

MEXTESOL

PRESS

I SHARE:

ANECDOTES FROM
MEXICAN CONTEXT



MEXTESOL PRESS



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MEXTESOL ®, the Mexican Association of Teachers of English, A.C. is pleased to make available this collection of selected contributions sent by fellow teachers from different states in Mexico.

Our previous *I Teach: Games & Activities for Mexican Contexts* _Vol.1 was published in two separate issues, one per semester. It featured ideas from more than twenty five teachers who kindly shared their expertise. It covered a variety of topics: board games, DIY activities, using devices, vocabulary & grammar reviews, skills tasks, and more. *I Share: Anecdotes from Mexican Contexts*, on the other hand, is our third publication consisting of one issue only, in a selection of eight classroom experiences, shared by English Language teachers in Mexico.

In general, contributions showcase different viewpoints and provide us with a broad perspective of how activities are implemented in each city and state. They also show that we have more in common with each other than we have differences.

We would like to thank MEXTESOL ® National Governing Board 2019-2022 for accepting this new member in the family. Special thanks are forwarded to Jorge Torres Almazán for having been at the forefront of the first two publications of Mextesol Press, to José Luis Villegas for the design and edition of these publications, to the staff in the National Office for their support in the administrative issues and, most importantly, to all the teachers who sent in contributions. We hope that many English language professionals benefit from the content presented in this issue.

Connie Reyes Cruz
Editor

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MEXTESOL's objectives:

- To promote professional development of English teachers
- To assist teachers in updating their teaching methodology and in expanding their repertoire of teaching techniques in all areas of ELT.
- To promote research in the field of Applied Linguistics, in the area of English Language Teaching.
- To disseminate, through its professional publications, the results of research and a discussion of classroom practices.
- To create, through Academic Saturdays, and Regional and National Conventions, an ongoing forum for training and professional development in the area of ELT.

In order to enhance the fulfillment of these objectives, we have created MEXTESOL PRESS. Our contributors are teachers from different states and contexts in Mexico. This is a one-of-a-kind publication for several reasons:

- It is the first-ever publication by MEXTESOL PRESS.
- It gives a voice to all professionals teaching in Mexico.
- It also shares what is proven to engage and motivate Mexican students.

The anecdotes shared in this publication are useful to forge connections among teachers, solidify relationships, convey the values that unite people, be remembered through the life-lessons contained, among others. By definition, an anecdote is a brief narrative involving real people and events. They appeal to the audience through their emotions: humor, fear, or empathy. That is why they are an important part of the ties that bind. With this perspective in mind, we really hope you enjoy them!

***“The most valuable resource that all teachers have is each other.
Without collaboration, our growth is limited to our own perspectives”***

Robert John Meehan

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1 Finding One's True Calling

*"I always let them know that I learn from them as much as they learn from me, and that the student-teacher bond we create goes way further than just inside the classroom." _
Alejandra Acevedo.*

BIODATA

This anecdote was written by Wendy Coulson, an international ELT consultant specializing in TEYL and low-resource contexts with deep roots in Mexico. She holds an MA in Applied Linguistics and TESOL and an MEd in K-12 Bilingual Education. She helped train and mentor Alejandra Acevedo at Colegio Cargolet and is proud to have mentored her as a first-time MEXTESOL presenter at the 2021 convention in Puebla.

Teacher Alejandra Acevedo is a quiet kind of great. When children walk into her sixth-grade classroom, they are seen and heard. It is their classroom. She is like that cool aunt that really 'gets' you. She's young, has tattoos, and does sports, but it is the way she relates to her students that inspires. "I do not focus on making my students like me," she reports. "I focus on giving them the knowledge that is useful and interesting for them."

Every morning at 8 am, Ale stands at the door of her classroom at Colegio Cargolet and greets each child. "I can feel their energy and happiness as

soon as they arrive," she beams. As the children enter, they put away their backpacks, take down the chairs from the desks and open the windows before they sit on the floor in a circle and talk about the previous day's events. The founder and former director of the school, Magali Coello, describes Ale as 'the perfect role model.' However, without the teacher role models she had as a child, she would not be who she is today-- and probably not even a teacher.

At the age of seven, Ale's mother moved her family from Celaya to North Carolina in the United States. She remembers school being extremely difficult for her because of the language barrier. However, one day, she recalls, things started to click. She discovered her mother's Inglés Sin Barreras books and began to study on her own. She also watched the local news and feverishly wrote down words as she understood them. As a result, she quickly learned the basics, such as saying her name, nationality, and likes and dislikes, and soon found herself communicating with her classmates.

She reminisces about some of the teachers who went the extra mile to help her through this challenging time and discovered her teaching talent.

Miss Baughman, her fifth-grade teacher, started studying Spanish to better communicate with Ale. She also gave her her first book in English, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and encouraged her to participate in a poetry

contest working with Ale two days a week after school. "I won!" she boasts. "I still have my certificate! It was a poem about a rose."

Then, Miss Ferguson, Ale's high school French teacher, suggested she tutor lower-level students as part of a school program. "She said that I was good at teaching others. She had seen that quality in me," Ale reports. She even became a Kindergarten teaching assistant at a neighboring school as a teenager with encouragement. "I think that was the key to everything when I went to work with little kids, and I enjoyed it. I did this for a whole school year," she recounts.

After returning to Mexico in 2010, when she was seventeen, she decided to study law and taught English to pay her school fees. She enjoyed teaching because she could help her students achieve their goals. Many of her students came back to report that they had been promoted at work or sent abroad because of their improved skills. After graduation, she began to practice law but found herself back in the classroom.

After working at a series of regular teaching jobs, she began to find her 'teaching voice' at Colegio Cargolet in Celaya, where she has worked since 2017. She explains, "Cargolet has this amazing educational environment in which we, both teachers and students, are free to be ourselves." She says that this open atmosphere gives her the space to create a strong bond with her students and facilitate student-centered lessons beyond the classroom.

After two years, Ale was promoted to English Language Coordinator. In this position, she checks weekly lesson plans, observes classes, holds regular team meetings, and plans cultural events. She says that from this vantage point, she sees the potential in her colleagues and works with them to bring it out. "We all need a little bit of everybody," she reflects. "This position gave me this big panorama that I had not seen before."

