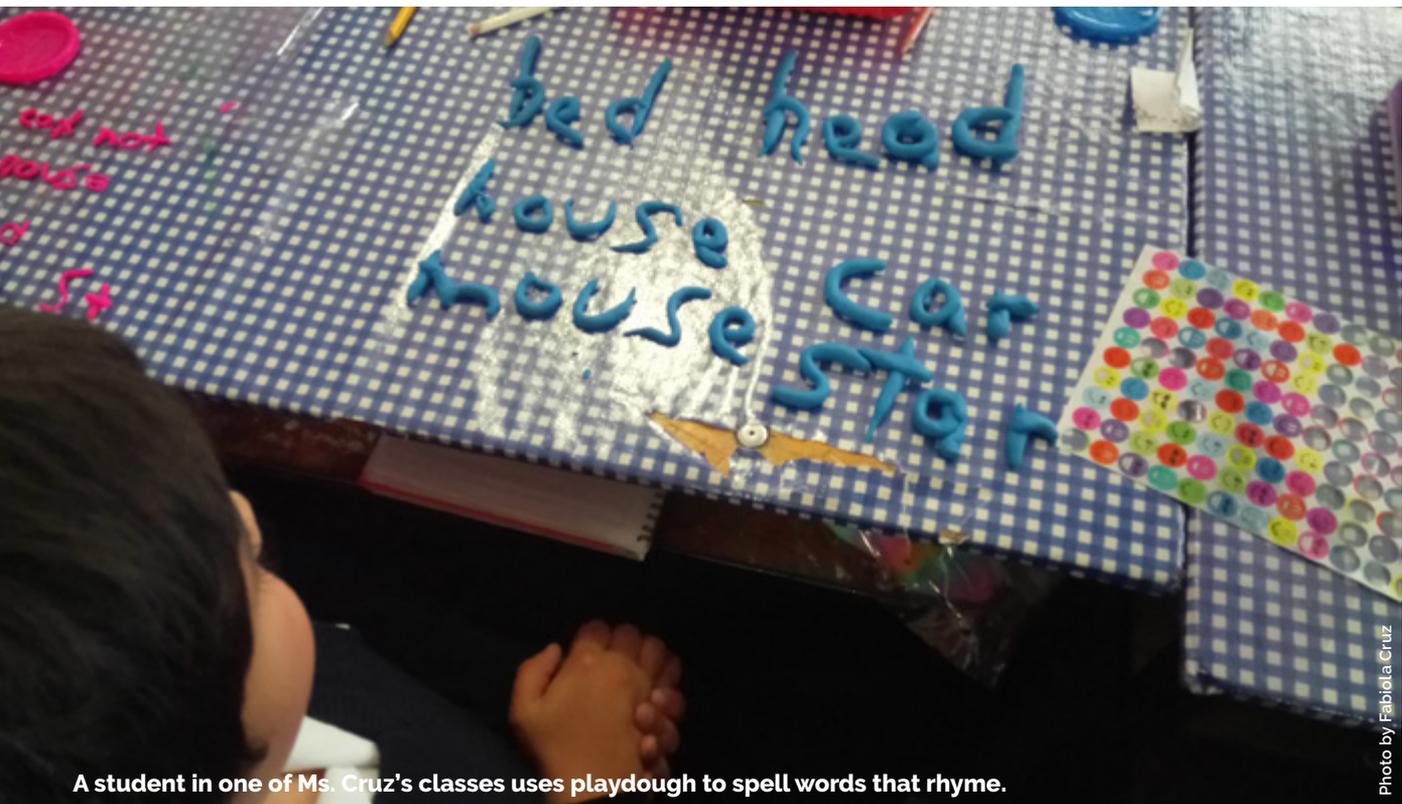


Fabiola Cruz Arellano is the only English teacher at the Profesor Carlos Hank González Elementary School in Toluca, where each week she teaches 850 students in the first through sixth grades. Ms. Cruz provides one 50-minute English lesson each week to 22 groups of students, with 40 to 55 students in each classroom. Despite the large class sizes and limited instruction time, Ms. Cruz sees positive results among her students. During recess, and before and after school, individual students seek out their English teacher to share something they learned the day before or to ask her questions about what is coming next. From the start of the school day to its close, Ms. Cruz never stops moving; when she isn't offering a one-on-one moment to a curious student during recess, she is on her way from one class to the next with an armload of games and visual aids.



