

ODA ELT PROJECT IN NICARAGUA: A CASE STUDY IN PROJECT DESIGN

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Abstract

The following is a description of the aims and activities of the ODA ELT Project: Nicaragua. It will describe the research into English Language Teaching which took place in the secondary schools of Nicaragua, how this research was conducted, and what the most significant findings were. From there, it will look at how project plans and activities were developed and the rationale for those plans. Finally, it will consider the implementation of these plans and the implications for future development within the area of ELT in Nicaragua.

1 INTRODUCTION

The ODA ELT Project is a collaborative project involving the Overseas Development Administration (ODA), a branch of the Foreign Office of the British government, the Ministry of Education (MED), and the two largest universities in Nicaragua, the Autonomous National University of Nicaragua (UNAN) and the University of Central America (UCA). Its general aim is to improve English Language Teaching (ELT) at secondary and at tertiary level.

The collaborative structure of the project is an unusual one in ELT. Normally a project is placed within one institution and one management structure. It soon became clear however, that there were strong reasons for basing this project between these institutions, and that, if ELT in secondary schools was to improve, it was essential to involve the universities in the process. It was also clear that the success or otherwise of the project depended on the willingness of these institutions to work together.

As part of the structure of the project, the authors were required to carry out research in the area of ELT throughout the country. Up to this point, there had been no such research. It was, therefore, necessary to conduct a baseline study in order to establish the conditions of ELT in Nicaragua. This had a number of purposes. Firstly, it was necessary to have a clear idea of the ELT context both at secondary and tertiary level in order to develop project plans which would be both appropriate and feasible in the given conditions. In any project a period of familiarisation is necessary, and this form of investigation provided the ideal opportunity. Secondly, this extensive research would provide a baseline against which the impact of the project might be measured at the end of three years. Thirdly, it was a way that the authors might establish credibility with the people they were going to work with; outsiders cannot offer credible solutions to problems if they are not sufficiently knowledgeable of the situation.

2 THE RESEARCH

The research was carried out during a three month period in 1993. Its broad aim was to discover the conditions of ELT all over Nicaragua, mainly in the secondary schools. This research was carried out with the cooperation of the Ministry of Education. The authors were accompanied by two MED officials with responsibility for ELT. The range of the study was as follows:

- 47 Secondary schools were visited in all Spanish speaking regions of Nicaragua
- 62 Secondary school English teachers were observed
- 65 Secondary school English teachers were interviewed
- 84 Teachers were given questionnaires developed at UCA
- 518 Students were given questionnaires concerning English

2. (i). Rationale and Procedures

The main body of the study took the form of observations and interviews with English teachers in their schools. It was felt by the authors that it was important to get as accurate and as general picture as possible of the state of ELT in the state secondary system, and to this end, a number of instruments were used. The first instrument was a checklist of teaching techniques. Whatever techniques the teachers used while being observed would be marked off against this list. No methodological assumptions were made before the observations concerning what kinds of techniques were going to be used by the teachers, and the checklist was as broad as possible, covering techniques which might be used across a spectrum

from a Grammar Translation class, to a Communicative class. If a technique was used which did not appear on the checklist, then this was added to the list.

A second aid was an adaptation of an instrument taken from 'Teach English' (Doff, 1990: p 123). This concentrated on different aspects of the class, for example, blackboard technique, use of English, engagement of students' interest, etc.

The third aid was an adaptation of the Flanders system of interaction analysis (Allwright, 1988: p 60). This was used to observe the kinds of classroom interaction which took place between the teacher and the students, and between the students themselves.

A questionnaire was also prepared through which general information could be obtained about the teacher, for instance, age, sex, salary, academic background, qualifications, etc. There were also questions concerned with their perception of the way they normally teach English.

Finally, a questionnaire was given to students concerning their perception of the usefulness of learning English for their future careers or future studies, their enjoyment or otherwise of the English class, and the difficulties involved in learning English.

