

EFL TEACHERS LOOK AT THEMSELVES: COULD THEY GROW TOGETHER?



Adriana González Moncada.
Claudia Montoya A.
Nelly Sierra Ospina.

Escuela de Idiomas
Universidad de Antioquia

Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study in which EFL teachers reflect on their work conditions and professional needs. Data were collected through focus groups. Results show that EFL teachers from public and private schools see themselves as very different from each other. The language proficiency they believe each group has, the access to teaching materials, the students' motivation, the social problems faced in their classrooms, and the work conditions represent the issues that generate the division between these two groups. The need to promote more instances of mutual recognition and understanding in professional training programs is concluded by the researchers.

Key words:

teacher education- self-concept- stereotypes- professional development

Introduction

Professional development programs seek to improve the conditions of teachers. Most programs aim to help them keeping abreast with the changes in the profession through in-service options (Richards and Freeman, 1996). EFL teachers have been

traditionally trained both in pre-service and in-service programs taking into account the agendas proposed for ESL teachers. The striking differences between the two settings are treated without enough caution in the literature (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Gebhard, 1996). The terms ESL and EFL are used as synonyms in most teacher education textbooks. A hyphen, a slash and the word "or" is used to disguise the lack of knowledge about the two settings. In the search of contextualized agendas for EFL teachers, EFL teacher educators must study the local needs to design programs of professional development that help the teachers face the changes and challenges of the profession (González & Arias, 1999). Although this prerequisite is shared by all those involved in the processes of teacher education, there are few studies assessing the professional needs of EFL teachers.

This paper reports the results of a study carried out in the Metropolitan Area of Medellín, Colombia, assessing the professional needs of teachers of English as a Foreign Language working in private and public schools. Through the meetings held EFL teachers expressed different opinions about their work conditions and the professional needs they experience in public and private schools. Testimonies about how teachers see themselves as two separate groups revealed some issues that deserve closer attention

from teacher trainers and teacher educators in the search of higher standards in our professional development. The fact that EFL teachers insist on having professional programs that separate those working on public and private schools will be explored in this paper.

EFL teachers working in the formal educational sector in Colombia, i.e. granting an academic degree may work in public or private schools. Public schools are those financed by the national, state or local government. Private schools are those owned or supported by private individuals, associations, enterprises or religious communities. Public schools offer instruction to students at no cost while private schools tend to charge for their service. Public schools are supposed to serve the country educating the people with lower income. For that reason, there seems to be an implicit agreement that public schools gather mainly lower social class students. On the other hand, private schools tend to be associated to higher-class students because their administrators may charge lots of money and, as a consequence, only people belonging to middle or high social classes may study there. Nevertheless, the Colombian school system may have public schools in neighborhoods with high income or private schools financed by religious companies or private enterprises in underprivileged neighborhoods. It is

also interesting to note that for the average Colombian there are other beliefs related to private or school settings. One is the fact that private schools have higher academic standards than public schools. This may be a consequence of the frequent disruptions academic work undergoes in public schools. Teachers need to go on strikes to be paid or to obtain many of their union benefits. Private schools also have longer school hours than public schools and may have additional courses to those required by the national standards. Another issue is the common belief that teachers working in public schools are less prepared to do their jobs than private school teachers, who are seen as more committed or better professionals. Although this clear difference in the perception of the status and quality of the work of teachers is very popular, there is little research on the reasons that support those beliefs. Even scarcer is the literature exploring how teachers see themselves as part of one of those groups and how they see their own group.

METHOD

Subjects

A total of 18 public school teachers (thereafter PST) attended the meetings. Eleven female teachers (age range 25-54 average age 40) and seven male teachers (age range 29-44 average age 36) participated in the sessions for this group. The years of teaching experience for the participants ranged from 3 through 28, being the average 15.3 years. The number of teachers from private schools was thirteen, 9 female (age range 24-45 average age 31; 4 male, age range 26-36 average age 32). Regarding their teaching experience, private school teachers (thereafter PRST) had an average of 7 years, ranging from 1 through 20 years.

The first group of PST contacted was composed mainly of Cooperating Teachers in our undergraduate Practicum in EFL teaching. These teachers are mentors of our students for a school

year. Using the snow ball technique, we obtained other names to conform the second group. For PRST, we reached former undergraduate and graduate students that recommended other colleagues.