Ale regularly incorporates her students' ideas into her lessons and encourages them to question what she teaches. "Some teachers might see questioning as disrespectful, but many times students' questions make my classes richer in content and make students understand what they learn," she adds. As an example, her department decided to teach some Science topics through English in the upper grades. In this way, she says, students see how learning English connects with daily life.

When asked about what makes her lessons stand out, she mentions her writing program, which begins in fifth grade. Ale is a firm believer in taking the students through all stages of the writing process and says that building solid sentences from the start is key. To do this, she instructs her fifth graders to stretch their sentences into 'fifth-grade sentences' by setting up a team competition to make the longest sentence.

To help her students move from sentences to paragraphs and essays, she uses graphic organizers and dialogue journals. Her favorite organizers are

mental maps, Venn Diagrams, and KWL charts which she says help get the children's ideas flowing. Journal writing is also crucial in this process because children see the connection between writing and genuine communication. Cargolet's founder says, "She's inspiring because she likes writing, and she writes to the children. She does encourage reflection and writing skills."

Like many teachers, Ale often felt overwhelmed teaching online during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, she keeps herself motivated when she reminisces about certain teaching moments. One such experience was in the summer of 2019 when she took a group of students to Canada.

She says that hearing her students apply what they learned in class, like stating breakfast preferences to their host families, 'blew her mind.' "When I feel overwhelmed, I go back to those experiences, and it fills my heart and makes me want to continue," she tells me.

It is precisely because of this experience and others that she continues her studies. In fact, she is halfway through a 'Licenciatura en la Enseñanza del Inglés' at UNITESBA, Universidad Instituto Técnico y de Estudios Superiores del Bajío, in Celaya, Guanajuato. After graduation, she plans to study a Master's in Applied Linguistics and to open her own language school.

2 The Change that Is Here to Stay

"It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive, but those who can best manage change"

Leon C. Megginson

BIODATA

Victoria Rentería Navarro works at Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO) in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. She teaches English and Public Communication. She has been working as an English teacher at a private University for 16 years. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in Communication Science from ITESO and a Master's Degree in English as a Second Language from Plymouth Marjon University in England, UK. She has a true passion for what she does. What makes her happy is to be in a classroom with young adults sharing and learning together.

March 16th, 2020, the day everything changed. I had my Public Communication class at the university where I work. I said goodbye to my students and went home. In the afternoon, rumors started spreading about the possibility of closing schools. First, some Universities started confirming the news at 9 p.m. Then, I read an email from the academic director saying the university would close its doors; we were going online. That is the way the huge shift started for me. I am the kind of teacher that thoroughly enjoys face-to-face classes and establishes strong connections

with students. I had always been a bit scared of that "online teaching world" that had been with us for some time. I had already been part of it when Mexico was hit with a previous pandemic, the H1N1 flu. That experience sparked my interest in blended learning and inspired me to write my Master's Dissertation on the topic. However, 2020 meant a complete transformation in me. The first weeks were absolute chaos. Teachers and students were barely beginning to comprehend what lay ahead. We were under much stress; we had to transfer our classes to online platforms.

In addition to this transition, we had to find resources, adapt activities, re-think the way we evaluated and supported students. It was hard to find adequate spaces at home to teach, cope with the fear of disease, and re-organize our whole lives. Nevertheless, little by little, we were changing. Two things were necessary at that point: emotional intelligence and agency. Agency is understood as "The capacity of actors to critically shape their responses to problematic situations" Biesta and Tedder (2006:11). In other words, when a teacher confronts a difficult situation, he needs to do things differently. Reflection comes first, and then he should use his knowledge, beliefs and institutional resources available. After that, he imagines the outcomes. Ultimately he must put things into practice based on reflection and previous learning. Agency is not something that people

have; it is something that people do. It is by doing that we learn new things. Biesta and Tedder (2007:137) establish that "Actors always act employing their environment rather than simply in their environment [...] the achievement of an agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular situations". The resources were there, but we had to learn how to use them effectively and adapt them to our context and that of the students.

Understanding the role emotions play during hard times was also vital. According to Goleman (1998), emotional intelligence is "the capacity to recognize and manage our feelings and to recognize and respond effectively to those of others." The world changed, people around the globe were scared, there was pure uncertainty. Nevertheless, there was a sense of humanity, hope, and goodwill inside the community's hearts and brains. What drives someone? What pushes someone early in the morning to keep fighting? Yes, family, friends, oneself, a strong belief in hard work, and willingness to teach and do it in the best way possible. It was time to shift, listen, and do so carefully. The answer was inside; there would be a way if teachers could get closer to their students. To win our students' brains, we had to win their hearts more than ever. That meant dedicating much more time to personal interactions, creating communication channels, being

much more open, understanding, and critical. I reached out to them, calling the ones that seemed lost, sending personal Whatsapp messages, and having one-on-one Zoom meetings. As the pandemic was advancing, students were even more affected, people started having anxiety attacks, some of their parents were losing their jobs, and worst of all, people were getting sick. Three students got closer to me and told me that a psychiatrist was helping them. They were considering dropping out of school because their parents could no longer afford the tuition. Nevertheless, they did not; we did not quit. I decided to tell them how it was for me. I listened to them, encouraged them, told them that I understood. I answered questions and created a more personalized lesson plan for them. I dedicated time and energy to creating more dynamic lessons. I incorporated music, games, collaborative activities, promoted autonomy, and spent time at the beginning and end of my classes to talk about our personal lives. Emotional intelligence was vital to keep my students engaged and capable of dealing with an array of new ways of doing things. I changed, I adopted, and I adapted. I was this semi-liquid puzzle piece trying to adapt. I got a new laptop, and I started clicking buttons. You know, when you click buttons, many things happen: you lose that fear, you make mistakes, you realize you can do certain things effortlessly, and you get frustrated when the computer seems "not as smart" as you thought it was.