Fabiola Cruz Arellano, the only English teacher at the Profesor Carlos Hank González Elementary School in Toluca

Photo by Connie Foss



A student in one of Ms. Cruz's classes uses playdough to spell words that rhyme.

Ms. Cruz does not have a classroom of her own. She takes all her teaching materials with her as she visits students during their homeroom periods. During these visits, homeroom teachers often remain in the classroom with Ms. Cruz to review the previous week's English vocabulary and grammar with their students to increase the impact of the weekly lesson and facilitate their own language learning. This friendly collaboration between English teacher and homeroom teacher is the result of a program called "Hand to Hand," in compliance with the 2010 government policy to help all preschool and primary school teachers achieve an A1 level of English, providing more students with at least a basic level of English instruction.

After all these nonstop classroom visits and interactions with students, Ms. Cruz is still

smiling at the end of the day. "I am always tired but still happy," she said, "so I think I have chosen the right career."

Toluca, where Ms. Cruz teaches, is the fifth-largest urban center in Mexico. Historically famous for its *chorizo* (long, spicy sausages, tinted green or red by the chilies used to flavor them) and for El Nevado, an extinct volcano whose snowy heights dwarf the surrounding countryside, Toluca is a modern city with multinational corporations. The demand for English in Mexico has grown exponentially in recent years, and even in the thriving metropolis of Toluca, there are not enough English teachers to meet that demand.

In 2008, the Programa Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica was formed to introduce English instruction in the government

This friendly collaboration between English teacher and homeroom teacher is the result of a program called "Hand to Hand."



Students practice using English by playing games. These games can be downloaded from the American English website. Ms. Cruz has made copies of these games for other teachers in Toluca schools.

Photo by Fabiola Cruz

preschools. But there was a large gap between this demand and the actual supply of teachers. Ms. Cruz was fortunate to be enrolled in the teacher-training program at the Atlacomulco Escuela Normal as one of these first groups of preservice English teachers. But there was a problem: even though she had graduated from a public school that offered English instruction, she failed to pass the introductory English course in the teacher-preparation program.

Ms. Cruz was determined to become a teacher, so she asked permission to continue the program in spite of her deficiency in English. The principal agreed on the condition that Ms. Cruz continue to study English independently until she passed the English proficiency exam. Ms. Cruz signed a contract and studied English in earnest. Within a year, she took the exam and passed, and that qualified her to enter the teacher-training program.

Ms. Cruz graduated from the Escuela Normal de Atlacomulco Profesora Evangelina Alcántara Díaz in 2010 with a bachelor's degree in Secondary Education and a specialty in Foreign Language (English), becoming the first member of her family to hold a college degree. She attended school in her rural village of Jocotitlán, where she received a

high school diploma but could not speak English because her English teachers—when she had them—were not themselves proficient in English.

The Atlacomulco Normal School is recognized throughout Mexico for its high standards and the excellent teachers it graduates. Over the years, it has hosted English Language Fellows, Fulbright English Teaching Assistants, and American Field Service (AFS) participants. During the time Ms. Cruz was a student there, an AFS Teaching Assistant from New Zealand was teaching English culture in some of her classes, often incorporating video technology in the form of mock interviews and cultural interchanges with native English speakers. In one of these interchanges, Ms. Cruz role-played a reporter interviewing her colleagues. When she watched the video afterward, she took note of her pronunciation errors. “I felt embarrassed and ashamed to hear my bad pronunciation,” she said. But rather than allowing this disappointment to stop her, she increased her determination to self-evaluate and correct her speech errors.