3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.(i) General

One of the most obvious features of the survey was the percentage of untrained teachers in the system. These are commonly called *empiricos*, teachers who have learned their craft through the experience of doing the job.

Our sample of teachers who were observed or interviewed during the study, more than 60 teachers from all over Nicaragua, was representative of the make up of the English teaching population overall. There were 19 graduates within the sample, which was 29% of those observed and interviewed. This compares to 27% of the English teaching population who are graduates in Nicaragua, according to statistics obtained from the MED. It cannot be assumed, however, that there was a great difference between graduate and non-graduate teachers in terms of their level of

English or their teaching techniques. In fact there was very little difference in language level, and in terms of general teaching techniques, the graduate and the non-graduate teachers were indistinguishable.

3.(ii) Physical Conditions and Resources

Classes were generally large, an average size of 45, although in Managua especially there were classes with upwards of 80 students in the class, with perhaps 20 of these sitting on the floor. There were no video machines or televisions, nor did we see a cassette recorder in any of the classes we visited. Photocopying material was not possible, due to lack of availability of machines and the prohibitive cost involved. There were stencil machines but these were used almost exclusively for exams. In many cases, cardboard or reinforced paper for posters was not available. Chalk and blackboard were the only materials which were widely available. These are minimal conditions in which a language teacher can operate, and the majority of teachers managed the class remarkably well considering the universal lack of resources.

3.(iii) Material

The national syllabus is based on a series of books called *Pathways to English*, although only the first three out of a series of six books are the basis of the syllabus. The first two books were distributed unevenly among students, and often only 20% or 30% of the students had the book. The third book was scarce; very few students had the book, and not many teachers had the teacher's edition of the book. This is a very hard situation for any teacher to operate in. Erratic distribution of the national textbook was cited by teachers as one of their main problems, and it is difficult to see how this problem can be solved at this late stage. Again, under the circumstances, teachers do well to carry out their responsibilities.

3. (iv) Level of English

We gave an estimated oral grade to each teacher based upon the IELTS test, a proficiency test used by British, Australian and Canadian universities to determine a person's ability to function in English. A score of 6 denotes a competent user of English, who "has generally effective command of the language, despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings" (see Introduction to IELTS, p.6). Of the sample, about 20% of all teachers scored 6 or over, and 80% scored below 6. There was a difference of about 5% between graduates and non-graduates in the survey, the graduates having a slightly higher average, but overall the results were very similar. Surprisingly perhaps, the highest individual scores were gained by untrained teachers.

3. (v) Methods and Techniques

As far as technique is concerned, there were a number of aspects of the class which were almost universally present, and there was no real difference between graduates and non-graduates, nor between those teachers who had a reasonable command of English and those who found communication difficult in English. A teaching paradigm existed which did not owe its form to training received in the universities, but to the 'craft model', as described by Michael Wallace (see Wallace 1991, p. 6). This refers to teaching which is based on techniques learned from previous teachers rather than from formal training.

Spanish was used as the medium in the overwhelming majority of classes observed. This was the case whether the teacher spoke English well or not. In fact, one of the best classes we observed in which the teacher spoke English and encouraged the students to do so was given by a teacher who could not adequately carry out a subsequent interview in English. By the same token we also observed a class given by a teacher who had spent many years in the United States and whose English was of a near-native speaker proficiency, but who gave the class in Spanish. The teacher's proficiency in English then, was not necessarily the deciding factor when it came to the amount of English used in class.

Most of the classes we observed were teacher-centred. The teacher would present the language items through explanation in Spanish, by exemplification on the blackboard, perhaps by asking a few questions using the structure or the vocabulary, and then directing the students to write five or six examples in their notebooks. Interaction was usually initiated by the teacher, the teacher asked the questions. There was little student-student interaction, group work and pair work being largely absent. Therefore, spoken practice and production among the students rarely took place, and the classes were not developed in stages or activities.

