

Peer Training as a means of Onsite Professional Development for Ecuadorian English Teachers

La Capacitación entre Pares como medio de Desarrollo Profesional in situ para Profesores de Inglés Ecuatorianos

Christian Andrade Molina*, Adriana Aroca Fárez*, Daniel Sono Toledo*

*Universidad Técnica del Norte, Facultad de Educación Ciencia y Tecnología, Ecuador.
Mail: cdandrade@utn.edu.ec

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RESUMEN

El desarrollo profesional continuo de los instructores es un factor preponderante en los sistemas educativos de alta calidad [12]; [14] [2]; [4]; [9]. En el Ecuador, se ha observado que ha transcurrido un número sustancial de años en los que ha existido un número limitado de cursos regulares para el desarrollo profesional de educadores de EFL. El objetivo de este trabajo es aportar una propuesta factible para la formación de profesores de EFL in situ: Capacitación entre pares, el cual es un enfoque de desarrollo profesional, que se ha llevado a cabo con recursos limitados y sin embargo, ha demostrado ser altamente efectivo [4]. Nosotros, los autores, recomendamos una iniciativa para crear una cadena de conocimiento, alentando a los educadores de EFL en Ecuador a convertirse en puntos de distribución del conocimiento.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Mejora Docente, Necesidades de los Alumnos, Cadena del conocimiento

ABSTRACT

Continuous professional development of instructors is a preponderant factor in high quality education systems [12]; [14]; [2]; [4] [9]. In Ecuador, it has been observed that a substantial number of years have gone by in which limited of onsite regular courses for professional development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators has existed. This paper is aimed to contribute a feasible proposal for training EFL teachers in situ: **peer training**, a professional development approach, which has been carried out with limited resources and yet being highly effective [4]. We, the authors, recommend an initiative to create a chain of knowledge, by encouraging EFL educators in Ecuador to become outlets of knowledge distribution.

KEY WORDS: Teaching improvement, Students' needs, Chain of knowledge

1. Introduction

In Ecuador, we have observed that a substantial number of years have gone by in which limited onsite regular courses for professional development of EFL educators has existed. Nonetheless, the government of President Rafael Correa has been making a remarkable effort in pursuance of improving the level of excellence of its teaching staff. Overseas training programs such as "GO Teachers since 2012," as well as onsite workshops from online Top Notch courses (2013), have emerged to improve EFL teachers' language and teaching skills. It should be emphasized, that, in order to achieve excellence in training teachers in Ecuador, it should involve a joint effort by districts administrators, principals, and teacher leaders. "Professional development can succeed only in settings, or contexts, that support it" [8 (p. 2)]. Hardwell also states that professional development will rely on the importance that the administrators treat it with, and their feelings towards its chances of success.

In our professional experience, we can state that in Ecuador, there is now a general sense of need for change in education. Carpenter (2013), maintains that professional development should occur on a regular basis using a methodical, continuous process over time. Continuous professional development of instructors is a preponderant factor in high quality education systems [12]; [14] [2]; [4]; [9]. This paper is aimed to contribute a feasible proposal for training EFL teachers in situ: **peer training** [4], a professional development approach, which has been carried out with limited resources and yet with highly effective results. Findings suggest that teachers who received peer coaching were more successful when implementing new instructional strategies in the classroom [2] [11].

All teachers, regardless of their backgrounds, require appropriate preparation to address the needs of students. We, the authors of this paper, recommend an initiative to create a chain of knowledge. In doing so, EFL educators in Ecuador will be encouraged to become outlets of knowledge distribution. This knowledge of distribution is an optimal option in our environment due to its appeal in the creation, development and maintenance for a learning community;

Professional development activities are the means whereby teachers are exposed to new ideas, strategies, and approaches for classroom practice. These activities can be seasonal workshops, conferences, or online courses similar to what is currently taking place in Ecuador. Nonetheless, Gottesman (2000), have suggested that in these kinds of activities there is little transfer of the acquired knowledge from training to practice. Teachers need to be provided with effective and continuous training and support so that these new approaches become part of the teacher's daily instruction in the classroom. The purpose of professional development activities according to McCann (2000), "should be to create the conditions in which levels of skill and knowledge are developed to sustain practice until transfer has occurred" (p.1). As we state in the next section most of the current approaches for professional development take place either in the largest cities in the country or abroad; with peer training we would have highly trained instructors and at the same time instructors who know the context in which said coaching will be applied. It has also been found to be a feasible and low cost option for professional development with a high degree of impact, which will influence both teachers and students. This way we will help to democratize education.



