

Treating English Fever in Honduras

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English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs in Honduras are misguided

attempts at a bilingual education at best, and corrupt instruments of politicians at worst. EFL programs have not done their homework and as a result, a substantial amount of money is being spent on ineffective programs that take time away from a child's education. One virtual classroom (which includes a projector, an interactive whiteboard, and a small computer) from the Corporación Azteca costs the Honduran Municipalities about US\$3,000, plus the additional cost if the Municipality decides to employ the teacher (one hope of the Corporación Azteca). There are hundreds of these programs in Honduras.

Honduras is one of many countries to have recently contracted "English Fever," a term used by linguist Stephen Krashen (2003) to describe the intense desire to know English and for one's children to learn English. The new educational law in Honduras mandates that all public schools teach English starting in pre-elementary (Article 60 of the Fundamental Law of Honduras, 2012). Most frequently mentioned are the job opportunities that knowing English provides, but the benefits are plentiful as the National Foreign Language Center at the University of Maryland reported, "... increasingly impressive bodies of research that document ... the great number of cognitive, social, academic, problem-solving and practical benefits that have been observed in children who learn one or more languages in addition to their home language" (Wang et. al., p. vii.).

The Honduran government has successfully identified *what* is the need (fluency in English), but like many other countries that crave a bilingual society, it has failed to recognize the *how* (instructional practices and program design).

The problem is clear: how are monolingual Hondurans going to teach English? To understand the seriousness of the problem we should first answer: Why can they not teach English? In one word: Input. Input refers to the language that a student receives through reading or listening. The researchers consider the necessity of input to be an axiom. "There is a consensus among second language researchers

that input is an essential component of second language acquisition” (VanPatten, 1996, p. 13). A fact obvious to many foreign language learners seems to be taken for granted by the well-educated Ministry of Education and the erudite lawmakers: a teacher who cannot speak English cannot provide any input and therefore cannot teach English. In order to provide quality input, you must have a high-level of fluency. Without fluency and without access to other sources of input, the low-quality input will result in poor acquisition.

The answer to the first question of *how* an English teacher who isn't fluent in English is going to teach the language is often rote learning. The teacher has students orally repeating and memorizing isolated lists of thematic vocabulary (mostly nouns). Homework and classwork often involve copying the words in a notebook twenty or more times and cutting out and pasting pictures next to the words. I have repeatedly observed each of these practices in elementary and secondary schools in Honduras, and I have observed that they are also a fundamental component of the Corporación Azteca program. The futility of rote learning should be evident to any well-educated teacher and, in fact, I have heard criticisms from Honduran teachers who have observed the Corporación Azteca program. Upon what theory of language learning is this approach based? Unfortunately, what Krashen (1982) wrote more than thirty years ago is still relevant and prevalent today. “What is perhaps most evident is that teachers and materials developers pay little attention to research and theorizing of any sort” (p. 5).

Crash courses, especially those taught with traditional methods (vocabulary memorization and grammar study), will result in very little second language acquisition (SLA). There are organizations, including the Peace Corps, for which I worked for two years, which promote traditional methodologies and provide crash courses (20 hours per level, with 3 levels) to train teachers in English.

In 2009, the Corporación Azteca began to spread its “virtual classrooms” all across Honduras, touting a traditional methodology and claiming that the students will be able to speak English after its 43-hour program (100 minutes a week for 6 months, which is being generous since it does not account for canceled classes due to school events and the fact that many schools only offer 80 minutes of class a week). Even with a fluent and comprehensible input-trained teacher, if program duration is too short, then it won't produce any significant fluency gains. Too many organizations in their response to English Fever, commit the popular mistake of promoting a quick-fix solution.

The mistake made in Honduras and which continues to be made in many parts of the United States is summed up by Hasanbey Ellidokuzoglu (2008) in the “International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching”: “Language acquisition is unique and is different from other types of learning. Unless we accept this fact and design L2 [second language] teaching methods based on domain-specific theories of SLA, we will be trying to teach linguistics, not the language” (p. 16). The Peace Corp’s hands-on activities are best practice when it comes to the type of learning done in other academic subjects, but the activities are not based on theories of SLA. Neither is the content.

Likewise, the technology from the Corporación Azteca is an excellent resource that makes it easier to teach. The problem is that the Corporación Azteca is using the technology to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) with a traditional methodology. The English version of the curriculum states, “This program has the general objective at the end there of each of the participants speak, write, translate and perfect reason the English language.” I have quoted it as written to demonstrate that the English translation is riddled with grammatical errors, a red flag when the program assumes it can teach you to write perfectly. The program aspires to produce students who perfectly speak and write English, but it is nothing more than wishful thinking. Brenda Murphy and Ashley Hastings (2006) have compared such delusions to magic: “People may turn to grammar for the same reason that people in some societies and times have turned to magic: they hope that the impossible can happen if only they say the right words.” (p. 9).

