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What Practicing Teachers Value in Their MATESOL Education: A Retrospective Needs Analysis

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As California continues to face growing numbers of language minority students in its public schools and other educational institutes, one pressing concern is the quality education of future English as a second language (ESL) teachers. In an effort to improve that education, CATESOL's College/University Level undertook a study to collect data on the needs of TESOL professionals within the state.[1] This report summarizes the findings of this study, a retrospective questionnaire sent to practicing teachers concerning the match between their MATESOL education programs and their needs as teachers currently employed in the classroom. It is our belief that these results can provide valuable insight into the degree to which teacher preparation curricula match the needs of the state's expanding ESL teacher population. Further, we hope that input on which courses the respondents consider particularly valuable can serve as guidelines for those developing and refining teacher preparation curricula.

Description of the Survey

The survey, which was distributed through the efforts of CATESOL's College/University Level, consisted of an 11-item mail questionnaire (see Appendix). This questionnaire was sent out to all educational institutes listed in the CATESOL Directory where the number of instructors listed equaled 10 or more. A total of 560 questionnaires was sent to the designated institutes. Of these, 131 were returned, bringing the response rate to 23%. The respondents represented 27 different MATESOL preparation programs, as represented in Table 1.

Table 1
MATESOL Programs Involved in the Survey

Respondents	Institute
28	University of California, Los Angeles
16	San Francisco State University
10	University of Southern California
10	California State University, Fullerton
9	California State University, Los Angeles
8	California State University, Long Beach
5	California State University, Fresno
45	Other (18 out of state)

Description of the Survey Participants

The majority of respondents (120, or 92%) have a master's degree in TESOL or a related field (most frequently applied linguistics or linguistics). Only two have no specific ESL training; and four have a TESOL Certificate or a few TESOL-related courses. Although the survey was intended for teachers who had recently received their TESOL-related education, there was a large range of years (1963—present) in which the respondents' TESOL-related education was received. Seventy percent of the respondents, however, have received their education since 1984.

In terms of employment, 46% (60) of the respondents are employed full time; 49% (64) are part-timers; five respondents are unemployed; and two are otherwise engaged. Of those who are employed, the majority (43, or 32%) work in community college or college or university-affiliated language institutes (27, or 21%); 13% (17) work in a college program for matriculated students and 18% (23) report working at multiple levels.

Respondents' Assessment of Their MATESOL Preparation Programs

The main purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate the match between current MATESOL curricula and the respondents' assessment of how these courses prepared them for the teaching profession. Respondents were asked to rate courses which they had taken on a scale of 1-4, as follows:

1 = included in my program; useful
2 = included in my program; not useful
3 = not included in my program; I wish it had been
4 = not included in my program; I don't miss it

Table 2 displays those courses which were given a rating of 1 (most useful) by the majority of respondents:[2]

Table 2
MATESOL Courses Rated Useful by Respondents

Number of Responses	Course
113	First/second language acquisition
110	Survey of methods
108	English phonetics/phonology
95	Teaching of writing
94	Teaching of grammar
92	Teaching of reading
92	Teaching practicum
91	Linguistic description of English
91	Curriculum/materials development
88	General introduction to linguistics
85	Teaching of speaking
84	Sociolinguistics

Respondents also noted courses which they considered to be not useful. Those for which there was a consensus rating of 2 (not useful) are displayed in Table 3:

Table 3
MATESOL Courses Rated Not Useful by Respondents

Number of Responses	Course
22	Research design
19	Bilingual education
17	Discourse analysis
11	English syntax
11	Introduction to linguistics

Suggestions for courses which were not included in the respondents' TESOL-related education but which they wished they had been able to avail themselves of (rating 3) are given in Table 4:[3]

Table 4
Desired MATESOL Courses

Number of Responses	Course
57	Teaching of literature
50	How to integrate skills
48	Use of instructional media
44	Teaching of vocabulary
41	Content-based instruction
37	English for specific purposes
37	The teaching of listening

Finally, the respondents also indicated those courses which were not included in their program and which they did not feel would have been useful (rating 4). These courses are given in Table 5.

Table 5
Courses Not Missed

Number of Responses	Course
40	Bilingual education
27	Research design
24	English for specific purposes

Open-ended Responses

Supplementing the quantitative responses on the survey were several questions eliciting open-ended responses regarding attitudes. Here, the majority of respondents indicated the particular usefulness of the following courses: the field practicum, general methods courses, and language acquisition. In retrospect, respondents especially indicated a need for courses in curriculum/materials development, the teaching of specific skills (especially grammar, writing, and pronunciation). They also expressed a need for more in-depth cross-cultural training. The respondents also indicated a need for MATESOL research design and bilingual education courses to be more tailored to the classroom environment.

Respondents characterized their greatest perceived needs as having to do with: dealing with large, heterogeneous classes; the teaching of basic literacy skills; test preparation and evaluation; determining grading criteria; and general classroom management skills.

Opportunities for Continuing Development

In addition to looking at the match between the respondents' education and their current, classroom-driven needs, the survey investigated what resources teachers use for their own professional development. The overwhelming majority (105, or 80%) reported that they used their colleagues as their primary source of support. Sixty percent (79) also reported that they used teacher resource books and 44% (58) read professional journals to further educate themselves. Among the occasionally use category, the highest ranked items were professional in-services (61, or 47%), journals (57, or 43%), and conferences (54, or 37%). CATESOL regional conferences, other conferences, and the summer institute rated the never or rarely use category with 18% of the respondents. By way of explanation for this low rating, however, they indicated that costs were prohibitive and that these were not always immediately accessible to them.

