project

It was within the above general Mexican elementary-secondary school milieu—which appears well-primed for professional development of an integrative-systematic nature—that we were invited by the director of a pre-K–12 private school in central Mexico for a short-term, intensive—albeit unspecified—EFL teacher training experience. We did not know then that our developing roles as consultant-teacher-researchers, and, yes, agents of influence, would help evolve this initial contact into a three-year comprehensive program. The overall experience was characterized, not by a single, long-term plan, but rather by a serendipitous chain of events, in which each link was considered a single and final link prior to another link being formed. That is, by contractual design, we entered the initial stage, and each subsequent stage, with the understanding that it would be the final one. Simply stated, we did not have the authority as consultants to mandate or authorize a long-term, comprehensive project.

However, as teachers’ and students’ needs became more precisely identified, presented, and discussed; as recommended alternatives to addressing the needs became more concrete and valued; and as resources became available, the
professional connection between us, as consultant-teacher-researchers, and the administrators, teachers, and students continued to strengthen, leading to yearly contracts. Thus, although not conforming in any strict sense to guidelines associated with long term strategic planning (United Nations, 2002) as articulated by the integrative-systematic approach, a developmental process did unfold—one which ultimately was composed of three major interrelated components: (1) implementation of long-term EFL professional development, (2) articulation of a multilevel complex of EFL proficiency standards and corresponding analysis and recommendation of K–12 EFL textbooks, and (3) the design of EFL tests for grades 1 through 12, and their administration to over 1,000 students. In this article, we address the four phases associated with the initial stage—what turned out to be Year 1—of the program, and offer, in conjunction with a description and analysis of the short-term teacher training session in June (at that point, planned as a one-time experience at a university site in the southwestern United States), the conditions and processes that led to a second site consultation within the same calendar year, together with its associated elements, analyses, and results.

**Phase 1: Determine EFL Teachers’ Needs and Interests**

In June, we visited the school site in Mexico to identify and document the needs of the EFL teachers and students by (a) surveys and interviews, (b) observations of actual EFL classes from kindergarten through high school, and (c) meetings with the school administration and teachers. We conducted group interviews with the teachers and administered questionnaires to determine their concerns about their teaching and how other contextual factors might relate to it. Factors surfaced such as student motivation, textbook use, evaluation and placement of the students, working relations between the EFL director and the teachers, as well as among the teachers themselves, and their specific needs for professional development. The teachers also completed a questionnaire in English about their knowledge of theories of second/foreign language acquisition and teaching. We then randomly observed at least one EFL class from each level and grade, which enabled us to observe almost all the EFL teachers at the K–12 level.

The above collection of first-hand information regarding the classroom practice of the teachers enabled us to identify, on a preliminary basis, patterns of their interaction with the students, and the students’ classroom performance in English. The observations were also videotaped for future data analysis.

During the site visit, several meetings also were held with members of the school administration (e.g., elementary and secondary school principals) to gather data and perceptions relative to the history of the school, the ESL program and its current developmental status, and concerns and needs from the perspective of the school’s administrators.

**Phase 2: Data Analysis and Design of Professional Development Program**

We examined the data from interviews and surveys, as well as from field
notes and videotapes of the classroom observations and group meetings. Based on this collective examination, we identified five common areas of needs and interests for professional development and proposed a three-week program to be held at the university campus at which the second author worked. The five areas of professional development focus were:

(a) integration of current effective teaching methodologies within general education and EFL contexts;
(b) development of learning activities which promote the use of English language through student grouping strategies involving interaction and collaboration;
(c) identification of appropriate means to assess students’ foreign language proficiency and development;
(d) effective team building and collaboration for sustained, productive collegiality among the teachers; and
(e) effective approaches to developing curriculum and evaluating textbooks.