There were many repetition exercises in which the students pronounced sentences after listening to the teacher's pronunciation, but the students did not produce their own sentences, and although they listened to the teacher's pronunciation in order to copy it, there were very few exercises in which they actually practised their listening skills.

To sum up, classes tended to be teacher-centred, using Spanish as the medium of instruction and concentrating on presentation of

grammatical structures or vocabulary items. They contained little, if any, practice or production.

3. (vi) Examinations

There are no standardised national tests for English in Nicaragua. All teachers make their own tests, without guidelines from the MED. There were wide variations in the tests that we saw and of which we took samples. Consequently, the standard high school diploma that students receive on graduating from their school means different levels of proficiency in English, depending on which school they attended and which teacher made the exam. Clearly, testing is a problem.

4 FEASIBILITY STUDY

Before plans could be made, what needed to be considered was the issue of what was feasible within the time scale of the project and within the finances of the project.

The scarcity of the national text book was a serious problem. When the first influx of English textbooks came into the schools there was money allotted to provide the first and second books, but no money for the third book in the series, which was the basis of the fifth year stage of the syllabus. Many of these books did not get to the students or teachers. Even if sufficient financial resources could be found, which was unlikely, there were too many difficulties with distribution to guarantee any solution to this problem. Furthermore, even if problems of distribution could be solved, teachers did not have the appropriate techniques to take advantage of whatever value the books had. From our observations we had seen the textbook being used as the basis of a grammar lesson and not, as was intended, as a communicative integrated English course.

The national syllabus was based on the *Pathways* series, but it was only half a syllabus as it was based on only 3 out of the 6 books. To make it complete by extending it to include all six books in the series would depend on the financial resources to buy more books. This was not feasible, as many teachers were already operating without even the first three books. To create a new syllabus would take an immense amount of work, would need new material and would need extensive training for the new syllabus. To design a new syllabus would create as many problems as it would solve. Therefore, it

was decided to work with the existing syllabus and materials and concentrate on training the teachers to use the books they had, and become more self-reliant.

Almost three quarters of all teachers had not been trained, and so any developments in syllabus, testing or materials could not take place without appropriate training for the general teaching population. There would be little point in developing these things only to find that the teachers were unable to use the new syllabus, tests and materials because they lacked the training. As stated above, there was little difference between the graduate and the non-graduate population, and so prior to developments in other areas, the issue of training had to be dealt with.

Training was also the most feasible and sustainable area within which to work. Teachers were already in place and they had a vested interest in further training. During the research, many teachers had expressed a strong wish to receive more training, and so a high level of motivation, one of the most important factors in any form of learning, but particularly in in-service teacher training was present. Also, unlike books, teachers were not likely to disappear in a country where unemployment is high and where there is a high retention rate amongst teachers. Books eventually wear out, but the training teachers receive can influence their teaching for the rest of their lives.

5 FORMATION OF PROJECT PLANS

Following discussions with all the institutions involved in the project, plans were formed. In-service teacher training and curriculum reform at UNAN Managua were settled on as the two main areas for development within the project.

The professionalisation of teachers was an important policy for both the universities and the MED, and so the creation of in-service training plans grew naturally from the already perceived needs within the institutions. This meant in-service training in the universities and in the secondary schools.

Although the universities and the MED are separate entities, nevertheless there is an undeniable relationship of supply and demand. The universities, in particular UNAN, supply the teachers for the secondary schools, and it is therefore necessary to develop the departments at tertiary level in order to develop the teachers at secondary level. Equally, the closer relationship

between the secondary system and the tertiary system could help the universities to develop appropriate syllabuses and could encourage more valuable research. With the correct model, the universities and the MED could develop together.

Based on this vision, university teachers and MED trainers would be given context specific, advanced postgraduate training in Britain, and this group of trainers would in turn help to train in-service teachers all over Nicaragua. Also, an advance group of the best *empírico* teachers in Nicaragua would be trained on an intensive English Language and Methodology course at UNAN Managua, and these would help in the training of their fellow teachers. In this way, those who had received training would themselves help their colleagues to reap the benefit of that training. Because of its structure, this part of the project became known as the 'Cascade Programme'.

