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Evolving from One's Depth to Teaching and Research Expertise: Chronicle of a Specialization Proposal

Costa Rica has put its faith in the formation of an English proficient community, as a salient strategy for economic development; yet, the success of this objective has been limited by the nationwide scantiness of qualified teachers. Taking action to construe a solution, the Masters in Second Languages and Cultures, of the Universidad Nacional, proposes a post-graduate-certificate training addressed to all instructors of the Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje (ELCL). The proposal is an on-the-job specialization project, for instructors to become even better prepared to form more competent primary and high-school English teachers. Via a fresh, trainee-centered methodology, the appointed advanced preparation triggers trainees' rapid and meaningful evolution towards perfecting their professional qualifications in needed areas of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics' instruction and research processes. This proposal is in-transit to formalization.

For the sake of clarity, in this document we refer to the different academic populations as stated in the table below.

Table 1. Description of Academic Groups at the ELCL

Category	Acronym	Description
More experienced instructors	(MEIs)	Instructors with more than 20 years experience at the UNA.
Less experienced instructors	(LEIs)	Instructors with more than 5 years experience at the UNA.
Novice instructors	(NIs)	Instructors with 4 or less years experience at the UNA.
Trainers	(TRs)	Instructors leading the advanced training for specialization.
More experience instructors with double role	(MDIs-TRs)	More experienced instructors who play at once a dual role: instructors of the masters' courses and the training.
Trainees	(TEEs)	Participants of the advanced training for specialization.
Master degree instructor	(MDI)	Masters program educators.
Graduate Students	(GSs)	Masters program learners.

A Dilemma that is Slowing Down Bilingualism

In the last five years, there has been a booming demand for massive English instruction in Costa Rica, due to its pressing need to count on quickly with bilingual labour force to access the global market. Lacking of enough proficient English teachers to cover the whole community's FL¹ training, the Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje (ELCL) of the Universidad Nacional (UNA) opened—in its main and rural area campuses—new programs.² Some of these academic plans prepare more skilled English teachers, others instruct FL students from different majors, and some others teach English to the general population. Recently, this initiative for English instruction was intensified in response to the national program Costa Rica Multilingüe,³ which urges all educational institutions to create and support FL teacher-training and English-learning programs.

Coinciding in time with the above situation, the English Department of the ELCL affronted, all at once, the challenge of opening many new language programs⁴ and the diminishing capacity to operate those academic plans with the more experienced instructors (MEIs). Four years ago, a significant number of twenty to thirty-years-experience instructors left service abruptly, motivated by a beneficial retirement plan. Within this span of time, other MEIs retired, and some others will follow them before long. These professionals' vast experience and knowledge expertise constitutes the legacy that less experienced instructors need to learn from, as an undisputable condition to perpetuate the ELCL's academic excellence. It is essential, then, to have the MEIs lead teacher-training projects.

Instructors with less experience—over five years—constitute nowadays a third of the total academic staff of the English Department. Incidentally, these less experienced instructors (LEIs) have become the forefront group responsible for advancing the distinctive teaching and research practices inherited. Although they

have worked on furthering their knowledge and experience to cope with the challenge, there is an urgency to speed the process due to the imminent retirement of the remaining MEIs.

The last and larger group of educators is the one composed by novice instructors. The unexpected loss of many MEIs, conjointly with the creation of plentiful English programs, led to hiring a myriad of novice instructors (NIs) who have very little or no experience at the UNA. These certified instructors have obtained master degrees in prestigious programs, but they lack depth in some specialized FL fields and the wisdom of experience in the ELCL's and the UNA's academic and research dynamics.

Pertinence of Post-graduate Professional Enhancement

Subject-specialized expertise is essential at the university level to best serve the profession. Both LEIs and NIs need to commit to professional growth and gain vast experience to reach the high-academic standards that MEIs of the ELCL have perfected over the years. Achieving this state-of-the-arts competence is decisive for teaching courses that deal with specialized L2 areas of knowledge such as Ethnolinguistics, Culture, Alternative Evaluation, Literature, Research, and others. Moreover, NIs more than others, must gain promptly knowledge and experience on UNA's institutional dynamics. The document *UNA Experience for Development* (2008) emphasises that mastery of official academic and administrative principles is a fundamental constituent for instructors to contribute more appropriately to the creation and management of knowledge (p. 29). The goal is to encourage NIs to develop institutional identity and commitment, inasmuch as these two attitudes drive instructors to exert effort on managing the university's principles, aims, functions and objectives for congruent alignment of their intellectual work.