Phase 3: Implementation of the Professional Development Program

Twelve of the seventeen EFL teachers (71 percent) from the school in Mexico came to the U.S. university campus to engage in the three-week training program. The five teachers who were not able to attend either were not able to obtain visas or had family commitments that required their presence. The three-week program included:

a. Team Building. Teachers were assigned into three teams according to the grade levels they taught: kindergarten, elementary, and junior and senior high school. Each team chose a team leader. The purpose was to have the teachers personally experience cooperative learning and collaboration before they integrated these instructional strategies into their actual teaching philosophy, repertoire and practice. The teachers worked together in their respective groups, planning classroom ESL observations, engaging in discussions about the topics covered, and exchanging ideas and understandings among themselves with respect to the topics and their applicability within their EFL context. Working in grade-specific teams promoted the development of connections and solidarity among the team members. The activities conducted within the groups established the foundation for effectively collaborating with one another in their final project preparation. During this period, the teachers discussed the content of what they were learning and its application to their actual EFL context, and then each group member worked on a specific section of the project for which he or she was responsible. This collaborative process served as a model for team building for social and academic purposes among the teachers and their students.

b. Seminar on Learning Theory. This seminar introduced teachers to current theoretical orientations in teaching and learning pertinent to native language and ESL/EFL teaching contexts. Topics included the socio-psycho-linguistic
orientation to language teaching and learning, models of communication, cooperative learning as a research-informed instructional and learning strategy, and methods of classroom observation for teachers. The seminar emphasized the notion that informed—particularly research-based—practice complements and extends natural teaching talent. Thus, the explicit operating assumption was that as teachers understand and integrate social learning principles and orientations into their EFL context, they will make more informed decisions regarding their classroom practice and more effective learning will occur. Additionally, based on the understanding and application of social learning principles, they can also assess their own performance and that of their students’ more critically. The complementary notion of teaching and learning as an interconnected life-long process formed an integral component of the seminar.

c. Teaching Workshops. During the afternoons, teachers attended workshops on practical teaching techniques related to reading, speaking, listening, and writing in a second language; the role of drama and games in teaching and learning; and portfolio assessment and other evaluation strategies consistent with the principles of the learning theory seminar. Workshops were designed to provide modeling and scaffolding activities to make the learning more context-embedded for the teachers. In each workshop, experienced professionals and experts provided exemplary activities and models for the teachers and the opportunity for them to work in their assigned groups as students to try out the activities. Teachers reported great satisfaction with this part of the training, particularly as the workshops introduced practical and tangible tools for them to use in their EFL classroom contexts. Through the workshops, they also experienced, and ultimately benefited from, collaborative group learning.

d. Observations of ESL Classrooms. Each teacher team observed ESL classes at the university during the mornings. Members within each team observed three ESL teachers. The members then shared their observations through daily debriefings and made personal journal entries. The purpose of the observations was to help develop the EFL teachers’ skill in critical observation, including noticing patterns of teacher-student interaction and the degree to which ESL teachers conduct their classes based on the teaching and learning theories discussed in the seminar. Thus, the guided observation process helped them to critically appraise actual ESL practices and relate them to learning theories and become more observant and reflective of the activities in their own EFL teaching practices. For example, when the EFL teachers observed the ESL classes taught by three different ESL teachers, they noticed the difference in their ESL teaching styles and techniques and the effect these had on the students. The EFL teachers became very concerned about one of the ESL teachers who was perceived as not being as effective in her instruction as the others. We used this meaningful instance to discuss and analyze the factors involved in the ESL teacher’s instruction based on the theoretical orientation and principles, and the complementary methodologies and techniques the EFL teachers were learning, to help them reconstruct and critique instructional practice. We then
asked the EFL teachers to brainstorm ways to help the ESL teacher make her teaching more effective. The EFL group observing her class also volunteered as helpers in her class, which enhanced the quality of her ESL classroom and provided collegial support and modeling to her by her EFL colleagues. This learning experience also made the coordinator of the ESL program, who was also one of the researchers and trainers for the project, become more aware of the need for professional development within the ESL program for which she was responsible. This instance became a mutually meaningful learning experience along multiple dimensions, characterized by deep reciprocity, as EFL teachers receiving professional development in the U.S. helped refine their ESL demonstration teachers’ skills, an experience which, in turn, raised the consciousness of the ESL coordinator relative to the need for enhanced ESL professional development.

