

Language assistants' views on the training provided by bilingual programs in Madrid

Las opiniones de los auxiliares de conversación sobre la formación proporcionada por los programas de bilingüismo en la Comunidad de Madrid

Lyndsay R. Buckingham*

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Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of language assistant (LA) training in Madrid's bilingual programs. LAs rated their preparedness and enthusiasm at the beginning of the academic year, and reported on their training and its applicability to future tasks. It was found that LAs perceived deficiencies in their training despite feelings of enthusiasm and usefulness when taking on responsibilities. LAs reported discrepancies between their training and their duties which resulted in them feeling ill-prepared. Therefore, it is recommended that bilingual programs examine the role of the LA and create a comprehensive training plan that efficiently prepares the diverse body of LAs.

Keywords:

language assistant, bilingual schools, roles, training, views.

Resumen

Este estudio explora la eficacia de la formación de los auxiliares de conversación en los programas bilingües de Madrid. Se le pidió a los auxiliares que evaluaran su preparación inicial y que posteriormente valoraran su utilidad. Se pudo comprobar que los auxiliares percibieron deficiencias en su formación y una mayoría de auxiliares manifestó que la poca relevancia de su formación previa les transmitió una sensación de inseguridad para afrontar su papel en el aula. Por estas razones, se concluye con la recomendación de examinar el papel del auxiliar y replantear un plan de formación que prepare a los auxiliares de manera eficaz.

Palabras clave:

auxiliar de conversación, colegios bilingües, rol, percepción, formación

* Universidad Pontificia de Comillas
lr Buckingham@comillas.edu

1. Introduction

There is a large variation in the amount of previous training a language assistant (LA) might have when s/he arrives in a bilingual school. Some LAs studied pedagogy at university; others have some teaching experience; many have neither education-related degrees nor teaching experience (Gerena & Ramírez-Verdugo, 2014). Nonetheless, they are all asked to perform the same role in bilingual schools. It seems logical, then, that those who employ LAs be responsible for providing a training program designed to prepare them for the tasks with which they are entrusted. However, in other studies on LAs in Spanish schools it has been documented that LAs tend to feel ill-prepared and unsure of their role (Hibler, 2010; Scobling, 2011; Tobin & Abello-Contesse, 2012). Given the shortage of research on such a valuable resource, the following study aimed to confirm or refute these conclusions on a larger scale while focusing on Primary bilingual education in the Community of Madrid. The objectives were to learn more about the training opportunities that exist, what LAs see as lacking, and the level of preparation they consider themselves to have.

2. Literature Review

Three main bilingual programs currently operate within the Autonomous Community of Madrid (CAM, in its Spanish acronym), Spain. The CAM bilingual project is a publicly-funded bilingual program; the BEDA program (Bilingual English Development and Assessment) is managed by FERE-CECA (*Federación Española de Religiosos de Enseñanza – Titulares de Centros Católicos*); UCETAM (*La Unión de Cooperativas de Enseñanza de Trabajo Asociado de Madrid*) runs both the Bicultural-Bilingual program and the Bicultural program.

2.1. Bilingual programs in the CAM

The three above-mentioned programs are very similar in nature, generally employing the CLIL method (Content and Language Integrated Learning) of teaching content in a foreign language, with the exception of the UCETAM Bicultural program. In this way, they increase the number of hours that students are taught in English.

Another common characteristic of the three main programs is the existence of the language assistant (LA), native English speakers who support the teaching of English and

content taught in English in schools for at least one academic year. LAs are recruited in their countries of origin and travel to Spain on a student visa. They may renew their participation for a second year, but then are not allowed to continue further (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2014). In general, LAs are young people who are not trained teachers, and therefore are not required to assess students' work or independently supervise students. Instead, the role of the LA includes speaking with students only in English, sharing their culture with everyone in the school, and supporting teachers in activities planning and materials creation. Despite some small variations, the essence of the LA role is similar throughout the programs operating in the CAM (see Buckingham (2018) for a full description on the role of the LAs). In order to prepare them for their role in the classroom, each main program provides an orientation and/or training program for them to follow while living and working in the CAM.

2.2. Training for LAs

Provisions for training and support are rather different among the bilingual programs, a summary of which is given in Table 1. What follows is a discussion of the main characteristics of the preparation offered to LAs upon arrival in Spain.

Table 1. Training and support for LAs			
	BEDA	CAM	UCETAM
orientation session	yes	yes	yes
handbook	yes	yes	yes
training throughout year	yes	no	yes
Assigned teacher-tutor	yes	no	yes
Observe classes at beginning of academic year	yes*	no	no

*This practice remains at each school's discretion.