Data collection

Data were collected through focus groups discussions. A focus group usually consist of groups of eight to ten respondents who are led through a series of questions in a conversational, free-flowing manner by a moderator. It may also include observers that take notes (USGS; 1998). The group usually starts out discussing a broad topic but ends up focusing on one or two areas/aspects of that topic that are the key elements of the focus group and the reason it was held in the first place (Dilorio et al, 1994). The value of a focus group is that group members will exchange ideas and build upon these ideas to generate more of the information for further research (Dendinger, 2000). Focus groups are held to understand how people feel and think about a program, service or issue that is of importance (Debus, 1988). The advantages of this research technique made us choose it as the best way to analyze the professional needs of Colombian EFL teachers because it promoted interaction among participants.

The main question for the group sessions was the needs EFL teachers have to carry out a better job. Teachers were classified in two categories according to the setting in which they work: PST and PRST. This classification was based on the fact that the school setting and the social class to which students belong are issues that play a major role in the job of a Colombian teacher. Teachers also categorized themselves in one of these two groups. They agreed on the fact that being funded by the government or by private organizations determines the way schools work. Moreover, the participants insisted on the need to bear in mind the differences existing between English teachers working in public and private

schools in Colombia. They perceive two different groups inside the universal set of teachers working in the teaching of English.

The concept of self-categorization has been widely discussed in psychology and sociology. It is defined as the combination of personal and social identities used to identify ourselves as both individuals and members of social groups. In self-categorization there is also stereotyping, thus the self is seen like other group members (Turner et al., 1987). In this study EFL teachers were placed -and placed themselves- into a professional category that reflects the aspects of the self defined and evaluated at group level (Hunter et al. 1999). The aspects mentioned in the meetings apply to the construction of their social identity as teachers rather than to their personal identity. We believe that the teachers' professional identity is the sum of the views of themselves and those held by the others. Although we consider that the teachers' professional identity influences their professional self-esteem, this issue is beyond the scope of this study and needs to be considered in further research.

Data Analysis

Once the focus groups sessions ended, they were transcribed using standard orthography. As the transcript was read aloud, the researchers shared notes to complement the information recorded with the participants' non-verbal behavior. Particular attention was paid to this in the last part of the focus group session when the moderator presented a summary of the main issues addressed. Participants showed their agreement or disagreement with the conclusions presented or complemented any missing details. The two focus group sessions of each category of teachers were analyzed at the same time to discover similarities and differences within the group regarding every answer. The data analysis included the identification of key words and concepts addressed by the

participants. Those concepts generated descriptive categories that included the views that EFL teachers presented about themselves as two separate groups.

RESULTS

Through the data collection process, we found out that EFL teachers do not see themselves as a community. They believe they belong to specific groups quite different from others. The most striking difference was noticed between teachers from public and private schools. Reporting their professional needs teachers referred to their jobs, students, colleagues, school environment, and neighborhoods in which their schools are placed. A considerable amount of time was spent in the description of the teachers as two professional groups. Teachers constructed self-concepts that reflect their symbolic representations of their own psychological, social, and ethical characteristics (Beebe and Masterson, 1997). In the self-concept they included qualities expressed through adjectives, different roles they assume, and identities they may have. These identities are socially constructed through the interaction with others (De Oñate, 1989).

EFL teachers -from public and private schools- used implicit stereotyping to refer to themselves. Stereotypes are defined as "an individual's set of beliefs about the characteristics or attributes of a group" (Judd and Park, 1993: 110). Stereotypes are not only a matter of judging other races, social groups or genders. They are "categories - of people, places, things- to make sense of the world around us" (Murphy Paul, 1998). Bargh (cited by Murphy Paul, 1998) says that stereotypes may be originated in in-group/out-group dynamics because human beings have the necessity to be part of a group. Since some of the traditional group units have shattered, "our identities have attached themselves to more ambiguous classifications such as

race and class" (Murphy Paul, 1998). Our response to try to understand the differences between the group in which we place ourselves and the one in which we place others is automatic or implicit stereotyping.