e. Practice Teaching. During the second week of their observations, some of the EFL teachers volunteered to teach ESL classes for a day or so to try out the new methods and techniques to which they had been exposed. These teaching instances also served as observation opportunities for their EFL peers in the team. Both activities afforded a two-fold benefit to the EFL teachers. On the one hand, the group member giving ESL instruction was attempting to effectively model the principles and practices they had all been exposed to. On the other hand, after the ESL class, the individual teacher and the whole group engaged in an open discussion, reflecting critically upon the perceived quality of the teaching that had transpired. Although most of the teachers who volunteered in these sessions were group leaders, there were also EFL group members who volunteered to present an ESL lesson from which their EFL peers presumably could learn, or vice versa. In one case, for example, the EFL teacher’s demonstration lesson content was far beyond the comprehensible level of the ESL students. As a result, some of the techniques did not work very well and the demonstration lesson was not very effectively delivered. However, the whole team discussed the activity during the debriefing session and provided ways to modify the content material and techniques of delivery in the future. This transformed a potentially negative teaching experience on the part of an individual teacher into a group-wide positive learning experience with relevant implications for their EFL classroom contexts upon their return to Mexico.

f. Reading a Textbook on Teaching ESL/EFL. At the end of the first week, teachers began to read a textbook (Freeman & Freeman, 1998) on teaching EFL/ESL learners. The textbook explained the socio-psycho-linguistic principles of language teaching and learning, provided specific examples of teaching and learning theories, and generally supported the content presented in the seminar on social learning theory. According to the teachers’ journal entries and questionnaire responses, reading the textbook facilitated their understanding of the relationship of theory to classroom practice, and provided concrete examples that they could adapt to their own EFL classrooms. The teachers also shared their questions in their debriefing sessions and journals regarding specific issues raised in various
chapters. As teacher-researchers, moreover, we engaged the whole team in
exploring ways to relate the principles and issues to their own context to make the
teaching and learning possibilities more relevant to them.

g. Daily Debriefing among Teams. At the end of each day, teachers spent
an hour to debrief what they had observed and offer their reflective comments
relative to their own EFL teaching context. They also shared their observational
and learning journals with us. This activity provided the opportunity for teachers,
individually and as a team, to reflect upon and discuss what they had learned, what
they did not yet understand, and those areas upon which they wished to receive
elaboration. This consistent, first-hand information enabled the researchers and the
trainers to continually calibrate the professional development program in terms of
its focus and activities. Thus, the teachers’ feedback and input were integrated
into the daily development of the whole program. For example, the teachers
were very enthusiastic about the use of computer software and technology in
the EFL classroom. After the first session of the workshop, they still had quite
a few questions unanswered. Knowing the teachers’ interest, we added another
session of the workshop on this topic to more appropriately meet their needs and
interests.

Another benefit of the debriefing session was to clarify the questions and
concerns that remained after the workshops. For instance, many EFL teachers
were not sure about how to integrate the techniques associated with the “writing
circles” process (i.e., support groups in which students as individual writers
may write and read their work-in-progress and receive non-judgmental, but
critical, feedback on their writing form, style and content) into their respective
EFL contexts. We elaborated upon the rationale of the process and its aim of
improving students’ written communication skills through social interaction
and collaboration. Then, we provided additional examples, applying techniques
across different academic grades and EFL levels. These supportive activities, and
the discussion that followed among the teachers, made the writing circles process
more comprehensible for the whole group. Subsequently, we observed that a
number of the EFL teachers had implemented this process in their classrooms and
that their students enjoyed engaging in the process.

h. Journal Entries. Teachers’ daily journal entries contained comments and
reflections on their ESL classroom observations, seminars and workshops, and
all other activities relating to their professional development experience. Journal
entries were read on a daily basis and responses and comments provided to the
individual teachers by the professional development coordinator, who was also one
of the researchers. This activity provided the researchers with information relative
to each teacher’s learning progress and insights into the dynamic relationships
within the team. Teacher feedback on their daily activities also helped us modify
the training program and activities to meet their needs and provide individual
support to teachers in need of it.