Within the CAM bilingual program, all new LAs are expected to attend an orientation session in September, before the start of their participation in the school. The session is organized by the Regional School Board and deals with theoretical and practical aspects of their experience as LAs. They receive background information about the CAM Bilingual

Project and the educational system in Spain and a description of their role as LAs. There are workshops and talks that deal with methodological aspects, such as some basic facts about foreign language teaching, bilingual education, the CLIL teaching model, and resource development for bilingual education. LAs are also informed about more practical aspects, such as the legal steps to obtain a residency permit and other administrative tasks, and educational and cultural topics of interest. Those LAs that were brought to Madrid by other institutions may also receive specific LA training through the Goethe Institut, the Institut Français or the Fulbright Commission, though they should all attend the official orientation session given by the CAM (Comunidad de Madrid, 2014).

In the BEDA program, training for LAs is taken rather seriously, especially since their LAs are considered to be students with internships. According to the FERE-CECA (2014), all BEDA LAs attend the Universidad Pontificia de Comillas so that their collaboration with schools will be the most effective and in order that the LAs acquire basic knowledge of Spanish language and culture. They take part in a two-year university specialist course in which they study the methodology and pedagogical skills related to teaching English to Spanish speakers, methods and approaches to teaching foreign languages, Cambridge English evaluation, English grammar, contemporary Spanish culture, and the Spanish educational system (*Escuelas Católicas Madrid, 2015*). The course consists of two modules of 60 hours each: “Methodology and evaluation of the teaching and learning of English in the classroom” and “Educational innovation in the area of the English language.” LAs receive a certificate upon completion of each module if they comply with attendance minimums, complete a Formative Project of Internship as well as a final report, and receive positive evaluations by the school Language Coordinator and the university tutor (FERE-CECA, 2014).

The aforementioned training program is mandatory for all LAs who are not taking part in the Erasmus study-abroad program (*Escuelas Católicas Madrid, 2015*). Program participants also have the option to work further to obtain a Master’s degree, though this has to be agreed upon at the beginning of their collaboration, and this option is presumably for LAs who return for more than two years (FERE-CECA, 2014). BEDA LAs have the additional opportunity to attend a number of training courses, workshops and cultural visits throughout the school year (*Escuelas Católicas Madrid, 2015*).

In the 2013-14 school year, the UCETAM organization began providing a training program for their LAs after detecting a need for more formal preparation. In 2014-15, this program consisted of an orientation session at the beginning of the year and two additional sessions during the school year. The topics covered included the use of evaluation rubrics, student discipline, group work in the classroom, an introduction to CLIL and intercultural competences (S. Mackin, personal communication, 24 September 2014).

Many LAs working for UCETAM also receive training elsewhere. About 30% of UCETAM LAs in the 2014-15 school year were provided by the Teach & Learn in Spain Study Program at Instituto Franklin, Universidad de Alcalá de Henares (S. Mackin, personal communication, 8 March 2015). The Teach & Learn program offers five different Master's programs, all related to education, which include an internship as language assistants in schools within the Community of Madrid (*Teach & Learn in Spain Study Program, 2015*). The program is aimed at native speakers of English who, to complete their internship, are sent to schools in the CAM bilingual program, the UCETAM program or other independent bilingual schools. In the 2014-15 school year there were 112 participants working as language assistants in Madrid's schools (I. M. Vescan, personal communication, 11 March 2015).

2.3. Previous studies about LAs in Spain

There have been few studies on the role of LAs, and none of them has directly addressed the training received by LAs or teachers regarding their use in the classroom. The existing studies include one of 16 LAs in English, French and German classes at the Secondary and university levels and in Official Language Schools (*Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas*) that was carried out by Ortega Cebrenos (2003), focusing on the social role of the LA in the classroom. Hibler (2010) conducted a small-scale study with 15 LAs and 15 teachers in Primary education in Madrid in which participants filled out questionnaires and classes were observed in order to determine the effectiveness of collaboration between LAs and their supervising teachers. Scobling (2011) carried out a larger-scale study in Secondary education in Castilla y León on LAs as a motivational element in the classroom and involved the participation of 104 LAs, 13 teachers and 114 students. Tobin & Abello-Contesse (2012) conducted case studies of six LAs in Secondary and one LA in Primary education in Andalucía, focusing on LAs as a linguistic and cultural resource.

