PROMOTING A BALANCED APPROACH IN THE EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN COLOMBIA

HACIA UN ENFOQUE BALANCEADO EN LA EDUCACIÓN, CAPACITACIÓN Y DESARROLLO DE DOCENTES DE INGLÉS EN COLOMBIA

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Abstract

This article aims to encourage reflection on an alternative in the education and training of English language teachers in Colombia. The author claims that a balance should be promoted between micro and macro approaches to English language teacher education so as to provide teachers with opportunities for the training of discrete teaching classroom skills (e.g. checking understanding, giving instructions) together with chances to develop high inference, reflective and reasoning skills derived from theoretical foundations and from teachers' personal experiences. Initially, an overview of some predominant strategies to teacher education is presented, followed by a more detailed description of the views of teaching and approaches to teacher education. Finally, implications are discussed and suggestions are offered to find the balance approach and making it explicit in the design and implementation of training and development courses and programs offered to foreign language teachers.

Keywords: Language teacher education, approaches, development, education, training.

Resumen

Este artículo busca generar reflexión sobre una alternativa en la educación y capacitación de profesores de inglés en Colombia. El autor afirma que se debe promover un balance entre un enfoque micro y un enfoque macro en la educación de profesores de inglés de manera que puedan tener oportunidades para la capacitación en habilidades discretas para la enseñanza de este idioma (v.g. dar instrucciones y verificar comprensión) junto con oportunidades para desarrollar habilidades más complejas (v.g. razonar, reflexionar e inferir) derivadas de bases teóricas y de las experiencias propias de los docentes. Inicialmente, se presenta una descripción de algunas estrategias predominantes en la formación docente, seguido por una descripción más detallada de algunos puntos de vista de la enseñanza y de los enfoques utilizados en la formación de docentes. Finalmente, se discuten las implicaciones y se ofrecen sugerencias para promover un enfoque balanceado y hacerlo explícito en el diseño e implementación de cursos y programas de desarrollo y capacitación ofrecidos a docentes de lenguas extranjeras.

Palabras clave: Educación de docentes de lenguas, enfoques, desarrollo, educación, capacitación.

Introduction

Colombian society has always had high expectations of English language teachers, especially in connection to their students' competence and performance in this international language. Above all, there seems to be a major focus on the outcomes of the English teaching process as these become visible in the students' achievement in national standardized examinations such as SABER and SABER PRO. Yet, students' poor results in such examinations (ICFES, 2011) in a way confirm that English language teaching in the country is not yielding the expected outcomes. In search of possible causes for this situation, factors such as teacher education and training, educational and language policies, students' lack of interest and commitment, and contextual circumstances have, at some point, been thought to be responsible. Clearly, it is not my intention here to address all those factors regardless how relevant they surely are in the process of English language learning and teaching in Colombia. I will, however, focus on the education and training of English language teachers as I consider this factor plays a fundamental role in the process of helping Colombian students successfully learn this language.

In regards to this factor, the same society appears to rely on what universities offer through their foreign language teacher education programs across the country and assume that that is what is required to the training and education of English language teachers. This may be related to the 'applied science' model (Wallace, 1991 cited in Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2012, p. 188) whose main assumption is that academic knowledge acquired in university courses can and will be directly applied by teachers in their language classrooms. In a similar way, Johnson (2009, p. 12) argues that "most L2 teacher education programs operate under the assumption that it is necessary to provide teachers with discrete amounts of disciplinary knowledge, usually in the form of general theories and methods that are assumed to be applicable to any teaching context".

The General Law of Education (1994) has also urged universities and colleges in Colombia to offer teacher education programs capable of broadening teachers' horizons, of refining their teaching practice, and of increasing their subject matter knowledge. This observation is supported by Cárdenas (2009) who found that many of the universities with Foreign Language Teacher Education Programs in Colombia emphasized aspects such as knowledge of the context and the subject matter, theories of teaching and learning, development of linguistic skills, differences between teaching children and adults, general pedagogical knowledge and specific methodological skills.

