

Tomorrow's EFL teacher educators

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ABSTRACT

Teacher education programs are an important alternative to raise standards in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). However, there are few studies that have explored the roles of teacher educators in this setting. Three main research questions guided this study: What actions have teachers taken to attain their professional objectives as EFL teachers? What experience have they had in professional development programs? What are the characteristics of an ideal teacher education program? This paper reports the findings concentrating on the ideal characteristics of an EFL teacher educator analyzing the testimonies of teachers from public and private schools. The study used four focus groups sessions and a questionnaire as the main data collection techniques. The results suggest that issues such as knowledge of local realities, broad experience in teaching EFL, command of the language, and experience in research are identified as the most desirable characteristics of EFL teacher educators.

Key words: Teacher preparation- EFL- professional development- In-service training Teacher educators

RESUMEN

Los programas de formación de docentes son una alternativa para elevar los estándares en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE). Sin embargo, hay pocos estudios que hayan explorado los papeles de los formadores de docentes en este contexto. Tres preguntas orientaron este estudio: ¿Qué acciones han tomado los docentes para lograr sus metas profesionales como docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera? ¿Qué experiencia han tenido en los programas de desarrollo profesional? ¿Cuáles son las características ideales de un programa de formación de docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera? Este artículo presenta los resultados concentrándose en las características ideales de un formador de docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera a través del análisis de los testimonios de docentes de colegios públicos y privados. Para el estudio se utilizaron como técnicas de recolección de los datos cuatro sesiones de grupos focales y un cuestionario. Los resultados sugieren que aspectos como conocimiento de la realidad local, amplia experiencia en la enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera, dominio del idioma y experiencia en investigación fueron identificados como las características más esperadas de los formadores de docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras claves: Formación de docentes- Inglés como lengua extranjera
- Capacitación docente- Formadores de docentes

INTRODUCTION

The need for defining “teacher educators” was highlighted by Ducharme (1986) as an issue that may have caused the lack of research on the specificity of this population. Although there seems to be some implicit agreement on the fact that teacher educators are those who are in charge of professional courses in teacher preparation curricula, a broader definition is needed. Teacher educators may be the professionals that educate teachers in pre-service as well as in-service professional development programs, and who help them meet the demands imposed by new trends in foreign language teaching and learning.

Besides having a strong mastery of English in all the skills and in different socio-cultural contexts, EFL teachers should possess the ability to interact with native speakers on contemporary issues. Furthermore, they should have a strong background in content areas, knowledge about pedagogical and

learning theories, and training in the use of new technologies for information and communication (Kreeft Payton, 1997). In EFL teaching, teachers face seven challenges: improving their language proficiency, being prepared to teach in diverse contexts, teaching with and without resources, implementing classroom-based research, having access to professional development, networking, and educating teacher educators (González, 2000). Teachers may work autonomously or be involved in professional development programs with other colleagues to attain higher standards. Although we all agree on the importance of teacher education alternatives, there is not sufficient documentary analysis reporting experiences in EFL teacher education. Similarly, there is still little research evaluating the content, theoretical framework, roles and preparation of educators in professional development programs. Three main research questions framed our analysis: What actions have you taken to attain your professional objectives as an EFL teacher? What experience have you had in professional development programs? What are the characteristics of an ideal teacher education program? This paper concentrates on the EFL teachers' beliefs about the characteristics that an ideal teacher education program should have.

EDUCATING EFL TEACHERS

EFL teachers' needs may be classified in three domains: as a worker, as an instructor, and as a learner (González *et al.* 2002). The authors conclude that although the three domains are equally important, a good number of EFL teachers tend to search for programs that improve their skills in the last two fields. Yet, teacher education programs may appear to be scarcely available to EFL teachers. According to some teachers, the majority of options may be expensive, long, too theoretical, and quite distant from teachers' real classrooms (González *et al.* 2002). In Colombia, the efforts to construct standards and guidelines for teacher education have been made by individual institutions¹. There is need for a joint effort to administer the teacher education programs using approaches discussed between teachers and teacher educators. A pos-