Below we report the main issues that each category of teachers identified as particular to their own conditions in public and private schools. The issues will be ranked from the most to the least important:

1. How do PST see themselves?

a. Facing a challenging job

PST consider that their job is particularly difficult. This group reported that their students are troublesome, not motivated, belong to violent groups, and are not willing to learn. Many teachers think that those difficulties originate in the students' lower socio-economic conditions. Dealing with lower class students represents an extra responsibility for PST. Facing the problems that every teacher encounters teaching English is even more challenging because students -and teachers- have to deal with poverty, malnutrition and family violence every day. Commenting on this view of students, Luisa- 35-years old, ten years of experience as an English teacher- said,

"We have already kind of stigmatized our students from underprivileged neighborhoods, because they are poor they don't learn English, they don't like it... because they are poor, because they aren't interested in travelling and many other circumstances that make them, that make us not even try to do things in another way".

Elkin, 29-year old teacher that has taught English for 4 years, comments on the students' difficult conditions because they have to study and handle a job to support their families. In his own words,

"The kid has, on top of the problem of English being confusing, on top our mistakes, he also has

hunger, a job, and violence. Then one says it is not that he doesn't want to do anything. One criticizes them all the time. It is not that he is useless, one doesn't analyze all the circumstances".

b. Being unmotivated towards EFL teaching

PST teachers see themselves as not committed to their job and not motivated to carry it out successfully. Most of them seem to agree on the fact that their colleagues undergo several problems that affect their professional performance. Esperanza, 48 years old and 25 years in the profession, says,

"People who are involved in teaching English or other foreign languages they should love it because one sometimes sees colleagues that don't like it. If they could they would be doing something else. One sees teachers from other fields more satisfied. The Chemistry or the Physics teachers are immersed in their labs. The English colleagues do not even prepare their lessons and are not honest in their relationship with students".

Esperanza has been long enough in the profession to have a clear understanding of the EFL teachers' complex professional life. Her view of her colleagues and closer friends having unsatisfactory experiences about teaching may be a consequence of being in an age group close to retirement. In the teachers' career cycle this stage is called "career wind-down" (Fessler & Christensen, 1991). Teachers in this stage tend to feel discouraged and quite pessimistic about their profession (Pennington, 1995).

c. Having low proficiency in English

The common belief that most English teachers in public schools do not speak English is shared by many teachers from this category. Their low language proficiency is one of the most frequently issues addressed as a need in professional

development programs. PST say that their personal efforts to have better language proficiency are useless because their colleagues have no commitment to practice the language outside the classroom. González (1995) found that teachers working in public schools are more likely to undergo language attrition than any other group of teachers. Limited practice of the language inside and outside the classroom was found to be the main reason for the loss of their language skills. Although some teachers have attempted to set up conversation clubs their efforts have failed because teachers are embarrassed to speak English in front of colleagues that speak better. Rafael, a 44 year old teacher with 28 years of teaching experience comments on that problem,

"The teacher does not have the competence in the language he/she is teaching. He/she may be willing to, may have all the labs, but this is a problem we have faced for many years and we will never get over it because there is a fundamental component missing in the teacher's brain, It's his/her lack of complete mastery [of English]... How can we ask a teacher, that doesn't have the linguistic competence, to teach the four skills if he/she doesn't have them?"

d. Being unprepared to face the challenges of teaching EFL in primary schools

PST see themselves as a group that is not prepared to face the challenges of teaching EFL to children. They highlight in particular the situation of many teachers assigned to teach in elementary schools with no previous training or background knowledge on the subject matter. Teachers believe that the lack of adequate professional training from the teachers in charge of educating children will have a consequence on the already poor EFL language policy the government has for public schools in Colombia. Commenting on this problem, Esperanza states,

"I am worried about the training of elementary school teachers. They are the ones that initiate kids in the learning process. They may kill the interest students' might have in the future..... In public schools any teacher can teach English, even having other majors".

Hilda, a 52-year-old English teacher with a 27 year experience, has had deep understanding of this issue. She remarks,

"[The government] gets some poor elementary school teachers that have no idea about English and tells them to complete their work load with seven hours of English in these classes. I have seen teachers that buy a little cassette and in the evening they listen to the cassette... or buy a little book and copy some things. They tell somebody to pronounce them for them..... What a disrespectful behavior to students and teachers!

The testimonies presented above reveal the low self-concept PST have. The difficulties related to their work conditions, their students' problems, their own and their colleagues' proficiency in English are seen as the main factors that affect their performance.