You come to understand that you have so much to learn and that you need to, yes, click more buttons. I never imagined myself as an online teacher. However, I was becoming one, little by little and many times painfully so. I incorporated new words into my vocabulary, such as QR codes, breakout rooms, synchronous learning, and web-based training. Finally, in the summer of 2020, the department offered me a fully online asynchronous class. I had so many doubts that I thought I would drop out, but I did not. I even enjoyed the course. My identity shifted during this last year too.

I took courses, started using new apps and ideas, and talked to my peers, sharing materials, techniques and concerns. Teacher identity is a field I have been very interested in as of late, and the radical changes Covid-19 posed to us created an impact on how we teachers understand our jobs. Different authors have created varied definitions of teacher identity. It has two interesting elements, one that is static and refers to our essence and another that changes. There are two dimensions to identity: personal and professional. Our identity will shift depending on our interaction with social groups and institutions. If we move to another country, changes will be even more significant, quite probably, we will learn a new language and thus elements from a new culture. Teacher identity has a direct impact on the classroom. Hamacheck (1999:209) makes an interesting statement: "consciously we teach what we know, and unconsciously we teach who we

are ."Bonnie Norton (2000:05) states that identity is "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how that person understands possibilities for the future ."I like this definition because it shows a person that is active, analytical, dynamic, and critical. The pandemic demands teachers who possess those qualities. Furthermore, understanding identity is essential to be able to "engage with innovation and change and understand the impact of our actions on the teachers we work with." Kiely (2012:01)

I have seen colleagues making an incredible effort to move online. From Pre-K to University, the work I have seen is extraordinary. I feel honored to be part of a community of professionals who is right now in front of a screen guiding, presenting, organizing, inspiring, encouraging, correcting, and learning. I invite you, reader, to picture all those teachers at this moment—all of them making an effort and at the same time going through highly demanding situations. I feel utter respect for all educators because together, we changed, we adapted to an unexpected and unparalleled scenario.

In the distance, we were closer. The future is uncertain, but with our knowledge and will, the expanded horizons will offer new opportunities here to stay.

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3 A Sabbatical Paradox_ Going to Oaxaca to Return to Myself

*"This is the road I have tried to follow as a teacher:
living my convictions; being open to the process of
knowing and being sensitive to the experience of
teaching as an art."* *Paulo Freire*

BIODATA

Elizabeth Wagenheim is a Humanities professor at Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, Maryland, USA, where she teaches English language learners, designs curriculum, and delivers faculty professional development. She holds an MA TESOL and an MFA in Creative Writing. Her research interests are second language acquisition, intercultural communication and conflict resolution.

A job, by its very nature, is transactional. In my career, I have been privileged to have access to graduate studies and develop marketable skills in a field that is consistent with my values. In exchange for my expertise, I receive a living wage and benefits. I am fortunate to currently work in a creative environment with students of art and design, where I provide language and cultural support to international students and English language learners. An essential part of my job at the college of art and design is to motivate students in the continued development of their

English skills. That is no easy feat since not one of my students comes to my institution for the purpose of English language learning. They want to spend their energy in their studio classes, learning their own creative and marketable skills. While teaching has its intrinsic rewards, advocating for the needs of the privileged few who can afford tuition at a private institution and attempting to convince them that English study is worthwhile can be demoralizing.

This depletion of spirit and my current job's distance from my commitment to social justice are the reasons that I chose to spend my sabbatical studying and teaching in Mexico. Sabbaticals are one of the benefits of teaching in higher education. The sabbatical is designed to be precisely that time for rejuvenation and restoration, a respite from the classroom. That is how I found myself on a verandah in a Mexican village, teaching English. When I was young and idealistic, my first job after graduate school was directing a small volunteer-based literacy program in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. Inspired by the work of the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paolo Freire, I regard my work as social justice work. I accepted the Freirean belief that the educational process is never neutral. People can be passive recipients of knowledge — whatever the content — or they can engage in a 'problem-posing' approach in which they become active participants in society and social change to actively better their community. For me,

training volunteers was a form of praxis as was the adult literacy learners' gains in their own agency and skills. As other professional opportunities presented themselves, my teaching became more academic and less community-based.

I traveled to Oaxaca, partly because of my partner's fondness for the city and partly as a base to take Spanish classes. Since most of my students are from China or South Korea, Spanish is not directly useful for my work at the art college; however, I firmly believe that embracing the cultural and linguistic disorientation of living in a country where you do not speak the language is one way to make ELL instructors more empathetic to their students. Similarly, learning Spanish is a small way that I can contribute to equity work in the U.S. by recognizing Spanish as a lingua franca in the Americas.

In Oaxaca, I enrolled in a language school that was founded on the political principles that Oaxaca is known for. The school is a collective and is owned by the teachers. It provides a culturally based and arts-rich curriculum with special elective workshops in inclusive and queer language. Being a beginning-level student, even in such a supportive environment, was even more humbling than I anticipated. In conjunction with my language studies, I found a high school student for intercambio who became an informant about academic and social life for young people in Oaxaca. She

was interested in studying photography at university and was practicing English to prepare for her admission process. She attended a school near her grandparent's house because it offered more opportunities than the one in her small town. Even at that school, her studies were interrupted by a lack of teachers. This insight into the challenges of public education in Oaxaca was informative for my teaching there.

Before I left for Oaxaca, I contacted Fundación En Vía, a nonprofit dedicated to microfinance and entrepreneurial support for indigenous communities in the state. When looking for a place to offer volunteer teaching, I was drawn to En Vía because their language program had been initiated by the women who were enrolled in the microlending program themselves who had requested English opportunities for their families. Praxis, again! I was placed in the town of Tlacoahuaya, whose name most likely comes from the Nahuatl phrase *tlacolullan*, which means "place of abundance."

It was a place of abundance for me, a return to teaching at its most foundational and enjoyable. The other volunteer teachers and I set up white board easels and tables on the open verandah of the town's civic center under the watchful but friendly eyes of the police. We moved the tables to maximize the shade as the sun inched toward sunset. It was there that I learned about the cargo system of self-government in which community members serve in unpaid posts such as police, judges, fire

fighters, and other civil services for a designated length of time. Through my perspective of a city resident in the U.S., in which the police and the community are often tragically in conflict, the cargo system is endlessly fascinating to me.