1 The first effort to create a national network of universities that have foreign language teacher education programs was held at Universidad de Antioquia on April 5, 2003. Thirteen universities expressed their interest in working collaboratively in the search for national policies in foreign language teacher education.

sible framework for the job of teacher educators is contained in the documents of the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE, 2001). This American organization is devoted to the improvement and accreditation of teacher education programs. It states that “standards of practice for teacher educators should represent agreements about what teacher educators should think about, know, and be able to do”. According to the Association, the principles that should rule the tasks for teacher educators are:

1. “Model professional teaching practices that demonstrate knowledge, skills, and attitudes reflecting the best available practices in teacher education.
2. Inquire into and contribute to one or more areas of scholarly activity that are related to teaching, learning, and/or teacher education.
3. Inquire systematically into, and reflect on, their own practice and demonstrate commitment to lifelong professional development.
4. Provide leadership in developing, implementing, and evaluating programs for educating teachers that embrace diversity, and are rigorous, relevant, and grounded in accepted theory, research, and best practice.
5. Collaborate regularly and in significant ways with representatives of schools, universities, state education agencies, professional associations, and communities to improve teaching, learning, and teacher education.
6. Serve as informed, constructively critical advocates for high-quality education for all students, public understanding of educational issues, and excellence and diversity in the teaching and teacher education professions.
7. Contribute to improving the teacher education profession.”

Although these tasks should be the result of agreements, as was mentioned above, there has not been a concern for universities or institutions that provide alternatives in teacher education in EFL settings. In the case of Colombia, there is little documentation of how we assume the challenges of improving EFL teachers’ work.

THE STUDY

Participants

Thirty-one EFL teachers from private and public schools from the Metropolitan Area of Medellín participated in the study. Eleven female teachers (age range 25-54, average age 40) and seven male teachers (age range 29-44, average age 36) from public schools were our informants. The number of teachers from private schools was thirteen, 9 female (age range 24-45 average, age 31) and 4 male (age range 26-36, average age 32). The criteria used to invite the teachers to participate in the study were the following: (1) to be a graduate from a foreign language teaching program; (2) to be teaching English currently in a private or public school; (3) have participated in professional development programs. The majority of the participants were cooperating teachers in the Practicum in foreign language teaching at Universidad de Antioquia.² Another group was composed of graduates from our teacher education program. Using the snow ball technique, i.e. one teacher recommends two teachers, and these two teachers recommend two more, we obtained a convenience sample (Cohen and Manion, 1985). All of them are nonnative speakers of English that have been in the profession from three up to twenty-eight years. The average number of years of experience for public school teachers was fifteen and for private school teachers was six.

DATA COLLECTION

Teachers were invited to Universidad de Antioquia to an informal gathering in which the techniques were applied. A consent form was signed to inform them about the conditions of the study, the access to their testimonies, and obtain their permission to use the data and later keep it only for archival purposes. Data were collected through focus groups discussions and a questionnaire (See appendix). Focus groups are held to understand how people feel and think about a program, service or issue that is of importance (Debus,

2 Cooperating teachers are public school teachers that support student-teachers in their Practicum in the undergraduate program. Cooperating teachers act as critical friends in the process of teacher preparation in the schools in which student-teachers are

1988). Four focus groups sessions were held, to explore the teachers' needs in professional development programs, their experiences in the courses available in Medellín, and their views of ideal teacher education programs. Data obtained was validated through two different focus groups sessions with the same category of teachers. A questionnaire was designed as a validation technique to find similarities and differences in the teachers' perceptions of the educators' characteristics.

DATA ANALYSIS

The focus groups sessions were audio recorded and, at the same time, three observers took notes about the participants' nonverbal language and group dynamics in order to keep track of important information that could not be audiotaped. The moderator took notes during the session to provide a summary of the most important issues addressed in the discussions. This summary was read to the participants to validate the data. Sessions were transcribed using regular orthography. Pseudonyms were used to protect the teachers' identity. Categories of ideal EFL teacher educators' characteristics were constructed during the reading of the transcripts using the grounded approach (Freeman, 1998). Emerging categories were compared to the descriptions of the experiences in training programs. Special attention was paid to the accounts of the successful teacher educators to construct the final categories presented in this paper. In this ethnography, the interpretive approach of the data was used as the main method of analysis (Nunan, 1997).