The study described in this article is another aspect of the same research project carried out by Buckingham (2018). The previous article describes the role of the LA as described by the LAs themselves and their supervising teachers. It was found that, despite LAs and teachers having similar expectations about the LA's role at the beginning of the school year, LAs finally carry out different tasks than initially expected. In turn, these classroom practices do not always coincide with the official descriptions of the role in program documentation, and sometimes go far beyond their responsibilities. It is suspected that more effective training for both LAs and teachers would remedy some of these difficulties, and this is supported by the current study.

3. Research Questions

This study discusses LAs' views of their own training as preparation for their role in the bilingual classroom. It strives to determine the focus of the training given to LAs and whether this was considered as appropriate and sufficient by LAs. It questions the degree to which LAs feel prepared to take on their role as a result of this training and the enthusiasm with which they begin the academic year. Finally, this research attempts to establish the efficiency of the training in terms of effectively preparing LAs for the role they will take on in the classroom.

4. Material And Methods

The current study focused on LAs' perceptions of their training and preparation as provided by the bilingual programs, and LAs were targeted as the primary source of information. Participants were first-time LAs working in one of the three main bilingual programs within the CAM. Contact with participants was carried out in both the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 academic years so as to reach the maximum number of participants possible while not extending the study so long that program characteristics changed, affecting the results. Data was collected through the use of questionnaires and made use of mainly quantitative data.

4.1. Data collection

Two questionnaires (see Appendix) were drafted by the researcher in an attempt to capture every aspect of the LAs' experience with training and preparation, participation in the school and the classroom, and suggestions for teachers and future LAs. Every effort was made to avoid bias in the wording of the items, and questions were ordered from less to more complex and grouped by question type (Wagner, 2010). The first questions required demographic information and details to ensure their inclusion in the target population. Then, participants were presented with several list, category and scale items (Nunan, 1992) that collected quantitative data. Finally, participants were presented with several open questions, only one of which was focused on training.

The questionnaires were distributed to LAs over e-mail and in person in schools and program training sessions. The initial questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the

school year (October) in order to collect impressions of the initial training and orientation that had been offered and expectations regarding the training programs. The follow-up questionnaire was sent out in January and February so as to gather LAs' experiences in schools and reflections regarding the application of training to classroom practice.

Both questionnaires were first piloted to two LAs from previous years in order to detect any errors or ambiguities. According to their suggestions and comments, one small adjustment was made in order to make a question non-compulsory. Afterwards, they were distributed in both digital and printed formats, reaching participants through online social media and by word of mouth.

4.2. Sample

The target population for the study included LAs from each of the three main bilingual programs in the CAM that were working in Primary schools at the time of the study. Every effort was made to contact as many LAs as possible, but databases of the entire population were not available, which made probability sampling out of the question. Instead, convenience sampling was used by reaching out to LAs through personal contacts, social networking and through the program administrations. For the purposes of the current article and in an effort to make fair comparisons between programs regarding initial training, only the responses from LAs with no previous experience as a LA in Spain were included in the final analysis.

Table 2 shows the detail of the percentage of participants who were from each program and their corresponding demographic information. Participants were asked about their age, country of origin, the highest level of education they had completed, whether their university degree was related to education, the number of years of previous formal teaching experience, the number of years of previous informal teaching experience, their previous experience as a LA in Spain and the previous experience as a LA elsewhere.

Table 2. Sampling for study questionnaires			
Item	Response	Initial questionnaire	Follow-up questionnaire
Bilingual program you are currently involved with			
	BEDA	72.1%	33.3%
	CAM	18.6%	51.1%
	UCETAM	2.3%	6.7%
	Others (BC-MEC, CIEE, "concertado")	7.0%	8.9%
Level of education completed			
	University degree in progress	7.0%	2.2%
	University degree complete	74.4%	80.0%
	Master's degree	18.6%	17.8%
Focus of university degree			
	Education-related	18.6%	26.7%
	Non-education related	79.0%	73.3%
Previous LA experience elsewhere			
	no experience	83.7%	97.8%
	1 year	4.7%	2.2%
	1 year +	11.6%	-
Previous informal teaching experience			
	0	4.7%	6.7%
	less than 1 year	27.9%	35.6%
	1-2 years	25.6%	20.0%
	3-5 years	30.2%	24.4%
	6-10 years	11.6%	8.9%
	10 years +	-	-
Previous formal teaching experience			
	0	55.8%	53.3%
	less than 1 year	23.3%	17.8%
	1-2 years	11.7%	20.0%
	3-5 years	4.7%	2.2%
	6-10 years	2.3%	2.2%
	10 years +	-	-