Quite unlike my teaching in the U.S., in which my classes are composed of students who are formally educated and traditionally college-aged, I delighted in the mixed-aged groups that I taught in Tlacoahuaya. Mothers who would bring their young children to the English classes would frequently stay and participate. The matriarch who came in with her children in tow quickly transformed into a willing student in a read-aloud of a picture book in English. A father in class with his child would boast of his young daughter's talents, which would allow me to tailor speaking practice to her areas of interest. This tangible example of the parents in what Zen Buddhism calls the "beginner's mind": a mindset that allows for an openness to new possibilities, inspired me to try and fail in my own Spanish studies.

Teaching in Oaxaca allowed me to add games back into my lessons; whether we were using total physical response to practice vocabulary or playing freeze tag with English "magic words," play was again infused in my lessons. The sense of play is something that I commit to bringing back to my teaching, though it has been complicated by the pandemic year of

remote teaching.

When I returned, I could not ignore my commitment to the families. After witnessing the often mind-numbing work of orienting volunteer teachers, most of whom have no teaching experience and are committed to short-term teaching, I offered to develop an online training program for volunteers before they arrive in Oaxaca. The online training would free the volunteer coordinator to work individually with volunteers to help them plan their lessons rather than an expenditure of time on repetition of the same information. I built free training on a free online platform that would leverage volunteer energy before their time in Oaxaca and deepen their connection to the organization before their arrival.

Working with volunteers allows En Vía to provide free classes without depleting its financial resources currently available for microlending. I believe in the professionalism and education necessary to be a teacher, which is sometimes in conflict with reliance on amateur teachers. Training must involve insight into the Zapotec cultural context, appropriate teaching techniques, and an understanding that volunteers should also have a "beginners mind." Freire warns, "One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding." However, an efficient

screening interview, a full-time coordinator with a TESOL degree, and an appropriate pre-service training program mitigates some of my concerns and allows grassroots community to community learning.

The concept of a sabbatical is thought to have originated in a Hebrew practice of allowing agricultural land to remain fallow every seventh year to allow it to restore itself. My Oaxacan sabbatical allowed me to be grounded in my original call to education, in the humility of being a stranger, in the joy of teaching.

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4 A Highly Emotional Classroom Experience

“The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something. Don’t wait for good things to happen to you. If you go out and make some good things happen, you will fill the world and yourself with hope.”

Barack Obama

BIODATA

Martha Romero Zárate is an ELT at the Meritorious Autonomous University of Puebla (BUAP for its acronym in Spanish). She has worked as an English language teacher for 10 years with high school and college students. She holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Modern Languages from BUAP and a Master’s Degree in Innovation in Education from Colegio Miguel Hidalgo in Puebla.

During the pandemic caused by Covid-19, many events have happened to humanity; everyone has something to say. As an English teacher, it has been a significant challenge to adapt my traditional classes to a virtual teaching-learning setting. Here is an anecdote about my teaching experience during confinement.

I am an English teacher who has worked with business administration students in a rural public school for five years, where the conditions are not the same as in the city. I mean that students in a rural context have

fewer opportunities to be in touch with a foreign language than those who live in a city. These city students can go to extra classes or practice in a language laboratory, while students in a rural context only practice during class sessions, by teams or pairs, because there are not enough didactical resources, plus the fact that the internet signal is usually poor. I try to use flexible material for this condition, involving them in a motivational learning environment and encouraging them to acquire the language since learning English can provide great opportunities to succeed in business.

I believe that if the teacher encourages students to succeed through values, ethics, and a positive attitude, the world may be different and have another philosophy. Consequently, human beings can be more conscious concerning their performance.

According to the university program, students must acquire and develop language competencies and positively learn a foreign language. However, some of the students reach the former objective while others do not. This is because they feel confident and involved in the language learning process. On the other hand, some are shy and believe they cannot succeed. Under this circumstance, I often try to provide them with pleasant and face-to-face academic activities. However, everything changed in 2020.

The work class conditions before Covid-19 allowed teacher-student interaction. Nowadays, this interaction represents a serious challenge

because of virtual work. Moreover, most students are not accustomed to working in this new learning paradigm. Thus, teachers worldwide had to adapt their teaching practice, and the students had to develop a kind of autonomous learning. Moreover, because of this phenomenon, some of the students had to start working to help their families; this fact has represented an academic problem because they stopped studying, which has affected the family economics.

One day, while my students were attending an online session, they tried to make their best effort in a speaking activity. I had asked them to work in pairs to communicate with each other by WhatsApp and describe what they would like to do in the future. Most of them said they would like to start classes as in the past and contact people, for they missed the activities they used to do. However, they also described feeling sad, confused, and worried about the future. One of them expressed he had severe problems at home since the pandemic appeared. I could notice that my students were expressing not only what they felt but also emotional and health problems. Therefore, I thought that my students needed to be heard in order to be helped with possible psychological problems which could affect them in the future.

I made that decision when one of my students expressed, "I am trying to do my best to participate in class, and do my activities, but something is

missing; life has been different since Covid-19 and I feel so confused". As soon as I heard this, I decided to seek professional help. Of course, life has changed for every human being, and every person has been trying to manage this situation. Nonetheless, something true is that some people are stronger than others. This pandemic has taught us many lessons; people should be more empathetic and conscious and be better human beings.

According to this, I thought that my mission was to be a teacher and a friend who understood the situation; thus, I decided to organize some workshops to help my students with some information about how to manage confinement.

I contacted some psychology, physical education, and nutrition experts to give my students some advice for managing some emotional problems like sadness, despair, depression, feeding problems, and physical activation problems. Unfortunately, most of them had begun to experience health problems because of the lack of physical activation and an appropriate diet.

The workshops lasted three hours each, one per day. The students learned how to manage some emotions that had been affecting them. They learned how to exercise within their own spaces and improve their diet. They were so grateful for the information. However, the most important thing here was the students' positive attitude towards the workshops; the experts gave them some helpful advice and talked to them about the

importance of resilience, which is adaptability. When a person develops the ability to do so, he/she has better chances of surviving major challenges.

I remember the psychologist saying a memorable phrase, "You do not know how strong you are until being strong is the only option you have left."