RESULTS

In the search for professional development programs, teachers give great importance to the teacher educator who will accompany them in their learning process. EFL teachers believe that a good teacher educator is not simply someone that speaks English very well because he/she is a native speaker. They argue that many other characteristics are required to help teachers grow professionally. Among the main characteristics demanded by the EFL profession, we can mention:

1. Knowledge of local realities: This issue was identified as the most important characteristic of a good teacher educator. Sharing his/her knowledge

and experience with peer teachers who have undergone the same difficulties gives some extra value to the work of a well trained educator. The construction of a postmethod pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 1994) claims for particularity as an essential component (Kumaravadivelu, 2002). In this approach, pedagogy must be sensitive to the particular conditions of the sociocultural milieu in which the teaching and learning take place. The same conditions should apply to teacher education.

When commenting on the ideal teacher education program, Nancy, a teacher in a public high school, states that local teacher educators have much more strength. She emphasizes the fact that knowledge of our particular settings is very valid as qualification for a teacher educator. She says,

“Here [in Colombia] we also have well trained people to teach these courses. I would say, WELL TRAINED (her emphasis) . . . there are also very interesting experiences to be shared”

Many teachers insist on having separate training programs in which public and private schools are not mixed. They believe that the two settings need to be treated as two separate worlds. Nancy, highlights that her work conditions are very different from those in private schools (González *et al.* 2000). As a consequence, teacher education programs should be specific to each setting. Her opinion about the specialized training for her particular reality is:

“It is great because when we have the same situation, the same characteristics, large classes, many students... but private schools have small classes... when we share with private... school teachers, they have different situations...”

Carlos, a private school teacher, agrees on the need to have separate programs for public and private school teachers. He acknowledges the many differences that both contexts face and claims for specific training. The most evident difference is the students' social class and standard of living. His students possess many advantages that public school students do not have. He says,

“The possibilities for teachers in private and public schools are different.

Private school students go easily to the United States once a year... They have cable TV with thirty, fifty channels... Their parents are professionals that speak English..”

2. Command of the language: Having courses taught in English is seen by the teachers as a prerequisite for high standards in the program. The language proficiency of the teacher educator is an important issue. Some teachers believe that being a native speaker is a condition *sine qua non* for good teacher educators. For others, being a native speaker is secondary because a good command of English is enough to communicate ideas and share experiences. The native vs. non native dichotomy has been addressed in the profession and in the literature quite recently. The labeling of the language teacher as one or the other may not be as clear as it looks (Kachru and Nelson, 1996). This distinction has created division among teachers as well as researchers including issues such as the acknowledgment of the difference, the reasons for stating that difference, the status of both speakers, and the practical implications that difference may bring (Liu, 1999; Maum 2002). Not many administrators and teachers are aware of the new paradigm offered to the profession by the concept of World Englishes (Kachru, 1992). In many EFL settings the dichotomy native vs. non native is still evident. Being a native speaker may have more power implications than in ESL settings as untrained native speakers may be preferred to trained non native speakers because of their presumable greater knowledge of the language and the culture. Besides, they tend to be considered as the only models to imitate. Out of the thirty-one teachers that participated in the study, three insisted on the fact that a native speaker meets their idea of the ideal teacher educator.

Referring to the language component for the teacher educator, Maria says,

“He /she must be a native speaker, someone that was born in the United States or England that comes to teach us a course... If someone comes to train us it is because he/she is truly someone trained to do so... It would be great to have the experience that someone from abroad comes and brings other strategies”

It is interesting to note that for this teacher being a native speaker may

automatically qualify him/her as a teacher educator. She did not identify other characteristics as particularly important in the roles assumed by the teacher educator.