Country of origin			
	Australia	-	2.2%
	Canada	4.7%	2.2%
	Ireland	2.3%	2.2%
	Morocco	2.3%	-
	New Zealand	4.7%	-
	Phillippines	-	2.2%
	UK	16.3%	15.6%
	US	67.4%	75.6%
	Zimbabwe	2.3%	-
Average age		25.8	24.1
TOTAL number of participants		43	45

4.3. Data analysis

The data obtained from the printed questionnaires was manually entered into spreadsheet software, and data from online questionnaires were compiled into the same spreadsheet. The data was analyzed to remove any repeated responses, determined by the same personal data or open answers. Next, each response was given a unique code in order to allow for posterior retrieval and correlations.

The data were then analyzed according to the type of question (list, category, scale and open). The list items allowed participants to choose more than one response, and each mark was counted as a response. The number of times a response was marked was divided by the number of participants in order to obtain a percentage of participants that chose that option.

The category items allowed only one option to be marked, and the number of times a category was chosen was divided by the number of participants to obtain a percentage that chose that category. The scale items consisted of an affirmative statement which participants were able to rate from 1 to 5, 5 being the most positive. The results of the scale items are reported as an average rating with a calculated standard deviation and as a category item, showing what percentage of participants marked each number. This allowed for easier analysis and discussion of the results.

Finally, the open question was treated with key word analysis by identifying the main topic or topics that were requested by each participant. The key words were categorized and summed, then divided by the number of participants in order to achieve percentages of frequency for the request of specific types of additional training.

5. Results and Discussion

Here, an analysis is presented of the opinions expressed by LAs regarding the training offered by their corresponding bilingual programs. In the initial questionnaire, 43 LAs were asked about the nature of the training they received or expected later in the year, the topics covered, and what additional training they would like to receive. In both the initial and follow-up questionnaires, LAs were also asked to rate statements regarding their feeling of preparedness and enthusiasm using a scale of 1 to 5. Finally, in the follow-up questionnaire 45 LAs were asked whether they performed the tasks which had been described in their training, whether the experience was what they had expected, and to what extent they felt their role to be useful to students and teachers. Therefore, this section is divided into three parts: types of training expected or received, feelings of preparedness and enthusiasm, and effectiveness of training.

5.1. Types of training expected or received

LAs were first asked about the training they had received or expected to receive at the beginning of the school year . It seems that their experiences were diverse, of course depending on the bilingual program to which they belong, but also on the schools where they worked.

First, they were asked about the type of training they received or expected to receive. They were given five choices of which they could choose one: Formal training for LAs by the program organizers, Training in your school with director and/or bilingual teachers, Informal meetings or preparation sessions with bilingual teachers, Informal get-togethers with other LAs, and Other, please specify. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Several LAs (14%) wrote in the “other” option that they did not receive nor expected any type of training at all. Fewer than half of the LA participants (46.5%) marked that they received formal training for LAs by the program organizers. This is surprising since the three largest programs provide at least some training for LAs. This may be because some LAs do not consider

the orientation session available in the CAM program as formal training, given that the topics are mainly focused on practical issues such as an explanation of their role, the educational system in Spain, and administrative procedures for formalizing residency paperwork.

Just over half of the LA participants (53.5%) marked that they had informal meetings or preparation sessions with teachers in their schools as part of their training. Only 11.6% reported formal training in their schools with the director or teachers. The five participants that marked formal school training also marked informal meetings in their schools. Therefore, 46.5% of the LA participants had neither meetings nor training, informal or otherwise, in their schools at the beginning of the year nor planned for later on. This data is troubling, given that it is important for LAs to learn the particular functioning of their schools, including the rules and programs run there.

It seems that most LAs (55.8%) seek support from others in the same situation by meeting informally with other LAs to compare notes and share ideas. It is positive that so many participants are proactive about their preparation so that they seek out these opportunities. However, this may point to a lack of organized training that results in this perceived need.