Through the teachers’ daily journal entries, many subtle issues surfaced
relative to the professional development program and teaching EFL in their native context. We also got to know each of the teachers better, particularly with respect to their understanding and feelings about the activities in the training program. This understanding enabled us to provide comments, both written and orally, to each individual teacher. Our dialogue tended to build a personal bridge between each teacher and the teacher/researcher. For one EFL teacher, for example, who shared his concern about the usefulness of the observation activity, we elaborated upon the multiple purposes and advantages of honing observation skills. Another teacher shared her frustrations toward some of her colleagues, expressing that she felt misunderstood by them. We held an individual conference with her to help her overcome the emotional challenge she was facing and provided her with positive suggestions and feedback. Journal entries also made us aware of tension existing between the director of the EFL program and some teachers on the team. We were able to dialogue with both parties, offering suggestions to promote communication and understanding between them.

1. Final Presentations and Evaluations. At the beginning of the third week, teachers ceased their observation activities and began working on specific group projects and individual presentations. Their focus was twofold: (a) present changes they planned to make as a team at a specific grade level and (b) present changes to the individual lesson plans relating to specific lessons in the particular classroom textbook each used in Mexico. The environment for these activities was consciously and reciprocally supportive, and guided by principles adapted from Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development: The presence of a helpful peer, who interacts meaningfully with the partner or group to extend the individual's or group's level of knowledge (DeVillar & Faltis, 1991, 1994). The presentations, submitted in writing by each team and teacher, were in the form of action plans they were to implement the following semester in their classroom contexts in Mexico. The action plans focused upon lesson plans that promote student-centered learning; integrated listening, speaking, reading and writing skill development; collaborative group work; and holistic evaluation of student language development.

At the conclusion of the professional development experience, each of the participants completed a fifteen-item questionnaire, evaluating and reflecting on the three-week process. The preliminary results of this three-week summer program indicate that the twelve teachers felt that they had come to understand the notions and value of collaboration and student-centered learning through reading, discussion, and workshops. Further, they felt that they had learned how to apply them to their own teaching. As a result, ten of eleven teachers (92 percent) commented that this training experience had changed their perspectives on teaching and learning. Teachers enjoyed that the workshops were concrete. Ten of twelve teachers (83 percent) strongly agreed that the daily debriefing and discussion sessions helped them to “clarify some doubts,” “exchange ideas,” and “relate to real classroom challenges.” They also “learned from other members of
the group different things" that can be used in their classroom. Teachers strongly agreed that the teamwork on the final project was useful to themselves and to their school. All the teachers expressed a strong desire to continue the professional development process by continuing the communication with the researcher-trainers, reading the textbook on ESL/EFL teaching, and interacting with their team members.

Phase 4: Continued Support and Evaluation via Periodic E-mail and Site Visit

a. Background. Between September and early December, the Mexican EFL teachers and the researchers communicated via e-mail. Group leaders coordinated the comments and sent at least one e-mail each to the researchers to report upon their implementation activities as outlined in their action plans and ask for advice on issues. For example, the junior high school teachers had questions on how often student journals should be reviewed by teachers. We responded to the group leader with recommendations (Cobine, 1995; Martino, n.d.).

In December, we visited the school again. During our visit, we listened to and read the English teachers' presentations and reports on the implementation activities they had carried out upon their return from the summer training. We also observed and videotaped their classroom teaching; interviewed senior high students as to their perspectives on the teaching and learning effectiveness of the EFL experience; held conferences with the director of the EFL program, group leaders, and individual teachers; and met with the K–12 content area directors from the school to hear their concerns regarding the effective integration of this integrative-systematic ESL approach throughout the school. In addition, the first author gave two presentations: first, to the school-wide K–12 teachers, directors, and school board members on student-centered pedagogy, integrating elements from the research- and experiential-based writings of Dewey, Freinet, and Vygotsky and their relevance to current teaching dilemmas and opportunities (De Villar, 1998); and second, to all the EFL teachers regarding the principles of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1994) and their relationship to second language learning. We also developed and administered a survey to the school's junior and senior high students to capture attitudes toward various dimensions of the ESL experience.

b. On-Site Implementation by EFL Teachers

1. Teachers' Collaboration in Teams. In Mexico, the EFL teachers remained in the same groups they had formed in the summer program in order to continue to collaborate in their planning of weekly activities associated with the curriculum. For example, the kindergarten teachers made picture dictionaries together for each curriculum unit, used portfolios with each class, and incorporated more games, songs, and realia—such as fruits and puppets—into classroom activities. They also modified the curriculum to suit the needs and pace of the children's learning, once authorization of the program director was granted. Furthermore, they documented the changes and associated activities in the form of a collective
curriculum binder for each unit to use as a basic guide in the next academic year. All in all, the teachers enjoyed exchanging ideas and providing collegial support, and felt that they had benefited from the collegial experience.