Image 1. Peer to peer training experimental workshop at Universidad Técnica del Norte

2. Development

Statement of Problem

"Who dares to teach must never cease to learn" (Cotton Dana, 1912).

According to Minister of Education Freddy Peñafiel (2014), more than 5000 EFL teachers were examined with the iBT version of the TOEFL exam with less than 2% receiving a passing score (B2). The test

was free and mandatory for all tenured teachers. Because of this results, in Ecuador, several initiatives recently launched by Ecuador's government such as Go teacher, the Top notch on line course, and the Peace Corps workshops, are efforts to nationally address professional development (PD) for EFL teachers. However, EFL teachers who do not meet the criteria or requirement to participate in the aforementioned programs are left out. Additionally, these programs are not long term in nature, leaving a gap that needs to be filled out with local, on-going, and feasible PD opportunities. In this research, we the authors propose peer-to-peer training to contribute with this large scale efforts to improve the quality of EFL teaching. Our aim is to provide professional development plan that provides for the acquisition and integration of differentiated instruction into the classroom (Image 1). Insofar as administrators support this kind of initiatives, peer coaching could be available to all EFL teachers in Ecuador regardless of whether they are tenured or are working with a temporary contract. Additionally, it could provide easy access to practical resources and activities by being designed around their work schedule, as well as being developed in their workplace. Although they are intended as being a solution, some workshops are just not offered keeping the needs of a specific region in mind.

In Ecuador, the education issue has changed from a narrow scope with higher standards to a broad scope with lower standards. In the past education policies broadened the public's involvement in formal education. In broadening its scope, the quality of education and teaching has significantly scaled down [19]. For instance, in Ecuador according to Ministerio de Educacion y Cultura [Ministry of Education and Culture hereafter] there was not central database listing qualified teachers, so that professional development opportunities could be provided. Fortunately, the pertinent authorities have been building up a detailed database through which few professional development opportunities have been provided for EFL teachers.

Peer to Peer Training as Professional Development

In the search of professional development in the complex public-school system, teacher peer training was brought to light. The peer to peer training model permits educators of similar status to engage in a process of mutual cooperation and interpersonal assistance, helping one another in reflecting on their own practices on a regular basis [7]. "Teacher peer coaching is an intensive professional development (PD) activity in which teachers provide one another with feedback about their teaching", [3(p.347)]. It has been carried out with limited resources and yet being highly effective. Findings suggest that teachers who received peer coaching were more successful when implementing new instructional strategies in the classroom [4]; [3]. Thus, in this EFL curricular and pedagogical on-going process, peer training/coaching fosters relationships among colleagues. Insofar as strong connections are made by educators, it will solidify the existing learning community [4]. Additionally, in Ecuador, as in any country of the world, both novice and experienced teachers confront significant challenges and changes each school year. These changes and challenges will vary greatly from district to district. That is the reason why, it is essential that professional development takes place in the specific context of the educator's daily work. Mizell (2010) agrees that professional development should be a regular and continuous process, since teachers have different needs at different times which cannot be accurately addressed in just a few workshops. Casey (2006) emphasizes that peer training "can help put an end to sending teachers to generic workshops that do not address our specific context" (p.1).

Continuous professional development of instructors is a preponderant factor in high quality education systems [6]; [12]; [14]. Acedo points out in her study (2012), that teachers are one of the most important factors in high standard education. Educators in Ecuador need to be sure of not only what they teach, but also how they teach. Unfortunately, in Ecuador we have experienced the opposite. We have found that in Ecuador opportunities for EFL teachers' professional development, especially in the public education system, are conspicuously absent. According to SENESCYT (2013), that is one of the

reasons why the GO teacher program was conceived.

Though professional training for teachers is crucial, Ecuador's education system does not constantly emphasize formal teacher development opportunities for the ones who cannot apply for a scholarship abroad. When it comes to boosting students' academic achievement, studies have demonstrated that professional development for teachers and school leadership are key elements [14]. Joyce and Showers (2002) described "student achievement is the product of formal study by educators" (as cited in Harwell, 2003). Since educators every year have to deal with many changes in content area, standards, new technology, student needs, and innovative methodologies, it is important to have a regular program of teacher training not only for novice teachers, but also experienced ones. (Image 2) [14].