Conclusions

As is to be expected in a survey, the respondents do not always concur in their opinions.[4] It is striking, for example, that 37 respondents indicated a felt need for English for specific purposes (rating 3) while 24 noted no regret at its absence from their course of study (rating 4). Also, some responses seem counterintuitive, at least to this researcher. How can one explain the overwhelming lack of interest in bilingual education (59 respondents, combined ratings 2 and 4) in such a critical field of study given the focus on bilingual education in the state's schools? With respect to this finding, it is useful to remember that the respondents polled are drawn primarily from intensive language institutes or university-affiliated ESL programs, not from the K—12 setting.

Nonetheless, there are also very evident trends in the responses which can serve to inform those responsible for MATESOL program design. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated the value they placed on any courses which were directly methods-related, especially those related to the teaching of specific skills (reading, speaking, etc.). And they were uninhibited in expressing their belief that programs emphasized theory at the expense of practice. In fact, many respondents expounded at great length on this topic, covering both the front and back of the questionnaire.

The survey results suggest several directions for MATESOL education programs. First, to adequately prepare teachers for the challenges of the state's classrooms, these programs need to be practice-driven and informed. This does not mean that theory courses are not relevant, but it does indicate the need for programs to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Since the needs of classroom teachers depend to a large degree on the set-

ting in which they intend to teach, programs would do well to allow maximum flexibility in their requirement structures, that is, to allow students electives beyond the core required courses. Finally, to create a better match between felt needs and the core curriculum, programs should emphasize those courses listed in Table 2 and in general respond more directly to classroom-related issues.

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Footnotes

1. These findings were reported at the College/University Level Rap at CATESOL '93 in Monterey.

2. Classroom testing was unintentionally omitted from the questionnaire. Thus, the absence of this course from the most useful category does not necessarily indicate a lack of appreciation by the respondents. In fact, many indicated the usefulness of this course in the open-ended section of the questionnaire.

3. Several respondents noted the ambiguity of this question, since it could refer to either courses which were not included in the program or those which the respondent, for reasons of time or scheduling, could not take.

4. There are obvious differences in programs, instructors, and curricula which help to account for conflicting findings. In fact, many of the respondents in the open-ended section of the questionnaire indicated that their negative ratings of a given course reflected dissatisfaction with the curriculum or instructor rather than the subject matter.

Appendix

MATESOL Questionnaire Sent to Respondents

1. What level of training do you have?
   - ____ No specific training in teaching ESL
   - ____ A few courses
   - ____ A TESOL Certificate
   - ____ A master's degree in TESOL or related field
     (If related field, specify): _____
   - ____ Other (please specify)

2. If you have a TESOL Certificate or a TESOL-related master's degree, what year did you receive it?

3. Where did you receive your TESOL-related education?

4. Are you now working in the field of TESOL?
   - ____ Yes, full time
   - ____ Yes, part time
   - ____ No, not currently working in the field
   - ____ Other (please specify)

5. If yes to #4 above, how many class hours a week are you working?

6. What level are you primarily teaching at?
   - ____ K—6
   - ____ 7—12
   - ____ Adult education
   - ____ Community college
   - ____ College or university associated language institute
   - ____ College or university program for matriculated students
   - ____ Private language program
   - ____ Other (please specify)

7. For the following course areas that may have been part of your TESOL education, please use this coding:

   1 = included in my program; useful
   2 = included in my program; not useful
   3 = not included in my program; I wish it had been
   4 = not included in my program; I don't miss it

   - ____ Bilingual education
   - ____ Content-based instruction
   - ____ Discourse analysis
   - ____ English for specific purposes
   - ____ English phonetics/phonology
   - ____ English syntax
   - ____ ESL curriculum & materials development
   - ____ First/second language acquisition
   - ____ How to integrate skills
   - ____ Introduction to linguistics (not focused on English)
   - ____ Linguistic description of English

____ Practice teaching
____ Research design & statistics
____ Sociolinguistics
____ Survey of methods (natural approach, audio-lingual, etc.)
____ The teaching of grammar to ESL students
____ The teaching of listening to ESL students
____ The teaching of literature to ESL students
____ The teaching of reading to ESL students
____ The teaching of speaking to ESL students
____ The teaching of vocabulary to ESL students
____ The teaching of writing to ESL students
____ Use of instructional media

8. Do you have any further comments on aspects of your TESOL education that have been particularly useful? That is, what did you learn that you have called on to perform your job better?

9. Do you have any further comments on aspects of your TESOL education that have *not* been particularly useful? That is, what seems in retrospect to have been an inefficient use of your time?

10. Do you have any further comments on things that you wish you had learned more about in your TESOL program?

11. For each of the following resources for professional development, please use the following coding:

    1 = use it a lot
    2 = use it occasionally
    3 = rarely or never use it; not useful
    4 = have rarely or never used, but would if it were more accessible

    ____ Colleagues
    ____ 1-day in-service training workshops
    ____ CATESOL regional conferences
    ____ CATESOL state conferences
    ____ Conferences of other professional organizations
    (e.g., TESOL, CABE/NABE, AAAL, NAFSA, etc.)
    ____ Books for teachers
    ____ Professional journals
    ____ Summer institutes