It seems intuitive that the vocabulary that should be taught in an EFL class be the most-commonly spoken words, yet the traditional approach focuses on many low-frequency words. According to the Corporación Azteca Curriculum Manual, each class presents a new grammar rule or a new set of thematic vocabulary words (mostly nouns and some adjectives), except for vocabulary review or test days, which occur approximately every five classes. Mark Davies (2006), in his frequency dictionary based on a 20 million word corpus, states that 60 percent of spoken English consists of 50 function words (p. vii). Eighty-five percent of speech consists of 1,000 words (Nation, 1990).

Furthermore, Davies (2006) points out the importance of verbs, since they compose about 20 percent of all words in a language (p. vii). The extensive lists of thematic vocabulary words taught in a traditional class are rarely within the most frequently spoken 1,000 words and the majority of these thematic words are nouns. Take the numbers in Spanish, for example. Numbers are typically taught in the first month, if not the first week of a traditional class. The number nine has a rank

frequency of 786. There are more than 300 more frequent words than the numbers 6 through 10, and the numbers 13 through 19 are not in the most frequently used 1,000 Spanish words. In fact, only the numbers one and two are in the most-frequently used 100 words. Below are the most-frequently used words per theme and also the extremely low-frequency words typically taught in that theme. The numbers in parentheses are the rank frequencies as calculated in Davies' *A Frequency Dictionary of Spanish* (2006). Words are translated to English.

Animals: (780) horse, (4,945) elephant
Body: (150) hand, (2,407) ear
Clothing: (1,710) suit, (4,427) t-shirt
Colors: (250) white, (8225) orange
Days: (1,121) Sunday, (3490) Tuesday
Family: (166) son, (5,071) niece
Food: (787) meat, (7602) carrot
Months: (1,244) August, (2,574) September
Sports: (2,513) soccer, (28,388) hockey
Weather: (989) heat, (5493) breeze

It is no wonder that students can do so little with the language when we focus instruction on uncommon words. On the contrary, comprehensible input methods teach the highest frequency words by definition, i.e. high frequency words are understood everyday in what is heard and read.

Besides the hopeless methodology, the Corporación Azteca shares the problems of other well-intentioned, but unsupported approaches to teaching English. How fluent is someone after studying English in a Honduran college that almost certainly relies on similar, ineffective teaching methodologies? Honduras is not singled out in this regard, since US colleges currently fail to produce many fluent speakers of foreign languages. Ironically, teachers with functional fluency correctly attribute their success to reading, watching movies, living abroad, all potential sources of comprehensible input. The Corporación Azteca claims that "each of the teachers ... [is] one hundred percent bilingual," is suspect. The teachers are local Hondurans, many of which have a degree in English from a Honduran university or are still studying English.

It gets worse. Again, I will use the Corporación Azteca as an example, but many organizations are guilty of sending in teachers after inadequate training. The Corporación Azteca instructors are given a three-day training and do not need to have a degree in education. At the end of the Corporación Azteca's crash EFL

courses for teachers, it is expected that the monolingual Honduran teachers will continue to utilize the virtual classrooms. This practice is warned against by the position statement on technology from the American Council on Foreign Language Teaching (ACTFL), the most-respected organization that plays a major role in writing the United States National Standards, that “strongly advises school and university administrators to place the responsibility for language instruction in the hands of qualified language teachers rather than solely in technology programs ... There is currently no definitive research to indicate that students will acquire a second language effectively through technology without interaction with and guidance from a qualified language teacher” (2012b).

We are reminded that in the midst of what I call a “technology fever,” technology may be a need, but how to operate it effectively determines its utility. For one effective way to use technology to provide comprehensible input, read more about MovieTalk (<http://glesismore.com/movietalk/preview.html>). Technology is not automatically advantageous as researcher Ken Smith (2009) said, “If only a small portion of the money that is repeatedly being spent on improving technology would be spent on improving libraries by stacking them with interesting, readable, accessible, quality materials for students, it would do much to improve the language abilities of our EFL learners” (p. 6). If the purpose of the technology was not to teach English, but for use in other academic subjects, then a Honduran’s education may improve. How come the desire for English is so great, but it appears as though no one has bothered to investigate what makes a program successful? Much of the language research is online and can be accessed for free. Until EFL instruction receives a serious and educated response, English Fever will be denied treatment. (9/26/13) (photo courtesy Internet)

Note: The author has filmed 40+ hours in Honduras of an English for beginner class based on comprehensible input methods. The entire program will soon be online for free and public viewing. Click on Teaching English with Comprehensible Input. Teachers are encouraged to watch to learn the teaching methods. Both beginner and intermediate level English acquirers will improve their fluency from viewing the program.