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PEDAGOGICAL AND RESEARCH PROJECTS: A PATH TO EMPOWER PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS TO FACE THEIR CHALLENGES

NANCY BARÓN PEREIRA - SONIA ROJAS ESPITIA
nancyebaronp@hotmail.com - snmarisol@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Being a teacher today embraces new challenges and possibilities for pre-service and in-service teachers as well as for prospective teachers and their contexts in order to enrich and/ or transform educational practices. Some of these challenges deal with: the need to have a knowledge base of the subject and specifically a high level of Communicative Competence in the foreign language; a general and specific pedagogical knowledge; an understanding about the conception and execution of the curriculum and an appropriation of the teaching-learning theory. The mentioned aspects constitute a base in their professional development. Pedagogical and Research Projects in the Languages School

Resumen

Ser profesor hoy abarca nuevos retos y posibilidades para los profesores-practicantes y profesores en ejercicio y sus contextos para enriquecer y/o transformar las prácticas educativas. Algunos de estos retos tienen que ver con: la necesidad de tener un conocimiento base de la materia y específicamente un alto nivel de Competencia Comunicativa de la Lengua Extranjera; un conocimiento pedagógico general y específico; una comprensión acerca de la concepción y ejecución del currículo y una apropiación de la teoría de enseñanza-aprendizaje. Los aspectos mencionados constituyen una base en su desarrollo profesional. Los Proyectos Pedagógicos e Investigativos (PPI) en la

at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC) incorporate these aspects in their syllabus in order to face the prospective teachers to the realities they will handle as future ones. The aim of this article is to reflect upon the challenges, knowledge and policies around teaching a foreign language nowadays and discuss what prospective teachers can understand around pedagogy and research as the bridge to link what they study and reflect in classes and the realities they have to face as future Foreign Languages teachers.

Key words: Pedagogical and Research Projects, Knowledge base, future teachers 'challenges.

Introduction

Being an EFL teacher nowadays demands many challenges, Gonzalez (2000) states that there are many responsibilities and knowledge we have to handle; it means to have a degree, good language proficiency, to know and to have different methodologies, to possess certain theoretical foundations in FLA, (Foreign Language Acquisition), to be updated in technologies, and to be aware of diversity. Moreover, Richards (1998) proposes six domains to be a FL teacher: theories of teaching, teaching skills, communication skills, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical reasoning, decision making, and context knowledge. Experiences as teachers educators have showed that pre-service and in- service teachers need to

Escuela de Idiomas de la Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia incorporan en su Syllabus estos aspectos con el fin de mostrar a los futuros profesores las realidades que enfrentarán como futuros maestros. El objetivo de este artículo es reflexionar sobre los desafíos, el conocimiento y las políticas en torno a la enseñanza de una lengua extranjera en la actualidad y reflexionar con los futuros profesores lo que puedan entender alrededor de la pedagogía y la investigación como el puente para vincular lo que se estudia y se reflexiona en las clases y las realidades que enfrentan como futuros maestros de Lenguas Extranjeras.

Palabras clave: Proyectos Pedagógicos e Investigativos, conocimiento base, retos de los futuros profesores

know different theories and knowledge to put in practice in their classes.

Shulman (1987) proposed the following categories about teachers' Knowledge base and they included: content knowledge; general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of educational contexts, and knowledge of educational ends as well as purposes, and values, and their philosophical and historical grounds. As we can see, all are challenges we have to face in our everyday teaching practices. However, the reality demands more than those mentioned above; a teacher has to deal with different students' behaviors, limited use of EFL in the classroom, different educational contexts, where students and

teachers have limited sources, just to mention some of them.

The first category, “*content knowledge*” has to deal with the knowledge that a teacher has in terms of structures, contents, and cultural aspects around language. And as Pineda (2002) in Day and Concklin (1992) Content Knowledge is what a Foreign Language Teacher teaches. In “*General Pedagogical knowledge*”, the teachers puts into practice the strategies, techniques and practices to manage the classroom and its atmosphere. The third category “*Pedagogical content knowledge*” refers to the way teachers teach, how is the subject communicated to others, how “it is comprehensive for other people” Pineda (2002:11). “*Curricular Knowledge*” deals with the curricular choices that a teacher has to follow in terms of instruction, programs and its objectives, materials, evaluation, and so on. All in order to accomplish a meaningful learning.