The collaborative team approach also helped the EFL teachers who had not participated in the professional development training to learn from their peers and experience the benefit of collaboration in planning. For example, in the 4th to 6th grade group, only the group leader received training in the summer. The prospective threat to effectively establishing a collaborative context was compounded further by the fact that the teachers in this group were using a new fourth-grade textbook that appeared much more difficult in language and content than their previous textbook. Nevertheless, through applying principles of teamwork and collaboration, the group was able to modify parts of the textbook content to accommodate it to the level of the students. There were also special challenges associated with the junior and senior high teacher groups. Their schedules were such that they could not find a common time to conduct frequent formal group meetings as the other groups did. Nonetheless, they managed to meet during their breaks to share their activities and provide support to one another as much as the limited time allowed.

2. Implementation of Activities and Teaching Techniques. The common phenomena that we observed among the teachers, as compared to our first visit six months’ before, were more student-centered activities and teaching techniques across EFL classrooms. The teachers were using some of the techniques that they had learned during the summer program in their classrooms. In the kindergarten, the children were learning English through pictures, games, realia, and songs. They also worked on projects involving drawing, coloring pictures, and replicating modeled sentences. In the first to third grades, students worked in groups, making picture dictionaries, conducting puppet shows for the kindergarten children, and demonstrating their understanding of English culinary vocabulary as they “cooked” spaghetti and meatballs in class. The students sat in groups, among cooking utensils and materials—such as an artificial stove, paper plates, plastic forks and knives—as well as actual spaghetti, and ground meat, which they were to measure into portions and roll into balls, respectively. Their teacher explained in English and modeled the procedure for preparing and cooking the food, which the students followed excitedly. They then experienced the pleasure of eating previously cooked spaghetti and meatballs in class, as their teacher had kept it warm in the portable oven she had brought to class. It was a joyous and memorable authentic learning experience.

In the fourth to sixth grades, the classroom activities were creative and cognitively challenging. The students worked in groups on picture diagrams; Venn diagrams; role-plays involving going to a McDonalds, shopping, and the movies; and science projects—such as animals on farms and planting seeds and documenting their growth. All of these activities were based on the readings in their textbooks. In one of the classes, the students chose their own favorite units
from the reading and made them into skits, which they then performed in groups for the class and teacher. They also brought in different realia for the background scenery of their skits.

Additionally, the EFL program instituted a Culture Week event for students in grades one through six, during which stories would be read from Big Books by teachers from various grade levels to students.

In the seventh to twelfth grades, the classroom activities included using web maps and graphic organizers to enhance reading comprehension, complemented by songs and stories with fill-in-the-blank exercises and drawing activities to enhance listening comprehension. Students engaged in journal writing and writing circles to develop their EFL writing skills and participated in drama skits and thematic discussions to improve their English speaking proficiency. Some teachers also used *Time* and *National Geographic* magazines as supplementary reading materials. In one class, the students brought in pictures of their family or friends and exchanged them with groups of students who had no information about the people in the pictures. Then each group wrote down their guesses about the people in the picture, using descriptive words and phrases they had learned, and presented their fantasy-family project to the whole class. It was a pleasant learning experience for the students, and enabled them to practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English within the same activity. Another integrated activity that the students enjoyed was the cross-grade writing project based on TV captions. After the students watched a particular captioned program on TV, they wrote summaries and comments about the story they had viewed. The teacher then gave the summaries and comments to students in another grade at the senior high school level for them, as peers, to edit and offer editorial comments to their student-author colleagues. The student-authors always looked forward to the comments and corrections on their writing by peers from other grades. This activity was helpful in developing the form (i.e., the manner in which writing was presented) and content (i.e., the subject matter) of students’ writing in English, as well as their editorial skills. The principles associated with this supportive writing approach have been integrated throughout the EFL program.