In contrast, and despite the lack of extensive research in this sector, other higher education institutions and international organizations established in the country seem to stress the management of discrete teaching skills, use of resources, and subject matter knowledge in the preparation and training of English language teachers. Even worse, there are isolated cases of private language institutes that appear to rely on the assumption that anyone who speaks English can teach it and therefore hire fluent (mostly native) speakers of this language to teach their language courses. These previous ideas could be founded in two misconceptions regarding teacher education identified by Freeman (1989, p. 29). The first is concerned with the transmission of knowledge and of skills in methodology and related areas, and the second is based on the assumption that that transmission of knowledge will lead to effective practice. In short, the traditional belief that by instilling subject matter knowledge and basic pedagogical and methodological skills would enable anyone to become an effective teacher appears to prevail in various educational and academic circles.

Research into English teachers' needs in the Colombian context found that such needs relate to improving levels of proficiency in the target language, and expanding knowledge of the subject matter and pedagogical skills (Gonzalez et al, 2001; Cadavid et al, 2004). Thus, most teachers have felt identified with those needs, and a series of language proficiency and methodology courses are being offered to undertake teachers' language development and pedagogical enhancement (Colombian Ministry of Education, 2005). Other studies have emphasized aspects such as exploring teachers' personal experiences and developing reflective and research skills. For example, Clavijo et al (2004) looked at processes of innovation in language curriculum with a group of school teachers and found that participants tended to think and reflect critically about their students' needs and interests when planning and conducting curricular innovations. Meanwhile, Cárdenas (2004) study into the nature of English teachers' research as part of a teacher education program concluded that despite their limitations in dealing with research, their projects helped teachers to build a sense of empowerment for their profession.

Still, there appears to be little evidence of teacher educators and trainers seeking to combine both views. The one related to discrete teaching skills and language competence and the other connected to aspects such as teachers' own theories, experiences, and reflective practice. Some exceptions might be studies conducted by Ferri & Ortiz (2007), and Jerez (2008). This first focused on the design of a holistic professional development program for elementary school English teachers in Colombia, which sought to integrate strategies directed to improve teachers' target language and reflective practice based on principles of theme-based instruction while the second aimed to examine teachers' attitudes towards reflective teaching in the context of a professional development program. Jerez (2008) additionally contributed to enhance teachers' awareness on the importance of reflection, a recognized axiom within language teacher education (Burton, 2009), and helped them to develop skills such as working with peers, sharing ideas and thinking critically about their teaching process.

From an international perspective, various research initiatives have also been conducted in regards to the training and development of language teachers. Debreli (2011), for example, examined the use of diaries to track whether or not student teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning English as a foreign language would change throughout a pre-service training program in a university in Cyprus. The study revealed that even though diaries were successful in eliciting and tracking student teachers' beliefs, another instrument may be needed to check the internal consistency of participants' statements. Okan and Taraf (2013) looked at the integration of blogs into a second language teacher education program with the purpose of evaluating their effectiveness in preparing future teachers for their profession and improving their ICT skills. Findings indicated that participants held positive views towards the use of blogs as they were willing to create their own, and follow and make use of ELT blogs in their future career. Interestingly, an overall conclusion presented by the authors and seemingly related to a discrete teaching skill in teacher education and training, is that learning how to use technology should be an essential component of teacher education. Chou (2010) also investigated the effect of incorporating collaborative action research into an in-service teacher training program in Taiwan. He found that implementing this type of research in an in-service teacher training program contributes to teachers' knowledge construction, helps them gain practical teaching practices and builds up their confidence in teaching English.