Type of training	Responses
Informal get-togethers with other LAs	55.8%
Informal meetings or preparation sessions with bilingual teachers	53.5%
Formal training for LAs by the program organizers	46.5%
Other: none	14.0%
Training in your school with director and/or bilingual teachers	11.6%
	100%

When asked about the topics covered in the training received or expected, LAs marked several topics of those given by the questionnaire. As seen in Table 4, the majority (72.1%) received or expected training regarding the definition of the LA's role in the school. A higher percentage could have been expected considering this is the most basic training one can expect when starting a new role, though perhaps some LAs were satisfied with the basic definition provided at the time of application to the program. Just over half of the LA participants (55.8%) received or expected to receive training on the educational system in Spain, while slightly fewer expected training on the bilingual school program (46.5%). Again, it is logical that LAs would expect this type of training in order to understand their place in the grander scheme.

A large number of participating LAs expected to receive training on conversation class techniques (39.5%), teaching other subjects in English (42.5%), and the basics of bilingual education and its methodology (37.5%). These selections correspond to their perceived role as assistants who focus on oral skills and their participation in the bilingual classroom. However, only 16.3% of the participants expected to receive training about didactic materials creation even though it is described as part of the role in the three largest programs' handbooks (Buckingham, 2018).

Relatively few participants expected to receive training on CLIL (16.3%) or team teaching techniques (17.5%). As CLIL is a specific educational term, it is not surprising that most LAs who marked teaching other subjects in English did not also mark CLIL, especially when considering that many of them lack formal teaching experience. The same occurs with team teaching, since most LAs with little teaching experience and no previous experience as an LA would not be familiar with the term or this need.

Table 4. Topics of training received	
Topics	Responses
Definition of role of LAs	72.1%
Educational system in Spain	55.8%
Spanish language	48.8%
Bilingual school program	46.5%
Spanish culture	41.9%
Conversation/oral language class techniques	39.5%
Teaching other subjects in English (Science, Art, PE, etc.)	34.9%
Basics of bilingual education and its methodology	32.6%
Legal and administrative processes for LAs (residence permit, salary, etc.)	27.9%
Practical information about Madrid or your school's town	25.6%
Spanish history	18.6%
Didactic/classroom materials creation	16.3%
CLIL/AICLE	14.0%
Team teaching techniques	11.6%
Other: None	4.7%
	100%

Almost half of the LA participants expected training in the Spanish language (48.8%) and slightly fewer in the Spanish culture (41.9%), presumably perceiving the advantage of familiarity with both aspects. Considerably fewer participants expected training in Spanish history (18.6%), and this may be seen as less necessary to carry out the position of LA.

Finally, relatively few participants expected to receive training on the legal and administrative processes relevant to them as LAs (27.9%) and other practical information about Madrid or their schools' towns (25.6%). It may be that LAs assumed that this would be handled at a different time, with the help of people at their schools, or that they would be left to deal with it individually. They may not consider this type of information sharing as training, but rather orientation and practical information, to be shared in a different way.

When asked in the next question, 21% of participating LAs mentioned other topics in which they would like additional training. Almost every participant wrote in a different topic, though most participants (66.7%) focused on various pedagogical topics. Specifically, they asked for additional training on "the basics of bilingual education" (I-LA8), "teaching" (I-LA9), "a little more structure on the lessons plans" (I-LA12), "classroom management" (I-LA13), "One-on-one tutoring skills" (I-LA15), and "*Infantil* [infants' education] training" (I-LA34). Two participants also coincided in asking for more training on the role of the LA and what is expected of them, again emphasizing the lack of training on this crucial aspect.

One participant expressed disappointment regarding the lack of training and wrote that s/he would like to have training in all of the topics mentioned in the previous question. This participant (I-LA23) stated, "The list above is pretty complete – it's what I should get but don't expect to."

Others had varied opinions. One participant (I-LA12) requested training in the Spanish language, presumably due to its value in helping them adapt within the school and in daily life in Spain. Another participant (I-LA13) from a religious school requested training in the Catholic religion. Also, one participant (I-LA8) expressed a wish to know more about the objectives regarding the students' bilingual abilities.

Though it is difficult to generalize with so few specific requests for additional training topics, it is clear that pedagogical training is seen as lacking though valuable to their posts. There is some disagreement as to what focus this training should have, but the diversity of responses highlights the fact that LAs have an array of experiences and therefore varied formative needs.