I was startled when I heard him say this. I understood that emotional situations and feelings could positively or negatively influence people's minds. The will to survive depends on our inner strength.

Once the workshops finished, the following virtual classes were different; I noticed my students were encouraged to participate with a positive attitude to learn and practice the language. This represented a wonderful experience because I was able to help my students manage their emotions so that they can continue getting prepared for a better future.

As a final reflection, I think we teachers must be flexible and empathetic towards the problems our students face. We should listen to them as a friend they can trust. In this way, we can support and contribute to their comprehensive training.

5 My Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

“Resilience is knowing that you are the only one that has the power and the responsibility to pick yourself up” _ Mary Holloway

BIODATA

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On December 31st, 2019, the **Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS CoV 2)** –or coronavirus was first announced in Wuhan, China. The World Health Organization declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30th, 2020, and a pandemic on March 11th, 2020. From that moment on, everything changed. I was taking a gap year, studying for my Ph.D. in Education, as well as updating in different areas such as pedagogy, culture, and English. All of a sudden, everybody had to stay home, like it or not. As teachers, we had to start classes in an

emerging context which Raúl Santiago (2020) has described as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). Hodges and Moore have mentioned that ERT responds to a sudden change from instructional models to alternative ones as a consequence of a crisis. In such circumstances, education that would typically be delivered face-to-face or blended learning now requires immediate, fully remote solutions. The primary objective of ERT is not to recreate a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a quick and easy-to-set-up manner.

Thus, this pandemic forced us all teachers to make immediate decisions and so we started classes online in September 2020. At first, I objected to working on this modality because it was an unexplored experience. I honestly felt daunted by the challenge, not knowing how students would react to this new learning paradigm.

Nevertheless, it was clear to me that the show had to go on.

I started giving my classes using “Zoom” and “Classroom”, which were my digital tools and superb unconditional friends considering they were with me all along the way. My students then started their distance learning and were assessed through an online test I prepared for them. To that end, I explained the rules of the class to them and proposed to work with a new teaching methodology based on projects. Everything ran smoothly and,

from that moment up to now, my online activities have kept a rather good pace. I think we have had many achievements during this phase. Nonetheless, I could say that the 2020 scholar year was one of the best of all my teaching life. First of all because my students eagerly participated and figured out ways to complete their final projects per unit, almost on their own. They also wrote a journal, intended to make them reflect on their learning processes and what strategies were the most effective and suitable to their learning styles.

That year I also learned that teaching was one of the things that I could not do without. I was invigorated to see my students making a great effort to learn English, despite all the drawbacks encountered as they went through the journey, and they did it in ways hard to explain. They read, spoke, and wrote English without being afraid of failure. I felt deeply moved when reading their journals, for they expressed not only how this unprecedented experience with online classes had had a negative impact on them, but also how wistfully it had hit their families.

In contrast, a huge highlight was that my students had a chance to participate in projects as scientific readers where they had to read a scientific text and write a critical review about it. To that end, they attended a congress, read different reviews, and made comments on all the works presented. They seemed to have enjoyed the activity, as they commented

not to have ever attempted an event like this before. That was such an achievement! Something to write home about.

They also developed their research skills, searched different topics, and prepared projects presented in different relevant high school events. For instance, they engaged in a program called "*Jóvenes Hacia la Investigación en Ciencias Sociales, Humanidades y Artes*" and in the "*XXV Congreso Preparatoriano de las Ciencias*". Their sharing was outstanding. Furthermore, one of the students' projects was chosen to be published in the Prepa-6 Magazine. All in all, students and I got wrapped up in different projects and congresses that made this scholar year different, challenging, and successful.

There were natural technical drawbacks too. For instance, students had trouble with connectivity. I could see that most of them did their activities using their smartphones, and not their desktops, as expected, since they had to share their devices with the rest of the family members. Another sad emotional hindrance was losing someone dear in their families. I also read that some of them had to start working because one of the main supporting family member(s) had died or lost their jobs. It was undoubtedly a critical stage where we, as teachers, had to keep them from falling and encourage them to continue their studies.

What did I learn all along then? Although we know that life has to go on,

this pandemic is a sick-at-heart experience that will never be forgotten. Everybody has learned that life can come to an end at any moment, so we have to seize the day, taking nothing for granted. We have to practice *Carpe Diem*. Also, in many ways, these moments of reflection have constantly reminded me of Mario Benedetti's poem called "*Cuando la tormenta pase.*" When we get there, I hope we will all be better people, keeping in mind that life is like a river; we cannot touch the same water twice because the flow that has passed will never pass again, so we must enjoy every moment of our lives, so say the wise.

I conclude then that I cherish my life wholeheartedly. I love teaching because it has given me satisfaction, bliss, and vast fulfillment. If I could live my life again, I would choose to be a teacher again.

So, what is next? To keep improving my classes to be a better teacher every day. I will also keep exercising my empathy, tolerance, and resilience because I know, feel, and understand what others might be going through now. My utmost conclusion is that "*I thank this life which has taught me great and tough lessons, wide genuine understanding, and physical endurance during this Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic time.*"

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6 Perceived Language Barriers that Interfere with the Learning of English as a Second Language in Public Universities in Tamaulipas, Mexico

“One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way.” **Frank Smith**

BIODATA

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Introduction

It has been around 20 years since the interest in learning English has grown exponentially in Mexico. Most jobs demand university students to learn and speak this language. It has become a job requirement in Mexico. Reasons are many: Becoming competitive to get job positions, opportunities for getting jobs abroad, establishing social relationships with people from English-speaking countries, playing videogames, and the list continues to grow. Certifications such as TOEFL, ICELT, CENNI, ITEP,

APTIS, among many others, have become an exit exam requirement to get B.A., B.S. or B.F.A. degrees in all public and private universities in Mexico. What has happened with these ambitious programs in most universities? Can all undergraduates achieve this goal? Unfortunately, many English learners have not been able to get their official degree for not having reached the required level of English.

