

Teaching English in Ecuador

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Universidad de Investigación de Tecnología Experimental- Yachay

My university, also referred to as Yachay Tech, is the premier science and technology institution for research in South America (or that is the idea of Ecuador's current president, Rafael Correa). You see, this university opened its doors the same week that I started teaching there. Because this is important to understand my unique situation here, I will first explain the university's beginnings and a little bit about the initiative that built it, and then explain my teaching context second.

With investments from allied-nations, companies, and organizations from all over the world, the Ecuadorian government seeks to build Yachay as The City of Knowledge. Starting with the center of the knowledge sector, in 2014 Ecuador's president christened the opening of Yachay Tech. There are soon to be other sectors of the city, such as entertainment, residential, and agriculture among many others. Currently, only about half of the knowledge sector, and university, has finished being built. Although nearly none of the other sectors has even broken ground yet, you can already see the immense undertaking involved. If you would like more information on Yachay – The City of Knowledge, you can watch this short, 5-minute video which explains the main scope, plans, and objective, here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fab8oAI2TPA>.

Yachay Tech accepts only the top 5% of newly graduated high school students who have agreed to take a standardized exam that tests their knowledge of basic mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, and geology. All the students who have scored in the top fifth percentile and accepted their invitation of enrollment are required to take English classes so that they may be able to take the mathematics, science, and engineering courses in English by their second or third year of university.



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That is why the English Department has such a difficult job, because all of the students come with a range of either zero English proficiency or near-native fluency. It all depends on where they are from in Ecuador and the socio-economic status of that area. Public and private schools can offer no English courses or provide English during all years. All students are required to have a high standard of spoken and written Spanish, seeing as how there are many students of another L1 depending if they are of an indigenous family either from the Andes Mountains or from the Amazonian Rainforest. But no matter what the case may be, nearly all the students come with a smile and a motivation that says “I just won’t quit!” Remember, these are the top 5% of the country. They are not new to school, exams, hard work, or even homework; they have all come with a mission, and that is to become the best in their field... and not just in Ecuador.

Get to Know Your Students

Walking into a room of math and engineering whizzes can be intimidating for many reasons, but try getting them to talk to each other for the purposes of improving their English skills. That could be a difficult task in most contexts, but this is what I would face every day walking into the classroom. So I knew that if I could find out a little bit about each of my students’ interests and maybe where they were from, then I could spark discussion more easily and get them talking.

My first challenge was remembering the names of all the students, but that was just one class... most of us had two, if not more. However, with a seating chart or a determined effort to name each student as they walk in the class for the first week or so, anyone can accomplish this with no time at all. As obvious as this might sound, learning their names is not really getting to know them. As you can probably guess, when you have deadlines and a curriculum to get through, knowing your each of your students’ hometowns from a foreign country and interests in a short amount of time can be nearly impossible. Then add finding out their individual levels in English, you can forget about that! So I had an idea, have the students teach me.

In the first week or so of class, I had the students complete a short activity in which they told me about their home country of Ecuador. I researched and found that the country is typically split into four regions: the Amazon Rainforest, the Andean Mountains, the Pacific coast, and the Galapagos Islands. I divided the class into four groups based on which region they were from and provided markers and a large piece of paper. Each group prepared a short presentation on their region’s typical cuisine, occupations, basic geography, and local activities. All students got a chance to share so I got a chance to find out more about each individual, some of their favorite interests and activities, and maybe the most helpful, I got the chance to listen to them speak in English and briefly assess their varying levels.

After this, students noticed when I brought a reading or video into the class about soccer, fishing, zip-line, or rock-n-roll music. They noticed when I said hello to them by name in the hallway. They noticed when I asked them specific questions about their favorite team’s football matches, concerts on the weekends, or families in Guayaquil. When you make the students feel heard, you not only build a strong relationship and trust in the classroom, but you also make them

feel important. This is the difference I found out not only by other colleagues, but also by my students on evaluations at the end of the term. Some professors always referred to their students by a number, or not at all. Take a minute to learn about your students, it will make your job easier in more ways than you know. Plus, you just might gain a friend or two in return.

Expect the Unexpected

In my year and a half teaching in South America, I have learned that nothing is set in stone or ever certain. I have had five different directors all of which have come and gone for various reasons. I have had whole weeks cut from my schedule in a single night, and that can really make a semester-long project difficult or impossible to finish for students when you are required to have them complete all portions during class time. I have had whole classes split or merge with another within a term. I have had to issue up to eight different versions of my class syllabus in a single term. I have had the internet go out in the middle of a lesson, which required students to complete tasks on their accounts of our classroom-management system. I have even had stray dogs and other wild animals walk in to the classroom and perform all sorts of distractions, seriously. I have even had groups of tourists who walked into the classroom and start taking pictures of the students and me while in the middle of a lesson. So, here are a few tips that might help you in the future if you find yourself in your own personal version of the Twilight Zone.

First, of course always be prepared for class, but it is a good idea to have a couple of extra activities or language/conversation games that you always have in your back pocket. You never know when your class might finish everything you have planned an hour before expected or if the president of the university asks to take pictures with only eight of your twenty or so students (this did actually happen one day). Second, always save your materials in more place than one: your USB drive, your laptop, send it to your email, Dropbox, your external hard drive, etc. Forgetting bags, downed internet, or even forgetting to make that morning print job are all common things that can happen in this profession, you just need to have a backup. Third, remember that it is never the end of the world. There is no need to panic or cry; there is always a solution. Take a deep breath, even if an earthquake happens, you and your class will eventually get back on track.

Have a Little Fun

After all of your years of classes, exams, and practicum in a MA TESOL program, you have gotten to your position as an educator because you probably know your stuff. So you do not always need to show it every minute of every class. It is okay to let loose, tell a joke, or throw a little party once in a while. Do you remember after those long weeks of class when your teacher showed up to class with a surprise party or game? You probably felt so relieved and learned a little more on those rare occasions than your typical days in class. Even if you do not go as far as a party, having fun in the classroom or making the students genuinely laugh aloud has some real benefits.

One thing that my students become accustomed to is if they ask me the meaning of a word, I like to come up with a silly, funny situation to express the meaning. I have even been known to go as

far as act it out, as if it were a game of charades. Once students are laughing and having fun, they stop thinking. Once they stop thinking, their walls are brought down, their insecurities are forgotten, and they are then freely and openly listening to and comprehending English. If you have ever been to a bar in a foreign country and suddenly became a native speaker of that language, you know what I am talking about. The bottom line is this, if you are comfortable and having a good time, then chances are so are your students and that is when they are learning the best.

In conclusion, you never know what a new job, new country, new set of students, or new experience will bring until you go for it. Use your time in the classroom to get to know new people from around the world, this is a unique advantage that teaching English always brings. You cannot expect everything that might go awry, but if you adapt and take every new situation on with an open mind, you will most likely come through it stronger and better prepared than before... In other words, you just might learn something new. And remember, always have a backup! Lastly, have fun with each lesson because you just might get the chance to give that same lesson in the Andes Mountains, a Pacific island, high-tech city in Asia, or a small town in the United States. No matter what lesson you teach, as a TESOL professional, you can always look out of the window of your classroom and expect to find a view of some far off land. That is a priceless reward if you ask me!