5.2. Feelings of preparedness and enthusiasm

LAs were also asked to rate their feelings of preparation to carry out their duties as an LA. In both the initial and follow-up questionnaires, LAs provided diverse answers, as reported

in Table 5. In the initial questionnaire, the average rating of agreement to the statement, *I have received sufficient training from the program to begin my duties as a language assistant* was 3.10 with a large standard deviation (SD) of 1.22. In the follow-up questionnaire, the average rating fell to 2.91 with a slightly lower SD of 1.10. At the beginning of the year, 31.7% did not feel sufficiently prepared for their duties, rating the statement with a one or two. This increased throughout the school year to 33.3% of participating LAs responding with a one or two in the follow-up questionnaire. Many more LAs felt they had received sufficient training at the beginning of the year (41.5% marking a four or five) than in the middle of the school year (26.7% marking a four or five). This suggests that some LAs were aware of a lack of necessary training at the beginning of the school year, though after a time working in the schools even more realized that they lacked training for the duties they were expected to carry out. Some LAs were probably not aware of the exact duties they would be asked to do, also evident in the change in description of roles explained previously. Therefore, they were not aware that the training they were receiving was insufficient.

Table 5. I have received sufficient training from the program to perform my duties as a language assistant		
Rating	Initial questionnaire	Follow-up questionnaire
1	12.2%	11.1%
2	19.5%	22.2%
3	26.8%	40.0%
4	29.3%	17.8%
5	12.2%	8.9%
Average	3.10	2.91
SD	1.22	1.10

Despite a generally low rating for having had sufficient training, LAs felt somewhat prepared to carry out their duties. The average agreement rating for the statement, *I feel completely prepared for my duties as a language assistant* was 3.20 with a SD of 1.08. Just over one-quarter (26.8%) of the participants felt ill-prepared, rating the statement with a one or a two, and over one-third (39.0%) of participants felt prepared, rating the statement with a four or a five. Therefore, there was a variety of responses, many of which were a neutral 3 (34.1%). There seems to be a connection between feelings of preparation and having had sufficient training which is logical and points to a need for training in order to make new LAs feel comfortable in their role.

Finally, despite some feelings of a lack of training and preparation, most LAs were enthusiastic to begin their post. The average rating of the statement, *I am very enthusiastic about starting the school year and beginning my duties as a language assistant*, was 4.31 with a smaller SD of 0.90. Only one participant rated the statement with a two and none with a one. At the same time, 76.2% felt enthusiastic about beginning the school year, rating the statement with a four or a five, and over half of the participants (57.1%) rated the statement with a five. It seems that receiving little training and feeling somewhat ill-prepared for the role does not take away the enthusiasm they feel for taking part in the bilingual programs.

5.3. Effectiveness of training

In the follow-up questionnaire, LAs were asked to look back on their training and reflect upon their current duties as compared to those that were explained to them. As seen in Table 6, most LAs (62.2%) felt that their current duties did not correspond to what they had been told in the initial training, indicated by marking a one or two. Only 22.2% of the LAs felt that their duties were adequately explained, and indicated this by marking a four or five. Nevertheless, only 34.1% of the LAs marked a one or two, not agreeing with the statement, *the experience is what I had expected at the beginning of the year*. On the other hand, almost half (45.5%) of the LAs felt their expectations were met, and marked a four or a five for the same statement. It seems that LAs have come to expect that their duties would not be fully and adequately explained in the initial training, or that they expected to perform duties not defined in their role. It is also probable that participants contact with previous LAs through personal contacts and blogs on the Internet which leads them to expect the unexpected, though there is no way to confirm this.

Rating	I perform all and only the duties that were explained to me during the initial training.	The experience is what I had expected at the beginning of the year.
1	15.6%	13.6%
2	46.7%	20.5%
3	15.6%	20.5%
4	6.7%	34.1%
5	15.6%	11.4%
average	2.60	3.09
SD	1.29	1.25

Finally, despite the fact that they performed duties beyond their role description, LAs on the whole felt that their participation was useful to teachers and students, rating this statement at an average 4.23. In fact, 79.5% of the LAs marked a four or five rating for this statement. No one rated this statement with a one and only two people with a two. It seems that LAs may not expect to abide by their role, but since they feel useful to teachers and students most are willing to fulfill that improvised role.

5.4. Discussion

In general, LAs perceived a lack of training and preparation for their role in bilingual schools. Little training was offered by the program organizers overall, and very little or no official training was given once LAs arrive to their schools. What is more, many LAs did not even meet informally with teachers for planning or training purposes. This led most LAs to seek out assistance and support elsewhere, usually by meeting informally with other LAs to share experiences and resources.