In short, the problem has been that many initiatives for teacher education, training, and development in Colombia and in several other countries have focused almost exclusively on aspects such as subject matter knowledge and pedagogical and methodological skills while others have emphasized aspects like research skills, reflective teaching and teachers' personal theories. It follows that most of these initiatives have seemingly overlooked the possibility of integrating all these aspects in their schemes for teachers' training and professional development. In this essay I claim that a balance ought to be promoted between a micro and a macro approach to English language teacher education (Richards, 1990) in order to provide teachers with opportunities for the training of discrete teaching classroom skills together with chances to develop high inference, reflective and reasoning skills derived from theoretical foundations and teachers' personal experiences.

These micro and macro approaches to teacher education may offer the necessary skills to the preparation, training, and development of English teachers. It is in the light of these skills that I urge teacher educators and trainers to consider the benefits of this balanced approach and to seek ways to provide the needy Colombian English teachers with the discrete teaching skills to do their job along with the reflective and reasoning skills often derived from doing their job (experiences, self-evaluation, decision making, awareness raising, personal beliefs), and the theoretical constructs typical of initial teacher education.

Although the balanced approach suggested here may be relevant for both Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and for In-Service Teacher Education (INSET), it is my goal to promote this approach for training and updating INSET language teachers. In such case, alternatives for in-service teacher education can take the form of a university teacher education program, a qualification course (whether short or long length), or any other alternative aimed to further prepare or update in-service language teachers and designed by a university or college, an international organization or any other higher education institution compromised with teachers' education and professional development.

To better understand the purpose of this argument, theories of several authors who have made invaluable contributions to the understanding of the field of teaching and teacher education need to be considered. First, the seemingly different but interlocking relationship between

training, education, and development; second, Freeman's (1996) views of teaching and the role they play in teacher education; and finally, the two approaches for second language teacher education proposed by Richards (1990) in terms of how they may constitute a balanced approach and therefore might generate more effective outcomes in English language teacher education in Colombia. Implications and conclusions for language teacher education in the Colombian context will be drawn which may be relevant to other teacher education contexts.

Teacher Education Strategies: Training vs. Development

The importance of permanent development and continuous updating of language teachers has been recognized by many authors (Williams, 2009; Vo and Nguyen, 2010; Pomphrey, 2004; Wallace, 1991) in different settings and through a variety of schemes and alternatives. It is within those settings where words like training, development and education are still being used interchangeably in reference to how to educate individuals in becoming teachers. Lawes (2002, p. 40) argues that "we *train* teachers to be skilled classroom technicians, albeit reflective; we *educate* them to be equally reflective, critical, autonomous professionals with sound theoretical knowledge". However, Freeman (1989, p. 37) advocates that the term education is preserved as the superordinate; that is, as an umbrella term that is concerned with the learning and teaching of language teaching. Whereas teacher training and teacher development are used to describe the strategies by which teachers are educated.

Thus, training is seen as direct intervention on aspects of teaching that might need improvement and that can often be worked within a specified period of time. Freeman (1989, p. 39) observes that the aspects of teaching that are seen as "trainable" are discrete chunks, usually based on knowledge or skills, which can be isolated, practiced, and ultimately mastered. This strategy of training is based on the premise that if teachers can master those discrete skills and knowledge they will be more effective.

On the other hand, development is part of a more holistic approach since it emphasizes more complex aspects of teaching. The aim is to raise teacher's awareness to identify and deal with the different situations that might occur in the teaching setting. According to Cárdenas, the teacher educator helps to clarify and expand,

rather than intervenes in the teachers' ways of doing things and seeks to lead the teacher to implement change and to see reflection and refinement as essential to his profession (cited in Vergara et al, 2007, p. 181).

Although these strategies share the same general goal (to help in the preparation and education of teachers), they offer two apparently different perspectives to teacher education, from the knowledge and skills to do the job (training) and from the attitude and awareness to achieve change in doing the job (development). However, their value lies in that they complement each other and highly contribute to shape the way teachers learn to do and understand what they do in their classroom practice. It follows that a balanced approach to teacher education needs to include both of these strategies if effective outcomes are desired. Further to this, it is imperative to consider some views of teaching which certainly overlap with the teacher education strategies described above.