2. How do PRST see themselves?

a. Being overloaded with school work

Teachers in this category believe that they have more work hours than PST. They claim that the length of the class period, the number of hours they teach per week, the paper work, and the amount of extracurricular activities (more frequent parent-teacher conferences, spiritual retreats, school festivities, and department meetings) make them work very hard. Laura, 27 years old and 4 years in teaching, works in private school owned by a Catholic order. Although teachers are supposed to have some free class periods to work on their own, they have to deal with tasks different from teaching and grading papers. The following

testimony shows her everyday busy schedule at school. She comments on her difficulties to implement changes in her teaching,

"If in some training course I'm told I've got to do research, that I must keep abreast, what can I do if at school I cannot even meet with other English teachers to plan my lessons?.... They [school administrators] say that you're allocated three free class periods daily, but then they tell you, "please type this, do this... we need the minutes of the last meeting, hand in that.... then the free class period is gone".

b. Lacking autonomy to make decisions at school

PRS teachers think that many times their initiatives and innovation attempts do not have impact on their work because they lack autonomy and decision making power. Most private schools belong to religious communities that stress the importance of strict discipline and the value of silence in class. It is also quite common to rate the content of the materials used in English classes. These beliefs may clash with the teachers' desire to innovate their classes making them more communicative through group work, games, and songs. Topics such as sex, drugs, violence or certain kinds of music are forbidden even though students are highly motivated to discuss them in class. Teachers report that their own value system may be frequently attacked. Their personal life may be scrutinized to make sure that they fulfill the academic, behavioral, and spiritual requirements to be role models for their students. Some teachers reported having changed their beliefs because they loose their jobs if their ideas go against the institutions' policies.

Commenting on the administrators' complaints about having too noisy English classes, Sofía -30 years old and 8 years of experience- says,

"Most of the time in traditional schools [administrators] care mainly about discipline control than anything else. For them discipline is to get students to be quiet. In order to avoid discipline problems one doesn't make any changes in class".

Ernesto -26 years old and 7 years as a teacher- works in a private school owned by the parents association. Although the religious principles are not so strong, administrators question the teachers' class activities if they are too noisy. He agrees on the fact that English teachers are often limited by the school discipline policies. He states,

"If one wants to do an activity where [students] had to move around the classroom, the coordinator or the principal of the school asked, "What's going on?"

c. Having highly motivated students

PRST recognize that most of their students like to learn English because they see it as a need. Teachers do not have to spend class time insisting on the importance of such learning as PST have to do it. As a consequence of having higher family income, many students may travel abroad, take English courses in language centers or have tutors. Those mechanisms contribute to the achievement of higher motivation and better language proficiency. The majority of the teachers commented on this positive issue and highlighted it as a source of motivation for themselves. They also acknowledge the difficult task of PST having students that have English as a mere requirement for graduation. Students' motivation makes the teachers keeping abreast in terms of information and technology to meet the students' expectations. Lucia, 34 years old and two years of teaching experience- comments on the

influence of the school setting on the students' motivation,

"We have to look at the economic status of the school, if it is a middle class school, then it is possible [to learn English] because it is not the same for a kid from a school in Machado or Zamora² that a kid from a school in Envigado, el Poblado.³...The mental attitude from students is different because they know they will need it [learning English] for college or will travel abroad. A kid that doesn't have expectations to travel, might go to college, but do not see it as a need".

d. Having low language proficiency

PRST teachers feel they have good language proficiency to face the requirements of their job. Nevertheless, many of them shared their concern about having students whose speaking skills are better than theirs. They feel they have the grammar knowledge to teach the language but are in need of more frequent and challenging situations that require the use of English. Experiencing lower language proficiency than their students is a source of anxiety and discomfort for the teachers. Some reported having advanced students that make fun of their accent, gaps in vocabulary or lack of cultural competence in certain topics. When asked to help their classmates those students refuse to do it and disturb the class atmosphere. Lucrecia- 24 years old and 4 years as an English teacher- expresses this concern,

"There are kids that have traveled abroad and have better language proficiency than their teachers".

e. Not having the sufficient resources

Contrary to the general belief that private schools have different kinds of teaching aids, these

teachers reported that even in prestigious schools the lack of resources is often a problem. Some schools invest most of their budget improving the school facilities, supporting their sports teams or buying computers that may not be used in English classes. In some cases, the teachers have to pay for copies or school supplies needed to carry out certain activities in their classes. Vicky -34 years old and 6 years teaching English says,

"Private schools are not the last wonder. They do not have everything. They don't have all the resources as we may think apparently".