At the beginning of the academic year, one in three LAs thought s/he had not received sufficient training for his role. One in four felt ill-prepared to do their jobs. The difference in percentages may be due to the nature of the job, LAs having believed at first that it was enough to simply speak English at a native level. Indeed, in the two larger programs, job descriptions did not require previous teaching experience or that applicants hold a degree related to education (Consejería de Educación en Estados Unidos y Canadá, 2015; *Escuelas Católicas* Madrid, 2015), so LAs may not perceive a need for pedagogical training. Still, there is a correlation between a feeling of preparation and having sufficient training, which points to a need for more training in order to make LAs consider themselves better prepared for their role.

Most LAs felt enthusiastic about starting their posts. This may suggest that they would be willing to undergo further training in order to do their jobs well, if one can assume that this enthusiasm would translate into availability. Almost 80% felt that their participation is useful to students and teachers, which seems to support this assumption. If the vast majority of LAs is enthusiastic about their posts and consider themselves useful, it is logical that they would consider more training hours to be worth their while.

It is even more telling that once LAs had spent some time working in schools, only one in four felt their training has been sufficient. Moreover, the little training received was not perceived as effective. More than half of LAs felt their duties during the school year did not correspond to what was explained in the training. Only one in five considered that the training adequately prepared them for the role they carried out. This may be due to a lack

of training or related to the controversy that surrounds the role of the LA, as what is asked of them in program documentation is not always what they are required to do in schools (Buckingham, 2018; Hibler, 2010).

The most commonly reported training topic was the role of the LA in schools, though less than three-quarters of the LAs ticked this box. This is the most basic training that one can expect when starting a new post and should be closer to 100%. If LAs are not clear on their role, this can translate into feelings of insecurity when they arrive to their assigned school. It may eventually cause difficulties with the teachers they work with, as each person may have a different idea of what the LA role ought to be.

Given that LAs are in the bilingual classroom to foment oral communication, share their cultures and provide teaching materials (Buckingham, 2018), it is unfortunate that few LAs report participating in training related to these objectives. LAs perceive training as lacking in pedagogical aspects as can also be seen in the focus of additional training topics they requested. They are not trained teachers and seem to feel the need for more training related to bilingual education, classroom management, and lesson planning, amongst other topics. This is a reasonable request, given what is often asked of them during the academic year.

6. Conclusions

In order to make proper use of LAs as a valuable human resource, the findings of this study suggest that an overhaul is needed of the LA training process. First, program organizers will need to consider the ideal role for the LA and reconcile this with what goes on in the classroom. This should then be communicated effectively in program documentation and LA training sessions. Finally, based on this list of responsibilities, LAs ought to receive training to support and prepare them. If LAs are asked to lead oral and cultural activities and provide teaching materials, they should receive basic pedagogical training that will allow them to be successful. If LAs are meant to prepare students to face external examinations, they must be trained on the exams and in the necessary techniques. And, if LAs are asked to simply engage students in conversation and foster oral communication, they should be guided in this endeavor.

Moreover, LA training is needed at both program and school level. There are considerations to be made at both organization levels and LAs should be conscious of all aspects. Program training can cover the official LA role description, immigration and residency processes, program descriptions and pedagogical topics, as these aspects are relevant

to all LAs. However, the school should also hold orientation and training sessions for their LAs to inform them of school policies and procedures such as special days during the year (i.e., Foreign language week), school-wide programs (i.e., Reading plan), the course of action for requesting a day off or reporting an illness, disciplinary procedures (even if the LA will not carry them out), and other relevant aspects that are specific to each school. Every school has idiosyncrasies that make it unique, and the LA will only feel comfortable and part of the faculty once they are familiar to him.

This study is limited by the relatively small number of participants as compared to the number of LAs in the Community of Madrid. Further studies would be necessary to more completely ascertain the training needs of the entire population. It would also be interesting to repeat this study in other autonomous communities to compare and contrast results. Finally, classroom observations would be invaluable in order to witness LAs and supervising teachers in action, especially those who have had successful partnerships, in order to determine best practices and implement these ideas into the training programs.

All in all, proper training will help LAs to gain the confidence necessary to carry out their role. A program that allows one in every four workers to feel ill-prepared for their post is not effective, and this will reverberate throughout schools and the organization. If given the tools that are necessary to be successful, LAs can fulfill a valuable and unique role in bilingual schools. They have the potential to provide students with an authentic need to communicate and help them develop their intercultural competences. Without this human resource, bilingual programs could find it difficult to go beyond managing basic communication in a foreign language.