In spite of its relevance, training for the aforesaid professional development was not anticipated at the ELCL because the unforeseen need for professionals' substitution caught its authorities unprepared to institute, in good time, a plan for academic turnover. The risk is that, when universities overlook their instructors' enhancement of expertise, they end up preparing L2 teachers for primary and high-schools whose inadequate formation incapacitates many. Alejandrina Mata (2007), Academic Vice-minister of the Ministry of Public Education, declares that one of the core reasons why 11th high-school learners' in Costa Rica cannot communicate in English—in spite of having received 500 hours of language training—is due to instructors' lack of FL and pedagogical competence (in Villegas, n. p.). Coinciding with her, Leonardo Garnier (2008), Minister of Public Education states that, “Nobody can teach a subject if he does not master it or know how to teach it” (in Ruiz & Arias, n. p.). This insubstantial formation of English teachers is a condition that the ELCL has always prevented through its well-set and masterly operated academic programs and projects, including outreach plans.

Historically, the ELCL has coped with the above predicament assigning the MEIs to its teacher-training programs. Due to this asserted praxis, the ELCL' s alumni are among the top-national qualified English instructors, as confirmed recently by the results of the MEP's diagnostic evaluation (2008) applied to in-service English teachers of public primary and high-schools of the country (in Herrera, n. p.). These high-standard exit profiles in FL teaching are to be granted for the time to come since today—more than ever—there are plenty opportunities for social upward mobility, at reach mostly of those citizens who are English proficient. Thus, the ELCL needs to redouble efforts to set advanced training projects that will keep furthering its instructors' professional growth, for them to be better equipped to form more proficient English teachers and bilingual citizens.

Proposal

Motivated by the analysis of the above scenario, professors of the Masters in Second Languages and Cultures (MSLC), of the ELCL, formulated an academic refining plan at the outset of 2009. They proposed the creation of a novel on-the-job specialization training that aims at accelerating—through an integrative and reflective methodology—the instructors' breadth, depth and experience in the ELCL's established development areas of FL knowledge. This in-depth training is in line with UNA's Institutional Strategic Plan 2007-2011 (2008), that encourages the formulation of any project that “strengthens human talent, improves and renews the capacities of the academic body, and develops a formation/training plan to guarantee the institutional academic turnover” (p. 53). Coming next is getting approval of an action-research specialization project that seeks to formalize and implement the training in 2011.

As remarked before, the proposed in-depth preparation is framed within a permanent instructional project (not in graduate program) managed by the ELCL and conducted by its MEIs. Because the training proposed is a post-certification preparation that is aimed at engaging certified licentiates and masters, what trainees (TEEs) are offered is additional, specialized preparation in particular areas of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, and an accelerated gain of advanced academic experience. Commonly, curricula seeking master and doctoral formation in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics programs do not develop every subject-matter in depth. Instead, most of them provide general professional growth in the disciplines they address, and only few extend their curriculum to offer mastery on one or two specialization fields. Consequently, the expertise gained in the advanced training proposed by the MSLC will enable the TEEs to support and/or renew—in the short

run—the remaining few MEIs that for long have been operating the curriculum in the language school.

One of the conditions that adds validity and reliability to the appointed domestic training is that, its main pedagogical sources and research contexts are the graduate courses of the ELCL. The curriculum of the specialization project is grounded on the study-plans of the masters' classes, which are also the optimal laboratories where TEEs can develop more truthful action-research. Harmonically, the MDIs teaching GSs in the masters' sessions are at the same time the trainers (TRs) coaching LEIs and NIs in the advanced preparation. To put it in another way, every training-module aimed at enhancing less experienced instructors' expertise on a given linguistic discipline, will be developed alongside the graduate course in which the corresponding content of interest is taught, and tutored by the same experienced professional.

From here on, we refer to the MDIs and TRs as MDIs-TRs, to remind of the dual role that instructors play by being at once instructors of the masters' courses and of the training project.

Functionality of the Initiative

Due to its pertinent curriculum and time-efficient pedagogy, the proposal for a domestic training is the most practical and purposeful specialization alternative to satisfy the ELCL's immediate demand of MEIs. On one hand, there are few academic programs in the country that offer post licentiate or masters' certification training in particular areas of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. On the other hand, sending many instructors overseas to take leading-edge-training implies that the English Department would have to do without them. This would be too risky considering that skilful English instructors are scanty nationwide. Additionally, an out-of-the-country

preparation would demand engaging in exhausting bureaucratic arrangements for instructors to study safely abroad, and waiting too long for them to return. In contrast, the MSLC's plan for an on-the-job training has none of these limitations, but rather can set the project in short to assist even better the English programs of the ELCL.