It was decided that the degree programme for trainee undergraduate English teachers at UNAN should be reformed. During our study, we had seen little difference between trained and untrained teachers. The main thrust of the reform was to increase substantially the element of language development in the first two years of the programme. This would help to address the problem of low levels of English amongst the graduate teachers. It would also mean that later pedagogical courses could be taught, studied and researched in English.

It was also recommended that the Saturday degree programme in English be re-established at UNAN Managua, so that serving teachers would be able once again to gain a degree in the subject they taught. While the curriculum of the undergraduate programme was being reformed, the Saturday degree programme would also be constructed along the same lines, so two tasks would be carried out at the same time.

6 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH ADOPTED BY PROJECT

The type of methodological approach adopted by the project was crucial for its development. Rather than taking various methods as its starting point, the project took the context, that is, the situation in the secondary schools, the teachers, the students and the resource limitations as the point of departure.

To make what may sound like an obvious point, the authors believe that Methodology is not the study of methods, but the study of how to teach, and it

is not only study but training. When we arrived, the UNAN training programme had too much emphasis put on the study of methods such as The Silent Way, Suggestopedia, and Total Physical Response. These methods may be useful in a carefully defined context with particular conditions satisfied, but in a context such as the Nicaraguan secondary system, they are interesting but irrelevant, prohibitively difficult to put into practice, either wholly or partially. As illustrated above, the necessary conditions in terms of training, materials and physical conditions were not suitable for the use of these kinds of methods.

The Methodological approach to training therefore, was not based on what was considered by some to be modern or up-to-date, but on what was appropriate for this particular situation, and this was determined by the extensive research carried out at the beginning of the project. Appropriacy was the key concept. The main aim of the training was to break the paradigm which existed, a paradigm which had not been successful. The evidence for this is that the students who pass their high school diplomas and enter university to study English are treated as complete beginners, which is what they are after having taken five years of English in the secondary school.

The main features of the paradigm were:

- a) The use of Spanish as the medium of instruction
- b) An over concentration on presentation at the expense of practice and production
- c) A teacher centred approach with insufficient interaction, ie. no group work, pair work etc.
- d) An over concentration on writing at sentence level
- e) An emphasis on grammatical explanations and translation of vocabulary at the expense of the four skills

Techniques had to be developed and demonstrated which could deal with the lack of materials and resources, low levels of English among teachers, and which could be used in large classes of fifty or more students. The main features of the paradigm which the new in-service programme wanted to promote were:

- a) English as the medium of instruction in the English classroom
- b) Development from presentation to practice and production to take place in each lesson or series of lessons
- c) Interaction between teachers and students in English with more widespread use of pair work, group work etc.
- d) Communication through the four skills

- e) Development of structures and vocabulary through the four skills
- f) An emphasis on communication more than explanation; use as well as knowledge

7 IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECT PLANS

First, the project sent university teachers and MED personnel to the Institute of English Language Education (IELE) at Lancaster University in Britain, on an advanced teacher training course. The course was tailor-made to fit the needs of the Nicaraguan situation. These trainers formed a team of people capable of training the secondary school teachers in appropriate methods and techniques for their particular circumstances. Training centres were established in the regions, where training workshops were held, and which covered English teachers all over Nicaragua. An intensive six week teacher training course was set up at UNAN during the summer vacation, using the same trainers to train *empírico* teachers. The Saturday Licenciatura programme was set up using the reformed curriculum for practising teachers wishing to gain their degree in English.

So far, the project has trained 21 university and MED trainers in Britain. In-country, it has reached almost 400 teachers in the Nicaraguan secondary system with a two week basic methodology course, comprising 22 topics through the regional workshops. Twenty-eight trainers from UNAN, UCA, the MED, the ODA, and an Australian organisation the Overseas Service Bureau (OSB), have participated in the training programme. Also, there have been two intensive training courses at UNAN, and more than 120 *empírico* teachers have attended. Furthermore, the Saturday degree course at UNAN has had its first year, in which 70 teachers are receiving training, and a further 35 have been recruited for this year.