Many variables can explain why a significant number of English learners cannot comply with this degree criterion. According to results in different universities in the South of Tamaulipas, where this study has been carried out chiefly, undergraduates have not met the English qualification or gotten a high-stake English Certificate due to the following reasons:

- Most English learners did not have the opportunity to attend a bilingual school in Elementary education nor junior high school. Therefore, their knowledge of English is limited, and the English requirements are of a high level.
- Most English learners are unmotivated because they think they will not need this language in their future professional careers.
- Some English students refuse to study the target language, and because of this, they do not attend English classes.
- Other students think that the English class is optional and not mandatory.

- They feel overwhelmed with the burden of their content subjects, among other reasons.

According to my research and everyday teaching practice, there are some barriers that English learners tend to build, which explain why they do not learn the target language. In this article, three types of barriers that have been perceived as substantial obstacles for most English learners will be analyzed.

1. Language Identity

According to McKay & Wong, (1996); Norton, (1997); Pavlenko & Lantolf, (2000) the relationship between identity and second language development has grown in interest among applied linguistics researchers in recent years. Studying a second language and its culture has an impact on English learners in underdeveloped countries, such as Mexico.

Studying English modifies learners' perceptions about the world out of their context. McKay and Wong (1996) refer to "the importance of fluid and changing individual and social identities and their relation to multiple discourses; e.g., immigrant, minority, academic, gender." What these authors emphasize is shared with Norton's views (1997) that highlight the importance of "investment enhancement", which is related to power differences between learners and native speakers. These differences make learners reject the imposition of learning the most widely-recognized

language in the world, English as a Lingua Franca. To reduce the impact of this barrier, teachers have to raise everyday motivation to encourage students to learn different cultures through English. It is clear that learners in this context do not understand why they have to learn English to get a job opportunity in their own country. They perceive that if foreign companies are established in Mexico, Spanish must be spoken then. Students find it hard to understand the advantages and reasons for learning English.

2. Pronunciation

Another barrier is the difficulty students face in pronouncing the target language. Bhatt (2010) maintains that a critical observation in second language speech perception has been that L2 perceptual abilities do not match L2 production abilities. The author specifies that "In perception, listeners attend to acoustic-phonetic features of sounds to identify them, while in production, talkers produce specific articulatory configurations to distinguish sounds from each other. Generally, there is evidence that L2 learners can have highly accurate perceptual abilities, but relatively inaccurate production ones." Alternatively, L2 learner production skills can be more target-like than their perceptual abilities at certain levels of phonology. "Not only do perception and production require different primitives, but they also can have a differential rate of development."

Spanish has a strong accent, easier to understand than other related languages. However, the Spanish accent is harsh and flat and does not include stress, intonation or pitch as English does. Additionally, Spanish produces some twenty phonemes, whereas English has more than forty. Therefore, English students must produce more than twenty phonemes that are totally different from their native tongue sounds and not easy to accomplish. Another remark is that the Spanish language has only one silent letter, "h," and all the other letters in a word are pronounced.

In contrast, any letter in a specific word can be silent in English. This is one of the main difficulties related to pronunciation.

According to empirical studies, the phonemes that cause more difficulties to Mexican students are vowels and distinguishing short and long vowel pairs. As reported by Case (2012) "Students often stretch all vowel sounds out too much and confuse pairs of short and long English vowel sounds such as "live" and "leave" both in comprehension and speaking." Some examples of this sound confusion can be minimal pairs: fill/feel, bought/boat, batter/barter, pull/pool, among many others.

The former minimal pairs are pronounced in different speech positions and have varied lengths. Focusing on those production aspects can help students distinguish between the minimal pairs above, even if they do not fully grasp vowel length. For instance, the unstressed schwa "er" sound in

"computer" nor the closest long sounds in "fur" and "her" exist in Spanish. Case also points out that "consonants represent another problem since words written with 'b' and 'v' are pronounced identically in Spanish, making this perhaps one of the most common sound difficulties." An attempt to identify and produce the proper phonemes may cause misunderstandings because speech and intonation vary, and learners cannot always understand the meaning. In conclusion, developing and mastering communicative competence may represent considerable work and requires vast practice for Spanish speakers, starting from the basic levels of English instruction.

3. L1 Interference

Another severe barrier for learners related to productive skills is L1 Interference. Beardsmore (1991) mentions that transfer leads to positive and negative linguistic errors or interferences. By the same token, Ellis (1996) also cites that language interference influences the learning of a target language. Therefore, it has positive and negative effects. The more similar the two languages are, the smaller the differences between the two languages one can find; however, this similarity can lead to misunderstandings and overgeneralizations. Consequently, language transfer can work for students positively or negatively.

Positive and negative transfer are related to those similarities between L1

and L2. The most prevalent examples of transfers seem to be the cognates, words that have identical or almost identical spelling in both languages but different sounds. In Spanish and English, many words from both languages come from the same Latin root. Examples of these Latin words used in both languages can be: "ability, emergency, restaurant, actor, hospital, care, responsibility, construction, determination, sincere", to mention a few. These words are most of the times easily understood by Spanish-English speakers. However, negative transfers can also be 'false friends' or 'false cognates.' For instance: library, message, sensible, canes, attend, realize, assist, resumé, exit, and so on. In consideration of the former data, English teachers have to instruct their learners in using true and false cognates when teaching vocabulary. Unfortunately, isolated words cannot transmit messages and cannot help learners produce coherent utterances; thus, learners need to learn, among other things: syntax (the structures of sentences) which is one of the components of linguistics.

There are many other barriers that have to be researched, such as: Learners' personalities, the affective factor, lack of motivation, and others. For starters, however, teachers' planning should provide opportunities for learners to practice more phonology, to raise learners' awareness on how English grammar works as opposed to their first language and motivate students to understand other cultures.

In closing, what we teachers and learners do in our classrooms must be oriented to overcome the barriers dealt with in this article. Using strategies that can foster and encourage the study of English as a procedure for getting culture, job opportunities, internationalization and a sense of becoming global citizens can lead our learners to a better understanding of the importance of English mastery.

