

# San Diego Union Tribune

## Mexican students tackle English

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Part of Mexico's Proyecta 100,000 program

Growing up in a rural community in southern Mexico, Wilma del Socorro Dzib had few chances to speak English, much less test her skills with native teachers. But for the past month, the 19-year-old accounting student has spent hours every day intensively studying the language in San Diego at National University.

Dzib is part of a group of 76 students and teachers from Mexico who celebrated Thursday after completing a four-week course. The students, many from the state of Yucatan, are part of Proyecta 100,000, the Mexican government's effort to have 100,000 Mexican students enrolled in U.S. universities by 2018.

The initial step has involved sending 7,500 students to study English across the United States in recent weeks. Among them are 260 students who have been learning English in San Diego at five schools: National University, Alliant, Cal State San Marcos, San Diego State University and the University of California San Diego.

Thursday's graduation ceremony for the National University students included a demonstration of Sinaloan dancing, a rap song in Spanish belted out by a 22-year-old tourism student from the Yucatan, and a karaoke performance of John Lennon's "Imagine" led by a 20-year-old international commerce student from Sonora. Interspersed were heartfelt speeches, all in English, from teachers, administrators, and the students themselves.

"The words 'thank you' are not grateful enough," said Adrián Torres, a 22-year-old student from Guasave, Sinaloa, as he prepared to end his first trip to the United States. Torres said he was surprised at the kindness of the Americans he met. "I didn't think they would be so nice."

The students' presence in San Diego has come as the United States and Mexico have been striving to increase student exchanges between the two countries. The Institute of International Education counted fewer than 15,000 Mexican students enrolled at U.S. universities at the beginning of the school year, compared with 274,000 from top-ranked China.

The students sent to National University arrived with a wide range of abilities in English — some nearly fluent and others scarcely able to utter a few words. The majority, a total of 46, came from the Universidad Tecnológica Regional del Sur, a technical school in the southern Yucatan city of Tekax. Most are from indigenous Mayan backgrounds. Like Dzib, the accounting student, several said they had never left their state before.

"They are very quiet, they are very shy," said Juan Francisco Balam Mena, a marketing teacher from the Mexican school, who also came to polish his English. "This program

helps them to improve, to talk, to lose their shyness.”

At the other end of the spectrum were students from northern Mexico, including Juan Manuel García Angulo, 27, a Tijuana engineering student born in San Quintin, who has family in California. He focused on improving his English writing and oral presentation skills — abilities he hopes will help him find a job at an international company or gain acceptance to a U.S. master’s program.

National University Vice President Bob Benson said the Proyecta 100,000 language program is among a range of efforts aimed at increasing the school’s connections to Mexico. With other universities in Tijuana and San Diego, it is collaborating in the creation of a cross-border internship program. And starting in January, National University plans to provide scholarships and offer reduced tuition to students from Mexico who enroll full-time.