

1

The Individual as Context

For the past 6 years, I have been living and working in El Paso, Texas, in the United States, a mid-size city bordering Ciudad Juárez, the largest city in the northern State of Chihuahua, Mexico. The two cities, together, form a single metropolitan area with a population of more than 2 million people, the second-largest along the U.S.-Mexico border. This region constitutes a dynamic socio-political space with complexly related cultural, sociolinguistic, and educational traditions. Such complexity presents a variety of challenges and opportunities for English language teachers, learners, and their institutions. At a personal level, as an applied linguist, second language teacher educator, and program coordinator, my work in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands has been closely connected to my educational and professional experiences.

Having been born in a small town in northwestern Mexico, not far from the United States, a place that I left as a teenager, moving to El Paso 30 years later felt like returning to familiar territory. Cities and towns located on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border share many characteristics: their economies are—to a greater or lesser degree—intertwined; many people cross to “the other side” with regularity, to work, shop, dine, or visit family and friends; and both English and Spanish can be heard, on TV and radio programs, in homes and on the street, coexisting and influencing each other. Even though I had never been to El Paso before my job interview at its main university, I felt very comfortable from the day I arrived. If anything, the traits that I had always associated with border towns seemed more intense and vivid in El Paso.

During the years between leaving my hometown and arriving in El Paso, I learned English and got my bachelor’s degree in Mexico; became an English language teacher, also in Mexico; obtained an MA and a PhD in TESOL and applied linguistics in the United States; coordinated English and Spanish language programs in Mexico; and taught and conducted research in applied linguistics in Mexico and in the United States. My educational and professional journey has thus been characterized by a constant moving back and forth between the

two countries. Given these experiences, I felt I could live and work with relative ease in either country. So when I obtained a position at a university in southern Virginia, in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, I thought it would be one more of my many moves between the two countries. It was there, however, that I realized the powerful effect that a specific context can have on one's sense of a professional self.

Before moving to El Paso, I lived in Virginia for 4 years. One of the original 13 colonies and thus a place where many important events in the early history of the country took place, Virginia has a distinctive regional culture, very different from what I had known, up to that point, as most of my experiences had been in the U.S. Southwest. However, I managed to adapt fairly well to my new surroundings. And yet, something that I was unable to adjust to was working in a place where, for the most part, only English was used. There was no need for Spanish, my mother tongue, and thus I felt disconnected from that part of my self. In most places where I had worked before, I had been able to use both Spanish and English on a regular basis. Working in a Department of English in southern Virginia was, at least for me, a rather monolingual experience. It was not until I moved to El Paso that my two languages became, once again, part of my daily routine.

I clearly remember my first days in the city and at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) in January 2008. I had never been in a place where English and Spanish could be heard seemingly everywhere, constantly, on and off campus. Neither had I seen so many people switching from one language to the other with such great ease and openness. As an applied linguist, this was a very interesting place to be. I could teach courses in my areas of specialization (second language teaching and teacher education, bilingualism, discourse analysis) and relate class topics and discussions to the lives and experiences of my students and the bilingual and bicultural environment surrounding us. In addition, the position I was offered at the university involved coordinating a large English language program in which most of the learners are Spanish-speaking students from Mexico. Therefore, this was an excellent opportunity to work with students with whom I could relate, that is, English language learners whose background and language learning difficulties I could personally understand and appreciate. Like most of these students, I had learned English as a young adult and had also been an international student in a U.S. university.

Coordinating an English language program is a demanding job. It involves developing skills that are not usually part of classroom teaching: strategic planning; teacher training; program assessment; and managing human, material, and financial resources, among others. Throughout my career, I have had the opportunity to coordinate several academic programs, and this experience was, of course, invaluable, especially since I had little formal training in program coordination and management. This lack of training is, in fact, not uncommon in our field. As Christison and Stoller (1997) point out, most teachers learn to be

language program administrators by trial and error. Indeed, when I first made the move, early in my career, from being an English language teacher to coordinating the program where I was teaching, I had to “learn the ropes” on the job. Fortunately, I survived, and over the years I have honed my skills as a program coordinator, in no small part thanks to the advice and mentoring of more experienced colleagues.

In my current position at UTEP, in addition to coordinating the English language program, I teach undergraduate and graduate courses and conduct research in applied linguistics. My teaching and research inform, to a great extent, the work I do as program coordinator, as I have purposefully tried to establish connections among these three areas while taking into consideration the unique characteristics of El Paso and the U.S.-Mexico border region. I know that my decision to come to El Paso was influenced, in no small way, by the dynamism and energy found in places where languages and cultures come into close contact. As is the case with many border regions around the world, the U.S.-Mexico border is complex and dynamic, fascinating and perplexing, challenging and stimulating. Teaching English in such a context has been quite an enlightening experience for me, and in the following chapters I hope you, the reader, can gain some insight into what this entails.