The importance of teaching differentiated instruction to EFL teachers in Ecuador



Image 2. Professors sharing innovative, effective, and meaningful teaching practices.

We consider that EFL teachers in Ecuador need a starting point through which they can begin instruction where students actually are, not the front of a curriculum guide. Differentiated instruction gives teachers the tools necessary to gain perspective of students' needs, learning profiles and interests regarding second language learning. Therefore, our interest in instructing our EFL educators with the knowledge of differentiating instruction is of the utmost importance. Gregory and Chapman (2005) point out that "Today teachers face challenging landscape that is in constant flux." (Introduction, p. 10.). In Ecuador, as well EFL teachers must effectively address the needs of a wide variety of students. What we share in common makes us human. How we differ makes us individuals (Tomlinson, 2001).

Today's schools have students that differ in their academic background as well as in their interest for learning and in the way they learn. Differentiated instruction is a process through which educators accurately address students' learning profiles, needs, and interests. It emerged because of the growing presence of learner variance in the classroom. On average current classroom educators will find students from different language and culture backgrounds, students with diverse learning profiles and needs, and students with various socioeconomic status [10] [17].

Differentiated Instruction fine-tunes instruction to meet the individual needs of students, instead of beginning from a specific point in instruction. Furthermore, it allows for different ways to display the material that is to be taught in multiple ways. Gregory and Chapman (2007) emphasize that a classroom with differentiation as its focal point is one where teachers meet the different needs of students. Heacox (2012) explains that differentiated instruction answers to specific students' progress on a learning continuum, thing they already know, and things they need to know. This can take advantage of students' strong suits and the things that they care about and are interested in. Heacox (2012), also pointed out that differentiated instruction is adjusting several factors of the instruction in a way that those changes can better adjust to the students' differences in terms of content, learning styles or interests.



Image 3. A successful peer coaching session ending

3. Discussion

This paper proposes feasible options to provide a continuous and in situ

professional development opportunities for EFL teachers within a public system that has very limited resources. The professional development model used in this study is intended to introduce differentiated instruction to our colleagues in Ecuador. Differentiated instruction means tailoring curriculum elements to meet students' diverse needs. Since in Ecuador, the differentiated instruction concept has not yet been applied on a daily basis, there is still much research that needs to be conducted.

Based on academic ground work Gottesman (2013) proposed that teacher professional development is vital to achieve student academic success. It is also noted in the literature [4]; [3] that peer training is a viable solution for coaching educators in regular school conditions

The outcomes of the studies that we have surveyed reflect that teachers are comfortable with peer coaching. The peer to peer training process had an impact on teachers' perception of shared responsibility for professional growth, on teachers' perceptions of positive reinforcement from peers, and on teachers' perceptions of control over their own professional development. To ensure that school improvement and staff development is on-going, school administrators must create conditions in the schools that encourage peer training [15]. It should be emphasized that, in order to achieve excellence in training teachers in Ecuador, it must involve a joint effort by district administrators, principals, and teacher leaders. "Professional development can succeed only in settings, or contexts, that support it." [9 (p. 2)]. On the basis of our professional experience we can state that in Ecuador, there is now a general sense of need for change in education.

The research addressed in this paper shows that peer training strategies decrease teacher isolation in the classroom and its environment. The instructors who received peer coaching development skills were able to transmit this new-found knowledge to their own classrooms, and thereby increase their sense of self-efficacy. Furthermore, it has been noted that time allotted for peer training encourages teachers to sustain frequent and continuous dialogue about teaching practices. This dialogue develops a shared language and recognizes common effective

classroom practices. Teachers can plan, evaluate and prepare teaching materials together. For that reason, teachers need to be given opportunities to collaboratively learn new teaching methods and to examine their professional practice in noticeable depth and detail. Nonetheless, in most school districts, there are few times during a regular school day when teachers find themselves involved in dialogue about teaching practices. By implementing peer coaching, teachers are permitted and encouraged to take on the role of peer instructor and collaborator. The more of these occasions there are, the more support there will be for continuous, ongoing staff development (Image 3).

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Authors



Christian Andrade Molina
Master's Degree Curriculum and Instruction from Kansas State University (U.S.A)
Tenured professor at Universidad Técnica del Norte, English Major



Adriana Aroca Fárez
Tenured professor at Universidad Técnica del Norte, English Major.



Daniel Sono Toledo
Tenured professor at Universidad Técnica del Norte, Carrera de Recursos Naturales Renovables.