

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF EFL TEACHER´ UPGRADING AT “FÉLIX VARELA” TEACHERS´TRAINING COLLEGE IN SANTA CLARA (1964-1991)

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INTRODUCTION

When challenging the development of the upgrading schemes of the EFL teachers at the “Félix Varela” College, arises the need to reflect on past action. Through a critical outlook of the past experiences we can discover the positive aspects that should be continued as well as the negative aspects that should be ignored. We should also consider the extent to which the past influences the current trends in the upgrading schemes for EFL teachers.

The former rationale substantiates the need for this historical overview covering a period of 27 years, 1964/1991: since the birth of “Félix Varela” College as a school of Central University of Las Villas on July 30, 1964 (López Corona et al., 1995:4-5) until 1991 when the project of the three Searching books, headed by Antonio Morales Calvo of the English Department of Varela College came to an end.

DEVELOPMENT

Distinctive events occurred through these 27 years that presently outline four phases revealed by the review of literature and the life history of some founders: 1964/67, a first phase marking the birth of the English Department at Varela College; 1967/76, a second phase of early growth; 1976/80, a third phase of further development and consolidation; and 1980/91, a fourth phase of maturity and expansion.

In the first phase (1964-67), the “Félix Varela” College was born as a school of Central University of Las Villas as well as its English department. The founders of the English Department were Dalia Pérez Angulo, Magaly Pérez Calderón, Wilfrido Vázquez Guibert and Arnaldo López Acebal as Pérez recalls (Bosch, 1996). Pérez points out that before 1964 the future EFL teachers were trained in the School of Modern Languages of Central University of Las Villas headed by

Ruth Goodgal de Pruna. In this very early phase the upgrading of the teachers of the department was limited to the discussion of specialized contents assigned by the head of the department without a definite plan. In 1964 with the start of the Varela College as a school of Central University, Dalia Pérez Angulo was appointed the head of the English Department and she asked the teachers to choose the contents to be discussed according to their interests and needs.

The second phase (1967-76), almost a decade, showed evident signs of steady growth. Eloy Soto was the head of the English Department. New teachers who graduated from the course of High School Teachers' were admitted in the department. Later on, the first undergraduates from the course of Junior High School Teachers joined the department as teachers' aides: Luisa Vera, Jorge Medina, Deisy Fernández, among others. Pérez recalls that the implementation of new curriculums (1967-71) to train junior as well as senior high school EFL teachers was a challenge in the department. The teachers there had to train both students in regular courses (high school graduates) and in workers' courses (in-service teachers).

Though self-education continued as the basic upgrading scheme of the department, courses on General Psychology, Spanish Grammar and History were also taught by Esperanza Salmerón, Reinaldo León, and Migdalia Cabrera respectively. It was an initiative of the department to improve their members' professional standards.

Both Magaly Pérez Calderón and Esperanza Lucía Guelmes Valdés (Bosch, 1999) – the latter joined the department in 1967 and was the Vice Dean of Postgraduate Studies at Varela College for several years – agree that teachers' upgrading developed almost absolutely as self-education. There was never a chance to have advise of English-speaking specialists or even of experts from other Cuban colleges or institutions, although the request was repeatedly substantiated through the years.

The teachers of the department needed to specialize in contents such as Phonetics, Grammar and Literature, among others. These requirements were met again through self-education. The most experienced teachers were asked to

choose the content of their preference, and consequently they began to devote themselves to specialize independently. Magaly Pérez, who chose North American Literature, was the only one who received guidance from a native speaker – Nathan Galpert.

Pérez and Guelmes highlight two events that boosted teachers' upgrading. One was in 1970 when a rich stock of ELT materials was received: books, dictionaries, and recordings, particularly L.G. Alexander's series NEW CONCEPT ENGLISH. The other was the beginning of investigation in the department. The first experiment that was brought into existence by Dalia Pérez Angulo and Esperanza Lucía Guelmes Valdés dealt with the most common mistakes of English among high school students. The Vice-Dean of Investigation was Esperanza Salmerón. Gradually the number of English teachers involved in research increased and the fact-finding studies were diversified.