Domestic Specialization

As stated before, a particular feature of the specialization proposal is that it has been fixed exclusively as an advanced in-house preparation; several sound reasons substantiate this resolution. First, the ELCL has vast experience, thirty-six years, making L2 specialized areas of knowledge pertinent to the country's educational realities. Second, the MEIs have posed their own theorization, in addition to having tested borrowed ones; as a result, the school's heritage on specialized Linguistics and Applied Linguistics disciplines is forefront and highly suitable. Finally, the ELCL counts on with an accumulated experience in teacher-training. There were academic coaching-practices operating informally for more than twenty years, and there have been outreach programs for training in-service primary-school English teachers functioning formally for more than 13 years. Then, the ELCL's teacher-training background is an advanced point of departure from which to move onward.

Breaking New Ground

The novelty of the proposed in-depth training lies in its pedagogical methodology. Different from the teaching approach adopted by many specialization programs, the MSLC's training is centred in the TEEs. This pedagogical trend gives them the freedom and stimuli to use their professional background knowledge and skills to analyze and test the MDIs/TRs' accumulated theoretical grounding and

experience. Replacing teaching pre-established schemas is accomplished via the incorporation of a critical pedagogy and reflective methodology.

In addition, the originality of the pedagogical method also lies in the democratic mechanism employed to set acquisition growth strategies; as an example, we propose the following: collaborative leadership, cultural cohesion, and talent retention. The learning dynamics are devised conjointly by both MDIs-TRs and TEEs. They all test these academic plans of action in pilot projects such as the Alternative Evaluation training (just completed), and the Ethnography training (currently in action). The main argument to justify this cooperative establishment of strategies is that MEIs, LEIs, and NIs are all acquainted with pedagogical mechanisms. Together they can decide upon which teaching plans encompassing learning styles can be chosen to better trigger individuals' diverse intake procedures, as well as to speed up the acquisition pursued. Posed in another way, instead of dictating arranged views to TEEs, they are lead to confirm or discard the theoretical and experiential perspectives of MDIs/TRs, those of other scholars, and even their own.

Methodological Moves

The specialization training upholds an interactive trainee-centred methodology to warrant expedite and life-long acquisition. According to Murdoch (1994), this is an approach focused on generating a meaningful impact on the TEEs' instruction, by means of designing activities that engage them in active involvement, thus, their critical thinking is triggered and they construct learning rather than just take-in fixed data (in Krall, p.51-52). In spite of some settled pedagogical venues, the TEEs are encouraged to engage in self-study. They seek for bibliography portraying other scholars' relevant viewpoints in regards to the content under scrutiny, and they also

test the efficiency of all theories in the appointed courses via action research.⁵ The main academic activities of this interactive research approach are described below, and more will be added once completed the second pilot training.

Action Research Through Academic Activities

The first learning task is observation, which is to be implemented from a participant and/or a non-participant perspective. TEEs take turns observing how the MDIs/TRs incorporate theoretical grounding in the graduate courses, and collect information that portrays the MDIs/TRs' teaching methodology, resources, materials and others. Initially, these observations must be carried out from a non-judgemental approach to have MDIs-TPs be much more open to aliens' inspections of their class. Richards (1995) points out that "...for observations to be viewed as a positive rather than a negative experience, the observer's function should be limited to that of gathering information" (p.12). Delaying judgements until advanced phases of the training benefits TEEs as well, because by then, time and experiences would have enabled them to achieve a more mature criteria competence to judge from a fair point of view. In addition, TEEs should have independence to decide when it is proper to examine the class from an outsider's perspective (non-participant observation) and when from an insider's one (participant observation); the choice depends on their needs to fulfil the demands of each ones theme in the action-research.

The second assignment is addressed to generate critical discussion in training conferences, where all members analyze the graduate courses' theoretical grounding and teaching praxes under a critical pedagogical approach and reflective perspective. At least once a week, the in-training specialization group gathers to carry out three main tasks: analyze the assigned readings of the MDIs-TRs' own and

borrowed research findings; examine additional data that they (TEEs) have searched for; and inspect the reports of the graduate classes observed.

The training team participates in discussion sessions using critical pedagogy.⁶ This learning approach empowers TEEs giving them the confidence to analyze and express views fearlessly, which in turn arouses their receptivity to acknowledge the value of other individuals' viewpoints. Allwright and Bailey (1994) confirm that this broad-mindedness attitude defangs group clashes (which can emerge due to preconceived teaching and learning prejudices), anxiety to interact with more proficient colleagues, and lack of humbleness to accept sound ideas from others (p. 161, 199). In addition, the training group should engage in academic debates. The most effective methodology to orient the discussions is reflection-on-action,⁷ inasmuch as specialized knowledge and teaching practices only become intelligible and valid to TEEs when they ponder deeply self and others' views. Reflection can be carried out in four phases: engaging in analysis, proposing solutions, taking action, and evaluating results.