By the end of the three year period of the project, every *empírico* English teacher in Nicaragua will have received some form of intensive or extensive training. The response from both trainers and teachers has been very positive, and there is strong anecdotal evidence that the paradigm is being broken, although results from an impact study carried out by the authors in 1995-1996 will give a clearer picture of the success or otherwise of the project. A further paper will be written at this point.

8 PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is an important concept in any aid project, and ELT is no different. This concept refers to the continuation of the work of a project after it is formally at an end. From a methodological standpoint, it is the introduction of a new paradigm into the secondary school system based on appropriate techniques which is, in our view, the key to improved ELT in the secondary schools.

The authors also believe that a project should not be a separate entity, existing apart from the context within which it exists for its limited time. The project emerged from the interests and needs of the people it was meant to help, not an alien body imposed from outside. It is an inclusive rather than an exclusive project, and it is this integrative quality which encapsulates its greatest hope for sustainability. For example, the training workshops are part of what the MED do, but now they are helped by the university teachers. The Saturday Licenciatura programme has been established as a course that the department now offers, which has brought it in line with other departments within the school of Education who already run Saturday courses. Both examples will be sustainable when the project comes to an end, because they do not rely on the project's funds, but rather on human resources. The project leaves behind a team of trainers that is capable of continuing the training when the three year life of the project comes to an end.

However, the main feature of this project, and the strongest hope for sustainability, is the collaboration between the universities and the MED at all levels, from the policy making level to the operational level. The structure developed on this basis and the willingness of people in the institutions to work together in mutual benefit can continue into the future. The project has a steering committee which consists of representation from the two universities, the MED and the British presence in Nicaragua, at the highest level. This is a vital component of the project, as it means that matters of policy can be discussed, and decisions made which can be of mutual benefit to all parties. Cooperation is necessary both at operational and policy level, and this has been achieved within the project.

Plans for sustainability made by Nicaraguans for Nicaraguans will have a better chance of being carried out than those imposed upon them by outside bodies. The most recent group of Nicaraguan trainers to return from the IELE at Lancaster University have drawn up plans for sustainability which are currently being explored, and it is hoped that many of these plans will be put into effect over the coming years after the final date of the project.

9 PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

As far as the area of English is concerned, it is hoped that the project will become decentralised in the future. Through collaboration with other donors it has been agreed to place trainers in five regional centres, where they can be available to give continuing support to teachers in the department where they live and work.

It has also been proposed that the universities and the MED use this project as a model to carry out training across the curriculum. If this proposal is accepted then the impact on the secondary school system and the pre-service training given at the universities would be very significant. Its impact would not only be in ELT, but in all areas of the curriculum. Possibly the most important aspect of all this is the closer operational contact established through the project between the universities and the Ministry of Education. The project steering committee now has representation from the MED at vice-minister, director general, secretary general, and director of secondary education levels, while the universities have representation up to rectorial level. It is a committee which does not need to be confined solely to ELT matters, but can be used as a forum to cover Nicaraguan academic issues in general.

10 CONCLUSION

When the project first began in March 1993, there had been little or no research done in the area of ELT in the secondary schools. There was no systematic in-service training taking place in a country where the Ministry of Education depends to a significant degree on untrained teachers to staff their secondary schools. This has produced a teaching force that has had to rely on how they were taught (often by untrained teachers), for

inspiration and guidance in their teaching. Under very difficult circumstances the teachers, with low salaries, few resources and large classes, do an admirable job. This project has attempted to break the teaching paradigm that exists in the area of ELT, through the systematic training of both university and secondary school teachers. There has been strong anecdotal evidence to suggest that changes are taking place in teaching techniques, and that more English is being spoken in the classroom. The project will carry out a formal impact study towards the end of the project. We hope to be able to publish our findings in the near future.

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