Views of teaching and teacher education

In considering the question of "what do teachers know in order to do what they do?" Freeman (1996, p. 90) presents three views of teaching: a behavioral view, a cognitive view, and an interpretivist view. The behavioral view describes teaching as doing, in terms of teachers' and learners' behaviors in the classroom. In this view, teacher behaviors are connected to results in students' learning process. In teacher education, this corresponds to an attempt to train teachers to imitate a series of teaching behaviors that have proved to be successful in many other contexts. It is part of a micro approach, in which effective language teaching is linked to the adequate use of teaching skills and strategies in the language classroom. Freeman (1996) suggests that it is not enough to see teaching as doing and leads us to consider it from a cognitive view as well.

This cognitive view recognizes teachers as affective and thinking beings. Thus, not only do teachers know the behaviors but they are also able to articulate this knowledge in order to cope with unexpected and complex situations that arise in the actual teaching practice. Freeman (2002, p. 11) claims that 'we [as teachers] need to understand that articulation and reflection are reciprocal processes. One needs the words to talk about what one does, and in using those words one can see it more clearly'. Additionally, this cognitive view considers what teachers think and the decisions they make prior to their lessons (pre-active

decisions) and what they think about as they are teaching those lessons (interactive decisions) (Calderhead, 1988). In teacher education, this view offers teachers in training the possibility to plan and change plans based on their implicit theories and assumptions, beliefs, maxims (Richards, 1998), and perceptions of the complexities of the teaching situation.

The third view of teaching is the interpretivist view. Here, the action and thinking are accompanied by the interpretation of the context. In other words, this is a more complex and integral view in which teachers know the behaviors, are cognitively and affectively engaged with what goes on in class and know what to do in complex contexts displaying interpretive knowledge. As Berliner (1988) asserts:

> Classrooms and students are not just settings for implementing ideas; they are frameworks of interpretation that teachers use for knowing: knowing when and how to act and react, what information to present or explain and how, when to respond or correct individual students, how to assess or reformulate what they have just taught, and so on. (cited in Freeman, 1996, p. 98)

This view is part of a macro approach to teacher education as defined by Richards (1990), which seeks to involve participants in more in-depth processes such as exploring personal theories, awareness raising, self-inquiry, and reflective practice. From another perspective, Johnson (2009, p. 12) claims that learning to teach has been viewed as learning *about* teaching in teacher education programs, observing and practicing teaching in the practicum, and, eventually, developing effective teaching behaviors usually in the first years of teaching.

All these views give evidence of the complexity of teaching. It appears that knowing how to teach involves more than just following prescribed routines. It also requires thinking over the decisions that teachers make in class, and interpreting and reflecting on the interplay of the multitude of factors that seem to govern teacher education. However, by considering these views, it is possible to see much of what is expected from teachers and teacher educators. In the same line of thought, it is relevant to exa-mine two approaches to foreign language teacher education presented by Richards (1990), which might offer broader insights into the possible design and implementation of English language teacher education initiatives in Colombia.

Approaches to Second Language Teacher Education

The micro and macro approaches to teacher education help to illustrate what teacher educators should go through when designing their teaching training courses or development programs. On the one hand, the micro approach to teacher education considers teaching in terms of its most visible characteristics and implies observing what teachers do in the classroom (Richards, 1990). This approach considers teacher education as training and is also related to the behavioral view of teaching presented by Freeman (1996). It is more concerned with knowledge of the topic to be taught, and of the methodology for teaching it (Woodward, 1991). Teachers are usually taught discrete teaching skills (e.g. giving instructions, monitoring students' work, setting up group work, checking understanding, and praising students' work) and their effectiveness relies on mastering a repertoire of those skills, abilities and knowledge. Training courses frequently offer teachers opportunities to interact with teaching experiences in order to help them develop those skills necessary to successful teaching. Richards (1990, p. 14) lists simulations, workshops, microteaching, teaching assistantships, case studies, and tutorials, as possible tasks or activities for this approach.