In September 1976, the "Félix Varela" Teachers' Training College was officially established, as an institution of higher learning in Cuba with six schools – the School of Foreign Languages was one of them. This event opened up the path to qualitatively higher advancement and consolidation (1976-80) in the institution. The curriculums of teachers' training courses had to be improved in 1977-78 (Cabrera, 1995: 4-5) as part of the general Improvement Plan of the National Education System carried out by the Cuban Ministry of Education when the different educational sub-systems were set up in 1975 (Varela Hernández, 1995: 13-17).

By that time teachers' upgrading schemes were designed, implemented and evaluated according to a plan. The English Department teachers who had specialized on their own began to teach postgraduate courses to all EFL teachers in the territory. Then came an invaluable possibility for professional upgrading: PhD degree courses in ELT. In a short period of time (1978-86) four teachers exerted themselves and were successful in their PhD degrees: Magaly Pérez in North American Literature, Esperanza Lucía Guelmes in English Grammar, Jorge Medina in ELT Methods, and Andrés Bell Lloch in Phonetics. All these studies were done in former socialist countries under the teaching of European specialists.

When the School of Postgraduate Studies of the “Pablo Lafargue” Foreign Language College was founded in Havana, yearly one or two department teachers were sent there to take courses, or to be trained in specific subjects such as Stylistics, Lexicology, and others.

The last phase (1980-91) witnessed a breakthrough in teachers’ upgrading. It was the investigation of Antonio Morales Calvo and his teacher team known as SEARCHING. Matilde Patterson Peña (Bosch, 1996), one of the founders of the Searching team, explains that in the beginning (1982) there were only five teachers. Their study focused on the way to improve the teaching of English Integrated Practice. This explains why the team chose the name of SEARCHING: their quest for more effective and updated approaches to teach English.

The number of team members gradually increased. The decision to improve books for teaching came from Tony Irizar and Ada Chiappy, who, at the time, were the National Advisors of English at the Cuban Institute of Tourism, and who gently gave their support and experience throughout the Searching investigation.

The betterment of the three Searching books entailed an intensification and diversification of the upgrading of the team teachers unparalleled before, as Patterson states: access to a wide spectrum of information sources, discovery of communicative language teaching, acquaintance with new educational technologies, debates of articles and books, exchanges with national and foreign EFL experts, participation in national workshops and summer courses run by foreign consultants who were invited by the National Institute of Tourism.

For the first time since the birth of the English Department, English speaking professionals visited the Varela College and gave lectures: Neil Naiman, Joan Cutting, Marjorie Moore, Adrienne Hunter, Brian Merrill, among others. Many of them also helped in the revision of the Searching drafts before they were published.

Patterson concludes that Searching really radiated and disseminated the team teachers’ experiences not only to the rest of the department, but also to the whole Varela College and the province as well.

CONCLUSION

Based on the review of literature and of the life history of the founders the following ideas can be concluded.

- Professional upgrading was always present among EFL teachers at “Félix Varela” College since the foundation. However, upgrading schemes did not take into account needs analysis or the professional motivations of teachers. Besides, a theoretical body of modes, technologies, and strategies to challenge upgrading from a more soundly based perspective was lacking. A body that precisely further education provides (Añorga, 1994).
- There were accomplishments in some EFL teachers’ strong points, as well as in their completion of PhD degrees through self-education, which corroborates its validity for professional development. However, in general, there was very little versatility in the maturity of other upgrading schemes, both formal and informal ones.
- The senior EFL teachers of the English Department were willing and able to share their knowledge and experience with the new teachers who gradually enriched the scientific potential of the department. However, the exchange with English-speaking specialists and with teachers from other institutions was very limited.
- The birth and further development of the SEARCHING inquiry team marked a radical shift in the upgrading of both EFL teachers as well as other professors of Varela College. Motivation for upgrading was aroused. A small resource center was created with updated specialized sources of information. Professional upgrading was enriched through diverse schemes and modes, formal and informal ones. For the first time there were exchanges with English-speaking specialists. The whole process led to higher professional standards of the teachers of the Searching team who displayed the growth of three Searching books and the betterment of a culture of professional advancement in the English department.

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