Isabel comments on the fact that some institutions hire Colombian teachers with good command of English instead of native speakers to save money. According to her, non native speakers with good command of the language are not as good as a native speaker.

“Some institutions may offer very good professional development programs because they have native speaker personnel. They have very good knowledge and many adequate means to provide a good training...”

She suggests having native speakers invited to immersion programs in Colombia. Through this modality, several EFL teachers could have the language experience instead of going to an English speaking country. This way, the training would be much less expensive for them.

Some teachers recognize the difficulty in having native speakers as teacher educators in Colombia. They are aware of the domestic sociopolitical problems that make people fear coming to work in the country. Likewise, they know that having a work permit and a contract may be not easy for native speakers as many of them do not fulfill the requirements of the educational system. As a way to guarantee high quality in the linguistic input presented in the professional programs, they believe that non native speaker educators must spend some time in an English speaking country. This experience qualifies them as good informants of the target language they teach.

Some teachers do not consider that being a native of the target language is a requirement for being a good teacher educator. They do not perceive a one to one relationship between being a native speaker and being a good teacher educator. Osvaldo believes that there are other characteristics important to teachers. He highlights the fact that having a strong accent does not interfere with the academic qualifications of a good teacher educator.

“Being a native speaker is not a sine qua non condition to be a good teacher educator. He/she can not be anybody that speaks the language. It must be someone that has some strong knowledge... I don't think that for the sake of being

a native speaker and having a good native accent, someone knows more than a teacher that has a strong Spanish accent like us, but that knows a lot”.

3. Broad experience in teaching EFL: teaching English in different settings and across different ages is claimed as an element that provides teacher educators with more trustworthiness. One of the main concerns expressed by teachers in professional development programs is their lack of peer learning relations. The educator seems to be well informed of theories and methodologies but he/she is often very distant from the reality of English classrooms. Teachers believe that teacher educators who have high academic qualifications may not be efficient in their work unless they have vast experience in teaching EFL to different settings.

Carmen expresses her concern about how insufficient may be having higher degrees for being a good teacher educator. She asserts,

“Teacher educators cannot be distant from our reality in terms of their knowledge of students... a very graduate person (sic), restrained only to the university...a teacher educator that has not been in touch with youngsters, that has not managed teenagers... It may be wonderful to have a scientific or learning experience with him/her, but we cannot have it as a tangible reality... It is only through experience that we know if a student is lying, if he/she is telling a lie, if he/she elude the teacher.... no magician can foretell that”.

Marcela, a high school teacher, attended a training course for elementary school teachers aiming to broaden her teaching repertoire. The teacher educator assigned to the program was a university professor with vast experience and knowledge. However, he did not focus the course to the learning process of children. He chose material for university students taking a Methods course, not for regular teachers. She claims that teacher educators should be able to adapt their knowledge and experience to the different needs of the teachers saying,

“[As a teacher educator] One has to level oneself to the group of teachers. If they are from elementary school, I am in elementary school. Then, I go to higher levels... [The teacher educator] believed he was deified... It should

not have been like that... We told him so many times, but he said "I am the boss"..."

4. EXPERIENCE IN RESEARCH

Doing research is an academic component of many graduate programs at the master's level and it is mandatory for doctoral programs. EFL teachers value the training of educators who have participated in studies that explore their school environments and create knowledge in the discipline. They would like to learn about research doing research with more experienced and well trained colleagues.

Carmen stresses the importance of having research experience on local problems. She states,

"It is quite desirable to have teacher educators that at least do research with ordinary people... He/she must be deeply involved... not too much scientific knowledge, but practical and realistic training..."

Elizabeth recognizes the importance of having research experience for teacher educators, but calls for a greater focus on teachers' actual needs. She States,

"It is very easy to find brilliant people in the field of research, but they do not know how to focus that research on which is our needs and how they are going to help us fulfill those needs".