But English continued to be a challenge for her. “I was lucky to have two very special teachers to help me,” she said. “Teacher Ricardo always told me, ‘You have to believe that you are an English teacher. You have



Seminar participants practice their diplomatic English with Ms. Monh (right). Ms. Cruz's students sometimes watch instructional videos in English class.

Photo by Connie Foss

to look and act like an English teacher. You have to participate in class and practice what you are learning in order to become a teacher.” Professor Llanos—Ms. Cruz’s “Teacher Ricardo”—invested in her success by encouraging her to study English, informing her of extra classes at the school, and spending time after class to check her lesson plans and offer personal feedback.

Meanwhile, another teacher, Professor Reyes, supported Ms. Cruz by lending her resources from his own library of English listening materials. Like Professor Llanos, Professor Reyes made an extra effort in providing positive feedback to Ms. Cruz whenever she participated in classroom speaking activities.

Traditionally, English teaching in Mexico has focused on grammar and reading at the expense of communicative competence. Remembering this, along with her own painful experiences as a student of English, Ms. Cruz focuses on developing strong

English pronunciation skills and fluency in her students. She uses tongue twisters in the fifth and sixth grades, involving students in competitions to see which group can correctly repeat the phrases a set number of times without any mistakes. For example, native Spanish speakers often have difficulty pronouncing the short “u” sound correctly. Ms. Cruz uses the phrase “double bubble, double bubble, double double bubble” to target this specific pronunciation challenge.

Ms. Cruz believes that her students are successful because, from day one, she practices input–output by speaking to them in English and expecting them to respond to her in English. “Remembering my own experience as a student of English,” she said, “I know that speaking English in the classroom is the only way for my students to use their foreign language, because outside of school, they are not going to have any contact with the language.” She practices what she preaches in her personal life as well, befriending native

Ms. Cruz practices Content and Language Integrated Learning, in which she uses English in content areas such as mathematics, history, and geography.

English speakers, watching movies in English, and meeting to practice conversation with other English teachers in Toluca.

Ms. Cruz practices Content and Language Integrated Learning, in which she uses English in content areas such as mathematics, history, and geography. She begins the academic year by introducing key words and expressions that form the content of the language classes. She posts new vocabulary words on the homeroom walls, recycling key expressions throughout the year. Students listen to the correct pronunciation of words as their teacher presents the lesson with a song, video, or game. Then students identify the words in new contexts, and finally they synthesize what they learn by making new connections between the words they see and the words' definitions.

The moment she enters a class, Ms. Cruz is already actively teaching, and her students are actively engaged. She is either singing a song or asking her students questions about the new lesson. She introduces new vocabulary words along with the verbs and grammar necessary to enable a new conversation: input–output. In a lesson about daily routines and adverbs of frequency, she begins by showing a brief music video that demonstrates

the activities of waking up, getting dressed, brushing teeth, going to school, and so on. After the video is finished, she writes key words on the whiteboard, then pantomimes the activities herself, eliciting the enthusiasm of students who raise their hands eagerly, asking to have a turn. She replays a portion of the video and encourages students to sing along as they pantomime, reinforcing new concepts in a scaffolding activity. Finally, individual students come to the front of the room to “teach” the daily activities while classmates guess the correct words.

Ms. Cruz's story illustrates the power of one. As a student, she was influenced by the kindness of individual teachers who provided her with one-on-one encouragement to persevere in her studies. Now, in a school of 850 students and 22 homeroom teachers, one English teacher is making a difference. She said, “I hope that my work will inspire my students to learn English and that I will plant a seed of interest in my students to recognize the importance of English as a universal language that will help them to increase their knowledge of the world.”

This article was written by **Connie Foss**, a 2015–2016 English Language Fellow in Toluca, Mexico.



An exterior view of the Profesor Carlos Hank González Elementary School

Photo by Connie Foss