3. Students’ Performance and Feedback. In our observations and interactions with the K–12 students, we delighted in their English oral proficiency, their enthusiasm for learning English, and their active participation and interaction in class. The students generally were very animated in their interactions with one another and their teachers. In our interviews with the students, they all expressed (a) their liking and appreciation of the new activities (e.g. Cloze song passages, multimedia, group work, etc.) that their teachers had brought back from their professional development program and (b) a desire to learn more English. Prior to returning to the U.S., we administered a survey that we designed for the junior and senior high school students (N = 606) regarding the changes that the teachers had implemented at the beginning of the semester. The survey results indicated that:

- 63% (382) of the secondary students (N = 606) enjoyed their English classes more than last semester;
- 73% (442) of the students preferred to participate in many activities in the classroom because to do so helped improve their English;
• 80% (485) of the students enjoyed working with their classmates;
• the students’ three favorite activities were songs, multimedia, and teamwork.

Recommendations for Improving Instructional Aspects of the EFL Program

a. EFL Textbook Concerns. From our meetings and interaction with the teachers, we found that there were concerns about the use of the fourth-grade textbook, as well as concerns regarding some textbooks used in the senior high school. Additionally, the survey results from the secondary students indicated that only 41 percent (249 of 606) of the students agreed that the textbook used in class met their learning needs. We offered the following suggestions to the elementary and secondary teachers and to the EFL director: (a) that the teachers collaborate to modify the textbook to suit the needs of the students; (b) that the EFL director work with the teachers in each group to give them specific help and the flexibility in time needed to make the modifications as a team; and (c) that the EFL director work with all the teachers in collectively identifying and selecting textbooks in a more criterion-based and articulated manner, particularly for use at the secondary level. This issue would serve as a critical linkage to the second year contract, which requested a review, analysis, and recommendation of pre-K–12 EFL/ESL textbooks for use by the school. The assignment was made more complex, as three sets of texts, conforming to beginner, intermediate and advanced, had to be identified for each grade level from seventh through twelfth.

b. Concerns regarding Insufficient Time for Group Work. Teachers in the junior and senior high schools expressed their concern about the lack of time to meet as a group to collaborate in planning and sharing ideas and activities. In our observations and interviews, we also found that the lack of time for collaborative teamwork resulted in a corresponding lack of cohesion in activities and delivery of instruction within and across EFL levels. Thus, we recommended that the school administration allot one paid hour per day, per EFL teacher, so that the teachers could meet and collaborate after normal operating hours among themselves and the EFL director. The School Board authorized two paid hours per week per teacher throughout the academic year for them to meet.

c. Concerns regarding EFL Assessment and Evaluation. We recommended that the use of a portfolio as a means of assessment be adopted in the EFL program across all grades and levels and less time be spent on frequent, formal testing—a requirement which appeared excessive to the teachers and students, and which entailed a substantial amount of preparation and grading time. However, the school administration maintained its requirement of monthly testing of a traditional paper-and-pencil method. Thus, a compromise of sorts was reached as the program adopted the use of portfolios within grades K through 6—enabling students to demonstrate EFL development and competencies each Friday—and each month, the students would take the traditional paper-and-pencil exam. The portfolio assessments accounted for 50 percent of each student’s testing period grade; the monthly exams, for the other half.
**d. Concerns regarding Additional Support Needs.** The teachers in the fourth to sixth and ninth to twelfth grades needed more support and guidance from the director in terms of the modification of the textbook curriculum and collaborative teamwork. We suggested regular meetings between the director and the fourth-grade teachers so that plans could be made on how to modify each unit to deliver the instruction in class. The junior and senior high school teachers also needed guidance and facilitation in their collaborative group work, as addressed in sections a and b above.

*Recommendations Relating to Administrators and Parents*

**a. More Communication at Every Level.** Teachers, parents, and the students needed to be informed of the changes taking place in the classroom and the proposed benefits of these changes. Thus, beginning in Year 2, meetings at the beginning of each year were conducted by the EFL director with parents across the pre-K–12 range, at which time the director, aided by PowerPoint slides, would present in detail the elements, resources, and expectations associated with the EFL program. The director would also schedule appointments with parents during the academic year, particularly with those parents having students who were not performing at the expected level so that the parents and the director could arrive at ways of supporting the students in English language development outside the classroom.