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7 My Most Despairing School Anecdote

*“No Matter where You Are, As Long As
You Teach with Your Heart”*

_To Octavio

BIODATA

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It was Spring 2014, a lovely season with fragrant lovely flowers in full bloom all around, families playing together in the nearby park, ice cream cones in different flavors, and a breathlessly enchanting blue sky. In the middle of this delightful setting, there was our school. Every morning kids would arrive at school as early as they could, wanting to be the teacher's assistant for the day. *“Can we erase the whiteboard? Do you want me to open the windows? Can I help you with your school supplies? May I write the date on the board today?”* Beautiful stories behind these questions, or rather

intentions, can only be written in tender hearts as our students', would you not agree?

One Friday morning of that year, life was going on cheerfully at school, with teachers waiting for the kids in their classrooms, a cleaning lady helping a little girl to tie her shoes, the principal looking around to check that everything was fine, and then; there he was, Teacher Octavio looking around, making sure things were done right. To him, this school was not only walls; it was a treasure of memories_ kids playing all around, science fairs, general school events and chats with colleagues and students under the trees in the middle of the playground. The school was in the deepest of his heart. No wonder he had been working there for more than 40 years. We could see him enjoying a delicious cup of coffee with a piece of warm sweet bread every single morning. "It makes me feel strong", he would say. He was by far not only the most beloved teacher but the kindest one as well. That day, at around noon or so, he turned to me and other teachers and enthusiastically said, "Time to rehearse with my little ones. Everything should be perfect next Monday!" Students would have their monthly Civics Education Event the following Monday. To that end, they had practiced for an extended period, and they were keen on it. Actually, in terms of school events and ceremonies, everyone would always know what to do, say, and expect. As a result, all modesty aside, rarely would anyone omit to

comment about our outstanding school events. Octavio's students, particularly, were always working together, hard and creatively, like pretty tiny ants. His classroom was always decorated with colorful art pieces, and everyone enjoyed listening to, participating in and learning through his charming stories. When listening to him, our minds felt like being taken to unexplored worlds. Never had we listened to such beautiful, enjoyable and educational stories and heartfelt words like his.

"Guys, do not ever forget that, on the path to success, you have to work hard while others sleep. You have to study intensely and learn a lot while others party. Our job is not to take you to that path, where success resides, but to teach you how to get there; to help you get ready for a successful future". He would always say these words to our students, for their own sake.

That Friday, he spent the rest of the afternoon doing what he loved the most, "teaching with his heart." As the kids were leaving, they would say things like_ "Teacher Octavio, see you next Monday!" "See you on Monday!" "Have a great weekend!" "We are ready for the event!". He would reply "See you then!" "Take good care of yourselves." Little did he know what was about to happen.

It was seven-thirty on that Monday morning and everyone was looking neat and awesome for the big event. Girls would wear pretty ponytails with

delicate white ribbons; boys showed up looking clean-cut, wearing shiny black shoes and dark blue ties; parents would arrive very early to get the best seats at the ceremony. I made sure the music was all set up, and our principal would take his time to check on final details, rather apprehensively though. Everyone was ready, except him, our dear Octavio. "Where is he?" "Why has he not arrived yet?" _We were beginning to nervously ask ourselves what might have happened to him.

We waited impatiently for his arrival to start the event, but after a short while our principal told us that the show had to begin. I remember I was so much concerned about Octavio's lateness that I could hardly notice when our director said_ "The stage is all yours."

Soon enough we were right there, on stage, enjoying and doing our best to live up to our students' and our own expectations. Fortunately, the job was done perfectly, as Octavio had anticipated. Actually, it was by far one of the best school events I had ever seen! I was fascinated at the spectacle of our students marching so respectfully with their flag, moving left and right legs at the same time in a tight formation. Every bit of their performance was undoubtedly superb! What a pleasant production that was, for all the ones involved; students, parents and teachers. Just as Aristotle cites_ "Pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work." It was unfortunate that our dear Octavio had missed it. By ten o'clock, the event was over, and he never

arrived. At first we thought it was just his way of having tested his students' performance without him, yet it was not the case.

Many hours went by without hearing anything from Octavio. But after ten hours or so, his family, friends and colleagues started a desperate search all over the city; posting on social media, contacting hospitals, going to the police station, doing online search and the like. Nothing. He was not found anywhere. Unfortunately, the worst came to pass. He disappeared for three weeks before knowing he had been injured in a brutal assault. His family found him next to a river in shocking circumstances. His mind was lost and his body was badly hurt.

Octavio, our dear Octavio, was never the same again. He could not go back to work since the doctor had strongly recommended that he should stop working. This indeed made us all feel down and out. It was hard for us to cope with feelings of guilt and regret. "If we had been there... If I had called him up... If he and I had walked home together, this might not have ever happened", many said. His head and brain had been seriously damaged due to the terrible blows that stunned him that day. However, he could say a few words before being taken to the hospital, "Tell my Kids I love them with all my heart, and I am proud of them." _We will never forget his sweet, sparkling, blue eyes every time he heard his students' voices.

It was not until six months later that he left the hospital and we could see

him again in a wheelchair that was carrying his still weak body. A crowd of more than two hundred students of all ages had gathered at the school entrance with cards, flowers and banners to express the love they felt for him, in return for what he had always given us. In that memorable farewell ceremony, a wholehearted song was played just for him. His eyes went into tears, he did not recognize all of his students anymore, but he felt their love in the deepest of his heart.

"No matter where you are, as long as you teach with your heart," these were the kind words I heard the last time we talked to each other, that beautiful, sunny, spring Friday before we said goodbye.

8 Teachers Are from Mexico. Students Are from Venus!

“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge”

Albert Einstein

BIODATA

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Have you ever felt that your students do not seem to be focused on your class no matter how hard you try? This is a prevalent feeling for almost every teacher worldwide, and Mexican teachers are not the exception. Teaching English in Mexico is one of the most beautiful and exciting activities; however, it is also one of the most challenging tasks. It demands that teachers get prepared to look for more and better ways to teach. It challenges teachers to identify students’ motives to study English, how

much exposure to language students have outside the classroom, and of course, how to face administrative requirements that might impede learning objectives. This paper will explore these challenges and how they have been taken on, while keeping students motivated for better learning. It is first necessary to consider students' profiles. Working at a teachers' training school allows for working with young adults who are willing to be part of the teaching-learning activities, even if their majors are not related to English. For example, most of the students at Escuela Normal de San Felipe del Progreso in the State of Mexico come from rural backgrounds where their resources are minimal, and English is not something they find as a priority.