The third task substantiating action research is to allow candidates to teach challenging themes in the specialized courses. Nurtured by the study of data derived from theory, class observations, conferences, etc., TEEs select topics, set the lesson planning, and then teach the class. They also contribute to design a rating scale to have graduate students (GSs) of the courses inspected evaluate their (the TEEs') teaching performance in those areas accorded by the specialization team. Following a cyclical pattern, the data collected by means of this instructional experience in the masters' classes is debated in the training sessions.

The fourth task refers to evaluating; MGIs-TRs and TEEs assess the academic products that GSs present for assessment, as a means to realize how much meaningful learning they have achieved at different stages of the course. The

qualitative and quantitative evaluation of their examined research papers, portfolios, introspective essays, exams, oral presentations, etc., are compared in order to study similarities and differences in judgement among the evaluators, and the reasons underlying the discrepancies. MDIs-TRs encourage TEEs to discuss the results of such cross-testers evaluation, to examine the efficiency of theoretical principles, to make adjustments (if necessary), and to adopt what is beneficial to their teaching practices.

The fifth activity incorporates alternative evaluation tasks in order to evaluate the degree of specialization that the TRs achieved post-training. They systematize all the data yielded by the action-research and report the results in academic papers, and articles, and show the development of professional skills designing pedagogical units, updating bibliography, formulating academic projects, setting a workshop, and others. At least one of the intellectual pieces should depict the TEEs' acquisition experiences along the journey of the advanced training. The relevance of such product lies in that the resulting systematization of pedagogical and learning accounts, as well as of the data collected, will enable other professionals to use the report as a higher point of departure for further in-depth specialization processes of the same or similar areas of knowledge. The aforementioned academic products must be socialized with prestigious audiences, in order to fulfil two main goals: first, to allow the TEEs to further their professional skills; and second, to inform the academic community of the findings resulting from the specialization training.

Pilot Projects of Advanced Training

The proposal for an in-the-job advanced training has been early activated implementing a pilot project on Alternative Evaluation, in the II semester of 2009. This initiative has been used as a yardstick to unveil the advantages and

disadvantages of the teaching methodology of the specialization training, and its constant improvement has generated a positive backwash effect on the specialization team's teaching, learning, and administrative experiences. Moreover, the launching of this probing evaluation plan was given priority to satisfy the ELCL's as well as the nation's critical need for more qualified instructors in L2 non-traditional evaluation; as a result, the ELCL counts now with three additional specialists accredited to teach L2 courses on alternative testing.

Presently, a second pilot project is being taught, this time addressing qualitative research. The training is using the graduate course on Ethnography in the Classroom LPE 706, of the MSLC's program, as the fundamental pedagogical context to teach the TEEs. They are three distinguished NIs who are pursuing mastery of qualitative research and the opportunity to assist the MDI-TR on perfecting the teaching methodology of the training.

Impact and Pertinence

The impact of the specialization initiative is decisive in several relevant ways. To mention just two, the in-depth training will enhance the ELCL's traditional pioneer leadership in language program improvement. In addition, it will yield better equipped instructors to serve in the English Department. Nurtured by the ELCL's thirty-six year academic and research experience, the trained instructors will ground the formation of primary and high-school English teachers and bilingual citizens, at the high scale and excellence required to multiply promptly the country's options for its socio-economic development. Bailey et al (2001) emphasize that instructors' continued growth is fundamental to affront social, political and economic changes (p. 6-10); thus, our country's drastic variations call for the language schools' instructors' fast development of expertise.

At the End of the Tunnel

In broad summary fashion, the demand for MEIs at the ELCL has long exceeded the supply; hence, to provide an expeditious resolution, instructors of the MSLC presented a training proposal for advanced-professional-growth. The specialization proposal is the first of its kind in the ELCL, and its implementation is a key venue to fulfil the national appeal for vast, hasty, bilingual instruction. Currently, the in-depth preparation project is in its formalization stage, and it is expected that in 2011 the training can start operating.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Foreign Language.

² Omar Dengo's Campus: Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés para I y II Ciclos.

³ Decree N.34425-MEP-COMEX March 11th, 2008.

⁴ English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Teacher Training Program (TTP) and Masters' Program.

⁵ "...teacher-initiated classroom investigation which seeks to increase the teachers' understanding of classroom teaching and learning, and to bring about change in classroom practices" (Gregory et al., in Richards and Lockhart, p.12).

⁶ This concept implies that apprentices, in our case specialization candidates, "...must be free to be themselves, to think for themselves, to behave intellectually without coercion from a powerful elite, to cherish their beliefs and traditions and cultures without the threat of forced change" (Brown, p.443).

⁷ It refers to "...the ordered, deliberate, and systematic application of logic to a problem in order to resolve it...and this analysis takes place before or after each session of the course" (Russell and Munby in Bailey et al., p. 37).