**b. Distribution of Leadership Focus.** We recommended that the director of the English language program strive to distribute her administrative support more in accordance with the needs of the particular grade level or set of grade levels. For instance, as the kindergarten and elementary (first grade to third grade) teachers were now operating successfully, the director should focus more time on working with the teachers at other grade levels to promote the value of collaboration and teamwork among the teachers in those groups and ensure that they allot space in their schedules to prepare for and engage in collaborative activities. The director agreed to focus her leadership energies in a more distributive manner.

**c. Parent Awareness.** We recommended that the school organize activities, such as an English Night or similar events, in which students from all grade levels could perform in English for the parents once or twice a year. In this way, the parents would have an opportunity to observe their children and peers using English in public. It would help parents to better understand and appreciate the changes in the school’s EFL program. The teachers responded to this recommendation in distinct ways. One teacher team from the 1st and 2nd grades reported to us regarding their parent-student event:

> We had an open class with parents recently and it was a great success because they could see how kids are doing. We used all the strategies that we learned in San Antonio [U.S. city where professional development was first held] and we gave them an idea of the program and books. Parents could see their children’s team work published in bulletin boards where we included pictures and projects which covered the 4 skills.
d. Administrator Development. We recommended that in order to keep the administrators informed of the changes taking place in the English program and receive their support, training for the K–12 directors was necessary. The training could be in different forms. One possibility would be to invite educators and experts to the Mexican school campus periodically so that the administrators and board members could attend seminars on theories of teaching and learning, as well as on current trends in methodologies and the outcomes associated with them. Later, they could also travel to the U.S. university campus to receive intensive ESL instruction and visit schools and classrooms in the area. Based on the above recommendation, during the second year, particular administrators received two hours of EFL instruction each week throughout the academic year.

Conclusion

Within this intense consultant-teacher-researcher first-year context, it was not possible to predict if there would be any formal, contractual follow-up or the particular nature of it should it occur. That a second year formal contract did result, and that the perceived area of need was in developing ESL proficiency standards and analyzing and identifying pre-K–12 textbooks to recommend, were the consequence of negotiations and decision-making internal to the school site. The obvious drawback to operating under these constraints relates to adequate response time, availability of consultants, and project continuity and directionality, and could dramatically effect long-term planning, implementation and results along critical dimensions (i.e., teachers, students, administrators, parents, curricula).

Nevertheless, the complex set of processes that led to the results of our first-year research at a private school in Mexico appears substantively aligned to important principles that comprise the integrative-systematic approach to professional development prevalent in current U.S. educational literature. The experience was strategically planned, within the time and circumstantial constraints of the first year's two contracts, to (a) design a program guided by teacher, administrative, and student input; (b) provide—within an extended-term collegial context—meaningful and authentic learning opportunities within which teachers would collaborate and thus socially negotiate and construct meaning relevant to their EFL instructional circumstance; (c) build a community of learners, leaders and practice, comprised of the EFL teachers and the wider school community; (d) enable the EFL teachers to absorb new content knowledge and pedagogy (i.e., philosophy, research, and skills) to interrelate and transform into informed practice in a manner that would be at once generative and sustainable; and (e) be output-directed insofar as the ultimate aim was measurably-enhanced student performance in English. At the same time, the first year experience addressed important elements specific to Mexican teachers' professional development needs identified by country-specific research studies, namely, student-centered
instruction, detailed lesson plans, stimulation of higher order thinking skills, attention to reading comprehension and writing abilities, and cooperative learning practices. It appears that the elements of the integrative-systematic paradigm—although stemming from conditions historically linked to a decidedly U.S. context and values—can be effectively extended and modified to improve instructional and learning processes and results at the school-wide EFL level within a different language and cultural context (Spanish and Mexico, in this case), thus preserving the integrity of both, while reinforcing the language and cultural values associated with the rhetoric of globalization (multilingualism and multiculturalism).

References