On the other hand, the macro approach to teacher education is one in which teachers are offered opportunities to "focus on clarifying and elucidating the concepts and thinking processes that guide effective language teaching" (Richards, 1990, p. 14). It entails making more complex assumptions and decisions that often go beyond what can be openly noticed as quantifiable teaching processes. This approach considers teacher education as development and is also related to the interpretivist view of teaching presented by Freeman (1996). In order to develop those high-inference skills, the teacher must be involved in tasks or activities such as current teaching, teaching practice, self and peer observation, and seminars and discussion activities (Richards 1990, p. 15).

Equally important here are the kinds of knowledge that influence teacher's practice and understanding of teaching as stated by Richards (1998). On the one hand is the knowledge connected to curricular goals, lesson plans, instructional activities, materials, tasks, and teaching techniques. On the other hand is that knowledge connected to teachers' implicit theories of teaching, for instance their personal and subjective philosophy and

their understanding of what constitutes good teaching. These two kinds of knowledge are clearly linked to the two dimensions of micro and macro skills and in the same way should constitute an overall goal in teacher education.

Implications for English Language Teacher Education in Colombia

The balanced approach here promoted may have many implications for the way English language teachers should be trained and educated; however, it is my purpose to focus on only two that I consider to be of the utmost importance. First, a careful revision of the curriculum and syllabus of teacher education programs and courses should be sought in order to ensure exposure to the micro and macro skills discussed. Second, teacher educators need to raise trainees' awareness of the fact that there is more to language teaching than just knowing the subject matter and having a sound command of pedagogical and methodological skills.

In relation to the first implication, the contents, methodology, and assessment of teacher training and development courses and programs must provide opportunities for participants to develop their micro skills. These are the most trainable skills in language teaching, those that involve understanding basic concepts and strategies, such as learning how to use effective strategies to open a lesson, how to use group activities in a lesson, using effective questioning techniques, giving learners' feedback on performance, using classroom aids and resources (use of videos, an electronic board) (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 3). These are activities that, at first glance, are essential to teach a language lesson, and therefore are initially introduced as part of the foundations in English language teacher education. However, opportunities to develop participants' macro skills should also be considered. These are skills that tend to facilitate teachers' understanding of teaching and of themselves as teachers. They usually require observing various perspectives of a teacher's practice as a starting point for reflection, reasoning, and self-evaluation. For instance, understanding how the process of English teacher development occurs, how the teacher's roles change depending on the learners he has, understanding the kinds of decision making that occur during lessons, the different teaching styles and determining learners' views of classroom activities (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 4). These activities are connected to the teacher's

'mental lives' and represent the 'hidden side of teaching' (Freeman, 2002). Thus, they frequently go unnoticed and are not as visible or easily assimilated as the micro skills. For all that, it is of paramount importance to see the involvement of these high inference skills together with the lower order or micro skills when training and preparing English language teachers.

The second implication for this balanced approach highlights the relevance of raising teachers' awareness on the fact that there is more to language teaching than just knowing the subject matter and having a sound command of teaching skills. In fact, Richards (1998, p. 1) proposes six essential domains as part of the knowledge base for second language teacher education: theories of teaching, teaching skills, communication skills, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical reasoning and decision making, and contextual knowledge whereas Roberts (1998, p. 96) also presents what would be a prototype of a teacher education program of a similar nature, including six areas as well, the content knowledge of the language, theoretical knowledge about language structure and use, contextual knowledge, pedagogical skills, immediate enabling skills and attitudes for development after qualification. It is by raising consciousness on these aspects that teacher educators can facilitate teachers' professional development and subsequently generate better classroom practices.