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- 1 The questionnaires were written for a study with a larger scope. Here, only those items regarding training are described in detail in order to narrow the focus. The abbreviated questionnaires are available in the Appendix of this article.
 - 2 The BEDA organization allowed the researcher to distribute questionnaires at the training sessions for LAs, for which the researcher is very grateful. This accounts for the higher participation rates among LAs in this program.
 - 3 This item was worded in this way to encompass different training schedules among the LA programs.
 - 4 UCETAM recommends that LAs hold an education-related degree and that they have previous teaching experience (*BPU: Bilingual Program UCETAM*)

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APPENDIX

Initial questionnaire: Language Assistants (LAs) in bilingual schools

Demographic Information

Please answer all questions by providing the information or marking the appropriate response with an X. This information is for statistical purposes only.

Age: _____

Country of origin:

	United Kingdom
	Ireland
	United States
	Canada
	New Zealand
	Australia
	Other, please specify:

Level of education completed:

	Doctorate
	Master's degree
	University/college degree completed
	University/college degree in progress
	No university studies

University degree:

	Education-related
	Not education-related

Previous informal teaching experience (summer camp, tutoring, etc.):

	0
	less than 1 year
	1-2 years
	3-5 years
	6-10 years
	more than 10 years

Previous formal teaching experience (accredited school of any level, not including previous language assistant experience):

	0
	less than 1 year
	1-2 years
	3-5 years
	6-10 years
	more than 10 years

Previous language assistant experience (Spain):

	0
	1 year
	more than 1 year

Previous language assistant experience (country other than Spain):

	0
	1 year
	more than 1 year

Bilingual program you are currently involved with:

	Community of Madrid public schools
	BEDA semi-private religious schools
	UCETAM private secular schools
	British Council – MEC program
	Other, please specify:

Program expectations

Please answer the following questions according to your personal expectations.

What type(s) of training or preparation do you expect to receive this year as a language assistant? (Please check all that apply.):

	Formal training for LAs by the program organizers
	Training in your school with director and/or bilingual teachers
	Informal meetings or preparation sessions with bilingual teachers
	Informal get-togethers with other LAs
	Other, please specify: _____

What specific training or preparation do you expect to receive this year?
(Please check all that apply.):

	Definition of role of language assistants
	Educational system in Spain
	Bilingual school program
	Basics of bilingual education and its methodology
	CLIL – Content and Language Integrated Learning (AICLE – Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lengua)
	Teaching other subjects in English (Science, Art, PE, etc.)
	Didactic/classroom materials creation
	Team teaching techniques
	Conversation/oral language class techniques
	Legal and administrative processes for language assistants (residency permit, salary, etc.)
	Spanish culture
	Spanish history
	Spanish language
	Practical information about Madrid or your school's town
	Other, please specify: _____

What additional training, if any, would you like to receive? (open answer)

Please rate each statement from 1 to 5. (circle one, 1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree):

1 2 3 4 5	I have had sufficient training to begin my duties as a language assistant.
1 2 3 4 5	I feel completely prepared for my duties as a language assistant.
1 2 3 4 5	I am very enthusiastic about starting the school year and beginning my duties as a language assistant.

Thank you very much for your participation!

Follow-up questionnaire: Language Assistants (LAs) in bilingual schools

Demographic Information

Please answer all questions by providing the information or marking the appropriate response with an X. This information is for statistical purposes only.

Age: _____

Country of origin:

	United Kingdom
	Ireland
	United States
	Canada
	New Zealand
	Australia
	Other, please specify:

Level of education completed:

	Doctorate
	Master's degree
	University/college degree completed
	University/college degree in progress
	No university studies

University degree:

	Education-related
	Not education-related

Previous informal teaching experience (summer camp, tutoring, etc.):

	0
	less than 1 year
	1-2 years
	3-5 years
	6-10 years
	more than 10 years

Previous formal teaching experience (accredited school of any level, not including previous language assistant experience):

	0
	less than 1 year
	1-2 years
	3-5 years
	6-10 years
	more than 10 years

Previous language assistant experience (Spain):

	0
	1 year
	more than 1 year

Previous language assistant experience (country other than Spain):

	0
	1 year
	more than 1 year

Bilingual program you are currently involved with:

	Community of Madrid public schools
	BEDA semi-private religious schools
	UCETAM private secular schools
	British Council – MEC program
	Other, please specify:

Program expectations

Please answer the following questions according to your personal experience.

Please rate each statement from 1 to 5. (circle one, 1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree)

1 2 3 4 5	I have received sufficient training from the program to perform my duties as a language assistant.
1 2 3 4 5	I perform all and only the duties that were explained to me during the initial training.
1 2 3 4 5	The experience is what I had expected at the beginning of the year.