f. Facing lots of students' problems

PRST have to face the challenges of solving students' personal and family problems. They say that they are not prepared for those situations in which they deal with violence, abandonment, depression, and pregnancy, among others. Although PRST acknowledge that teachers in public schools may face more severe problems like those aforementioned, they complain about the great responsibility they have in the process of educating students. In higher social classes students may have more money but many of them lack caring parents. Bringing up children is seen sometimes as the school task. The roles they need to play inside and outside the classroom in the rapport with students are challenging and overwhelming quite frequently. Vicky states this problem as follows,

"I'd like to have the capacity, not only for me but for all teachers, to face... as superheroes, all the students' learning problems... The capacity to solve so many problems found in the classroom, learning and personal problems or family problems or kids that do not like the class or that have the wrong attitude. To be a person that has the solution to everything".

The aspects aforementioned make EFL teachers see a gap between the two groups. This paper has shown that teachers do not see themselves as a community sharing the same goals and needs. Five issues were identified as important in the construction of the teachers' self-concept: the access they have to teaching materials; the language proficiency each group believes they have; their students' motivation; the social problems they face in their classrooms; and their work conditions. PST and PRST emphasized the need to be trained as **separate groups**. They believe that their professional needs are very different for both groups, therefore teacher educators should be aware of the particular conditions affecting their job. Although the issues identified as priorities for both groups are apparently different because of the specificity of the settings, we believe that their professional needs are quite alike. The chart presented below summarizes the areas of need for each category of teachers. Contrary to what teachers say, similarities in both categories of teachers are evident. The issues found as concerns for both groups are marked with an arrow.

Figure 1. Issues considered by public and private school teachers as challenges in their profession
Public school teachers
Private school teachers

Lots of students' social problems
Lack of motivation to teach
Low language proficiency
Little training to teach EFL to children
Excessive work load
Lack of autonomy
Highly motivated students
Low language proficiency
Lots of students' social problems
Few teaching resources

Among the common issues for both groups of teachers we found

that they see their weaknesses to deal with the many problems encountered by students in Colombian urban communities as a challenge for professional development programs. There are subtle differences in the ways students' problems manifest in public and private schools. For example, students' feeling of being "abandoned" by their parents is the same even though in one social class that means not having a parent or both and in the other one it means having them too busy to take care of their children.

The second issue is the teachers' perception of their low language proficiency in English. Inside each category of teachers and in the views about the other category the incomplete mastery of English is a constant concern. We believe that this may be the main source of reluctance to have

professional development programs together. Attempts have been made to promote instances for public and private school teachers to work together in ELT regional conferences and extension courses from universities. Nevertheless, the language proficiency of presenters, lecturers, teacher trainers as well as the one of peer teachers may exert a great influence on the way teachers assess a professional development program. From our own experience as teachers and through informal discussions with colleagues we can assert that for nonnative speaker teachers professional development is a major source of language maintenance. Having the opportunity to use English for meaningful and challenging purposes is one of the major sources of motivation to attend training programs.

CONCLUSIONS

Constructing new agendas for teacher education requires the active participation of teachers. In the case of EFL, achieving better professional development programs implies seeking strategies that gather them as a group. Public and private school teachers see themselves as separate groups that have little in common. It is only when EFL teachers and teacher educators visualize that task as a common objective that we will enrich our daily work. It is the task of teacher educators to promote more knowledge and understanding of the EFL teachers' needs and concerns as a single task, not as two separate journeys depending on the educational context in which teachers are involved. It should be the teacher educators' commitment to generate instances of reflection and sharing concerns in order to construct professional development agendas that treat the teachers as individuals and also see them as part of a collectivity to grow together. We believe that mutual recognition could

be gained through: one, having group discussions and training sessions in Spanish dealing with certain topics that affect the job of both groups. Teachers will realize that some problems that affect their students are quite similar regardless of their social class. Moreover, having Spanish as the language of communication may allow professionals from different disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and medicine to provide teachers with elements to seek more interdisciplinary solutions to those problems. Language proficiency in English would not be a hindrance to promote that cooperation. Two, courses and work sessions could be planned for teachers of both kinds of schools taking into account similar levels of language proficiency. Participants would have more opportunities to be involved in the construction of common agendas for EFL teachers without discriminating colleagues based on their perceived language proficiency.

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