Following the categories, the fifth one, “*Knowledge of the learner*” deals with the fact of knowing the kind of students we have, if they are children, teenagers or adults. And beyond that, the context they belong to: rural areas or urban areas, and in this last area, if they study in a public or a private school. It refers to the diversity teachers have to face in the same classroom, the multiple intelligences students have and the different styles of learning they have to take into account when teaching the foreign language.

These different characteristics imply that the pre-service teacher needs to know the

physical and cognitive development students have. Pineda (2002:11) On the other hand, “*Knowledge of Educational goals and Philosophical Bases*”, embraces what the society expects from the Foreign Language teachers, as Rafael Arteaga, Ligia Cortez and Jairo Hernández (2007) discussed in a panel at Universidad Nacional (UN) in Bogotá. In that panel, all of them agreed that to learn and to teach a foreign language deals not only with the last tendencies in teaching it, but also in knowing the policies that guide the education system and the decisions that a teacher has to face when he/she is inserted in the system. Pineda (2002).

Teaching has important challenges into the society; they deal with not only teaching a subject, but also to engage students into historical, political, economical and personal issues (Freire, 1997). In this perspective, education is the most important base into the society development. Taking into account the previous statement, we as EFL teachers have big challenges that empower our reason of being teachers. Besides, dynamic changes in social, cultural, technological, political and academic issues we are facing, demands us to give the future teachers the right tools to face these new ways of teaching.

We would like to bear in mind some ideas from González (2000) proposal in regards to the same challenges that the new millennium presents us. One challenge is the *language proficiency* that an English teacher should have. Our experiences have shown how technology, webs and general information are giving the students certain

level of using the FL; because most of them have learnt English through technology and our children and young people are being educated by the television and Internet. This makes teachers wonder about our place in the school settings and for the citizen formation to develop the pedagogical practice with a key question: How do EFL teachers educate students with enough ethics, moral and intellectual tools to face the amount of information that they face at the time? Thus, it is not only to have the highest proficiency but also to handle classroom management, strategies, materials, among others; and most importantly, how to deal with ethics and moral responsibility when we teach. The aforementioned is being discussed into the pedagogical projects classes and it has been reflected with the future teachers, in order to guide them into the classes' observation to focus their observations in realities they have to face when they become teachers.

The second challenge is *to know the diversity of contexts*, the same teacher may work with adults, children, and teenagers, and they may teach ESP; thus, Gonzalez (2000) highlights that the universities must provide training in various settings and diverse populations. In the case of the Pedagogical Projects, students have to observe different classes in different settings (public or private, primary or secondary). During these experiences in the different contexts, they have the opportunity to know about the PEI (Proyecto Educativo Institucional). The purpose of doing it is to analyze and contrast what they have reflected in theory with what they find in it and what they perceive in the real context.

Besides that, they have the possibility to systematize their analysis through interviews addressed to school administrators and teachers.

Moreover, students study about curriculum, pedagogy and didactics and they contrast the theory about these aspects knowing a real curriculum in a school, making connections and contrasting with in service teachers' surveys or interviews; and observing classes again, but this time, relating curriculum, pedagogy and didactics and all the theory around them. Finally, prospective teachers have the opportunity to be involved in different contexts around the students' issues in different settings. Problems such as bullying, racism, inclusion, poverty, familiar violence, displacement, and so forth, are studied, analyzed and contrasted in real life through small-scale projects. Prospective teachers conduct a research problem, some objectives and a pedagogical intervention to overcome some issues aforementioned; they contrast the problem with the theory and put it into practice.

Different experiences have shown how an EFL teacher has to handle different context when he/she starts working: primary, secondary and universities. Pineda (2002) claims that we as teachers must focus on the learning process of our students; that is, knowledge about how children, adolescents and adults learn. Kumaravadelu (2003) goes further, he states that people use English according to their individual and institutional needs; it means that teachers must contextualize himself/herself depending on the institution

he/she is going to work in: private or public. Smith (1976) claimed that learning a (FL)foreign language depends on the people, places and purposes to learn it. In this sense, the Pedagogical Project classes offer them the opportunity to observe different types of students, they observe classes with children, with adolescents, in urban and rural areas. These different contexts give them opportunities to know in first person how to learn to manage students in different levels and social conditions.