With this information in mind, one of the main problems teachers have to cope with is that students do not have the chance to practice outside the classroom, mainly because there are not many native speakers around, and there are no places where they can apply what they have learned. For this reason, teachers need to find valuable strategies or activities to enable their students to understand what they have learned and where or how to use it. One of my favorite classroom activities is to approach my students only in English, indoors and outdoors. This might look simple, but it allows students to use English confidently without worrying about making mistakes.

Another activity that I find very useful is using social networks to practice the language away from controlled activities. Using Tik Tok, for example, empowers students to be creative and enjoy the experience of using English outside the classroom. Students have to focus on a task and use what they already know to perform it effectively. The use of language tasks allows students to recycle their previous knowledge and connect it to the new structures to build on their learning (Ramirez, 2020). Therefore, social networks connect students with real-life situations and help them to practice what they have learned, which translates into an increase in students' confidence.

Building student self-assurance, when performing a task involving productive and receptive skills, gets strengthened when we give students opportunities to practice outside scholar environments. One very efficient action is to use Facebook to open threads where students have to follow a topic and keep commenting on it. It can be an easy topic such as “What time is it in your town?”. What is expected is that students post the time according to what their clock says at the moment they complete the task. Once they have improved their command of the language, the topics can get more complex such as asking for the development of a thesis statement for a writing project.

Nonetheless, another problem students face is worry or anxiety.

Sometimes it is difficult for teachers to keep their students focused on the tasks as they are more worried about their grades than about their learning. In order to draw students' attention to their knowledge, instead of just passing the course, it is vital to generate strategies that involve challenging activities that interest students. Then, no matter how good or bad students are at the subject, they all get the same chance to participate and succeed because the activities are not about who knows more, but who performs better.

Concern also comes from having different student proficiency levels in English language handling in a class. As a result, the most advanced students might lose motivation from having to deal with classmates who are struggling with the foreign language. That is, many English teachers in Mexico have to cope with classes made up of students with mixed language learning abilities. Davies notes that "in Mexico, it can be generally assumed that university students will have studied English in secondary school, but they have learned so little and forgotten so much" (2003, p.186). Therefore, teachers have to plan integrated skills lessons and target different proficiency levels.

After looking at these ideas, it is necessary to focus our attention on planning challenging activities, such as mini boards. For this activity, each student has a mini-board (made with laminated cardboard), a marker, and

a piece of cloth to erase their answers—students make two lines with their chairs facing each other. One of the lines can look at what is written on the board (line 1), whereas the other is facing their classmates (line 2). Students from line one look at the description written on the board (use an overhead projector for this activity) and draw a picture of what is described. Students from line two look at the drawing and write what they think it is. The first student who shows his/her mini-board with the correct answer wins a point. After some turns, students change places in order to exchange roles. At the end of the activity the couple who got more points is the winner.

This activity gives students the chance to use their handwriting, which is a personal issue that connects to memory, a cognitive process that is essential for exams and examinations. For this reason, practicing writing and spelling avoids future problems related to the correspondence between the sound of a word and the way it is spelled (Harmer, 2005).

Students' motives to study English are crucial for directing teachers' activities and strategies. Unfortunately, most students are willing to learn the language because they want to keep their grades high, not to improve their English level. Upon this basis, we must give students motives for learning rather than just passing the course. Bruner made a point by saying that “the first object of any act of learning is that it should serve us in the

future” (1960, p. 17). Teachers should then focus on what has to be achieved and then give students reasons to do so.

Apart from the activities listed above, other activities that teachers can do to keep students concentrated on the task are interactive games. Gamification helps students decrease their affective filters and be willing to learn. Unfortunately, most students happen to suffer from monotony within their lessons. To avoid this, teachers should not overuse their activities, or they might get an unexpected outcome. An ice breaker that usually works well for keeping students on task is using Kahoot. This interactive platform gives teachers the chance to use their students' most precious possession for learning - their phones. Instead of telling off your students for using their phones in class, use these devices as a surviving tool for those days they are in Venus (meaning not focused or interested in the class).

Most teaching methods require providing students with enough information for performing either a task or developing a project. Project work also establishes that it is essential to reinforce learners' ability to form grammatically and pragmatically correct sentences and questions (Burglar in Richards' 2007). For this reason, pre-task activities (like using Kahoot) are used at several points in many teaching methods. They are essential for providing support to the learners in their attempts to deal

with complex activities.

As a result, students become more confident when using the language as they feel their needs and interests are being considered. _As an aside, in the latest institutional survey my students took to evaluate their learning, they mentioned that during their English class, they found themselves in a context where they could practice what they had learned in a self-confident way, and use the strategies they had learned for their own teaching practice, something which made me overjoyed. The former information means that learners approach the language in a more purposeful way when they can apply what they have learned in class, in various contexts and situations.

To conclude, as we refreshen all the ideas here undertaken, it can be understood why teaching English in Mexico is so demanding, though exciting: It is due to all the requirements and challenges teachers have to be confronted by. They need to provide students with opportunities to practice what they have studied in class and out of the classroom. It is also necessary to fulfill administrative duties (such as passing the course), to manage different English levels of proficiency and to maintain students motivated during their learning. Therefore, it is upon teachers to keep coming up with a variety of ideas to rise above these concerns, in order to keep students away from Venus. On the whole, we teachers know it is not

an easy task, but we can turn it into an attainable and worthwhile objective, can't we?

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Dear Mextesol Members,

The Mextesol Press-2022 will soon issue its Call for Papers, inviting our EFL Teacher Community to submit articles concerning both practical and theoretical areas of interest to the English language educator. The call will include information related to its focus on the next issue, title, guidelines and procedures, its Open Access policy, publication frequency and deadline for abstracts, among others. The Mextesol Press editors will be delighted to receive your submissions. Please consider contributing to our forthcoming issue(s) and encourage colleagues to do so as well.

Warmest regards.

Connie Reyes Cruz
Editora