Additionally, teachers need to realize that their own beliefs, images, decisions, theories and models of teaching usually play a significant role in language teaching and that they should value those as much as they do the theories and principles they find in textbooks and ELT materials often produced abroad. Teachers are in possession of a vast amount of knowledge of their teaching setting and the circumstances of their students which put them at an advantage in relation to the authors of many global ELT coursebooks. The teaching of English is going through a process of great transformations as the phenomenon of globalization inevitably contributes to its spread at all levels and in many cultural settings. It follows that Colombia English teachers should commit themselves to develop their own local methodologies inspired by their students' interests and needs, and the characteristics of their teaching context (Macías, 2010). Teachers should stop considering locally produced course books and materials as disadvantageous when comparing them to those produced by large North American or British publishing houses. Additionally,

globalization and the spread of English raise the need for second language teacher education programs to engage teachers in an exploration of the political status of English in today's world, the role it can play in maintaining positions of privilege and inequality, and the role the notion of 'native speaker' has played in TESOL theory and practice (Richards, 2009).

Conclusions

In this essay, I have provided relevant theoretical views and considerations to think of a balanced approach of micro and macro skills as a solid alternative to language teacher education and training in Colombia. It was also my goal to argue that alternatives for teacher training and development should offer a more eclectic and complementary view in the light of the many approaches available today. It is imperative to give teachers, whether at pre-service or in-service stages of development, opportunities to:

Engage in self-reflection and evaluation; identify their areas of strength and weakness; develop specialized knowledge and skills about teaching; develop curiosity and interest in many aspects of teaching; expand their knowledge base about research, theory, and issues in teaching; take on new roles and responsibilities such as supervisor, mentor teacher, teacher-researcher, or materials writer; and develop involvement with professional organizations. (Richards & Farrell, 2005)

Since these activities will allow them to have not only a strong initial formation but a positive attitude towards permanent professional development.

Constant comparisons have contributed to increase the gap between the focus of different approaches for teacher education, resulting more in overlooking the fact that most of them seek to achieve the same goal – that of preparing teachers to do their job. Perhaps, what needs to be done is to deconstruct the traditional views or paradigms and to think of a way of reconstructing a more balanced approach to teacher education which might render more effective results to the English language teaching process in Colombia. However, a balanced approach to teacher education should involve low order, micro skills and high order, macro skills if effective goals are expected. Likewise, conceptual frameworks for the design and implementation of teacher education courses and development programs should move away from the traditional master- apprentice

model towards a practice which aims to enable teachers to analyze their context and needs more critically and devise their own local methodologies (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Colombian in-service English teachers require training courses and development programs that can cover a variety of micro and macro skills and therefore seek the inclusion of elements such as reflection, implicit theories and personal experiences that have been, at least seemingly, absent from Colombian foreign language teachers' knowledge base.

Accordingly, more thought needs to be devoted to finding the adequate balance and making it explicit in the design and implementation of training and development courses and programs offered to Colombian foreign language teachers. There is also a need for further research on the distinctiveness of Colombian foreign language teacher education as well as further initiatives to enhance current frameworks with constant exposure to theory and practice aimed to have a more balanced approach. Considering alternatives around this balanced approach can enable us to look critically at our current teacher education practices and to design teacher education initiatives which help overcome the theory-practice divide so often criticized with many teacher education schemes (Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2012, p. 188).

Much has been discussed of training and development and how they seemingly serve different purposes when the tendency should be that "it is more useful to see training and development as two complementary components of a fully rounded teacher education" (Head & Taylor, 1997, p. 9). Additionally, whether it is a short or a long training course or a full university teacher education program, the issue of sustainability will always be a constant concern for teacher educators and will often require permanent supervision and research. Finally, English language teacher education alternatives should seek to provide participants with adequate contexts to facilitate social interaction, sharing of reflections and experiences as well as to offer frequent feedback from tutors, learners and peers in regards to their teaching performance at both the micro and the macro skills levels.

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