Another challenge is *the access or lack of access to resources*; teachers must handle resources from the most sophisticated ones, such as computer devices, video beams, and so on; until “scarce resources that are quite frequently a reality for our EFL teachers”. González (2000:1). Furthermore, teachers must consider how to elaborate materials to support the instructional design component of their classes. In spite this elaboration is a time consuming activity and requires dedication, patience and some expertise. “It is a unique experience in which teachers can cater to specific learning objectives and learning styles. Moreover, materials designed by the teachers are more likely to be updated and manageable”. Nuñez et al. (2004:129). That is, they have the possibility to place the learner as the center of the language learning process, and at the same time to explore their creativity by designing materials for their classes.

The fourth challenge is *the implementation of classroom-based research*. As we know our future teachers are not only to be teachers, but also to be researchers; therefore, we should start giving them the

opportunity of knowing the different ways of researching in our classroom settings. Every aspect we guide students to learn must be “permeated” by research projects. We can start with small-scale research projects in our classrooms to engage them to do it in their practices; in that way, they can start to rethink their final proposal and their future researches they could apply to enhance their teaching and learning process.

Research skills are the result of reflecting around two important aspects: classroom observation and experience as learners. That is, to put in practice the different theories students-teachers learning through their academic background and prior knowledge they had. A teacher educator who favors a humanistic, inquiring, and critical approach to language teaching and learning. As Piñeros and Quintero (2006) claim “a teacher educator who opposes the rigidity of a technical view of language curriculum... who conceives language curriculum as a set of school life experience in which both teachers and students find opportunities to share, activate, and built new understandings of the world” (p. 174). It is researching to improve our role as EFL teachers.

Our last challenge is based on a question EFL teachers have asked: *What does the Colombian society expect from the FL teachers?* And it is evident that we have to teach the FL very good; and what does it mean? That teaching responds to some needs, and what kind of needs? And probably it could be the country needs, but also the learners’ needs. Thus, it will depend on the following order: first, students;

second, teachers; then, family and lastly, society in which our students will project themselves, and which they are part of it. Arteaga et al. (2007).

To try to establish those needs, we have to allude to two important sources: first, the new tendencies or current practices in teaching the EFL; Arteaga (2008) says these tendencies are related to teachers-researchers who have worked and reflected about the EFL teaching would be; these would be based on the world requirements where we live today and to justify them theoretically. Second, we as EFL teachers must bear in mind the Colombian legislation, Which hopefully recovers the country feeling and it concretes the goals, as we as nation follow. It means the way we as teachers conceive policies around teaching and learning in our country, and how the society perceives them.

Conclusions

Nowadays, a reflective prospective-teacher, should know the different transformations of knowledge, with all its demands and challenges that González (2000) suggests and the particular case of the foreign languages teachers or the knowledge that Schulman (1997) talks about it. Pedagogical and research projects have constituted a bridge to face the student-teachers to the real situation in the educational context.

The learning has important roles inside the society; this has to deal not only with teaching the subject, but also with the students in their historical, social, economic

and personal issues. Through this perspective, the education is the most important base of development in a society.

Bearing in mind what was mentioned before, we as FL Teachers have big challenges in order to empower our reason of being teachers. Besides, the dynamic changes in the social, cultural technologic, politic and academic matters, asks to us as teachers, trainers of the future teachers, to think about how to give them the right tools to face the world.

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THE AUTHORS

NANCY BARÓN PEREIRA. Holds a Master of Arts in Language Teaching from Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC). She has worked in primary and secondary schools. Currently, she works at the Languages School in UPTC and belongs to the ENLETAWA research group. She has participated as lecturer in national and international academic events. Her research interests are critical Pedagogy and pre-service teacher identity.

SONIA ROJAS ESPITIA. Holds a Master of Arts in Language Teaching from Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC). She has been teacher of the Language Teaching Master Program at UPTC since 2012. She is also teacher at the School of Languages at UPTC and belongs to the ENLETAWA Research group. She has participated as lecturer in national and international academic events. Her research interests are Literacy and Research.