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

EFL teachers believe that teacher educators, as agents of social change, must display complex abilities. The first important aspect to bear in mind is that teacher educators are not perceived anymore as "external experts" who preach how teachers must teach. There is also an interesting change in the teachers' opinion about the presence of native speakers in the profession. The informed nonnative speaker that displays a good level of language proficiency is seen as a more effective teacher educator. EFL teachers would like to see

their educators as highly knowledgeable individuals, but mainly, as peer teachers who are familiar with local realities.

Under this new perspective, graduate teacher education programs should value the experience that the future teacher educator brings from his/her classroom. This background knowledge should be recognized, systematized, and validated to give sense to the theory learned in the preparation phase. They should also emphasize the language training so that teachers may have the best language level they can afford. Having better language proficiency may represent also access to scholarships to study abroad. These opportunities will allow them to gain knowledge, acquire research experience, have close contact with the target culture they teach, and improve their language proficiency.

A second main issue is the search for new alternatives in the education of EFL teacher educators. The construction of new agendas for professional development should be based on agreements emerging from reflecting on and examining our everyday practices, those of EFL teachers and those of EFL teacher educators. Joint efforts among universities are required to achieve this goal. Colombian teacher educators are called to get together beyond seminars and congresses. We should all share insights and concerns through the exchange of publications and experiences in the preparation of teachers. The most effective possibility could be to be involved in research studies that include teacher educators from different universities and different regions so that we can have a clearer picture of the national realities. Once we have a deeper understanding of our teaching conditions, we can propose the agenda for the construction of national standards and guidelines in the education of teacher educators. Tomorrow's EFL teacher educators are to be Colombian teachers well prepared to meet the challenges of the present and the future.

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APPENDIX

GUÍA DE PREGUNTAS PARA GRUPOS FOCALES

1. ¿Si yo fuera un genio y pudiera concederle todo lo que usted necesita en este momento, qué pediría? Escriba las cuatro necesidades mayores para usted. Tiene un minuto. (se da espacio para la lectura de dichas necesidades)
2. Si hablamos de su trabajo actual, cuáles serían esas cuatro necesidades mayores?. Organícelas de mayor a menor en orden de importancia
3. ¿Qué medidas ha tomado para suplir esas necesidades?.

ELT Conference, Agosto 11 de 2000

Universidad de Antioquia, Escuela de Idiomas

Apreciado Colega:

Queremos conocer sus impresiones frente a algunos elementos que han surgido del análisis de la información preliminar de la investigación desarrollada por este grupo sobre Necesidades de capacitación de los docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera vinculados a instituciones de carácter formal y no formal en el área metropolitana de Medellín. Hasta la fecha hemos trabajado con cuatro grupos de docentes. La información suministrada por usted nos permitirá validar las respuestas obtenidas y será utilizada sólo para propósitos de la investigación.

1. ¿Con cuáles de estas palabras asociaría usted el término Capacitación Docente?. Elija tres de las siguientes posibilidades:

Institución donde labora	<input type="checkbox"/> Pública	<input type="checkbox"/> Privada			
Nivel	<input type="checkbox"/> Primaria	<input type="checkbox"/> Bachillerato	<input type="checkbox"/> Centro de Idiomas	<input type="checkbox"/> Universidad	<input type="checkbox"/> Clases particulares

Desarrollo Profesional

Ascenso en el escalafón

Reconocimiento social

Aburrimiento

Trabajo extra

Pérdida de tiempo

Incremento salarial

Oportunidades

Contactos personales

Compartir vivencias

Teoría

Solución de problemas

Estudio Actualización
Descontextualización Monotonía

Otras palabras

2. Los siguientes factores han sido reportados por los docentes como decisivos en la escogencia de un programa de capacitación. Clasifíquelos en orden de importancia de 1 a 3

Factores que intervienen en la selección	1. Muy importante	2. Medianamente importante	3. Poco importante
El tema central			
El horario			
La duración			
El precio			
El numero de créditos que otorgue			
El sitio en que se lleve a cabo			
La(s) persona(s) que lo orienta(n)			

¿Qué otros factores determinan su decisión? _____

3. Los siguientes temas han sido propuestos por los participantes como esenciales en un programa de capacitación. Clasifíquelos en orden de importancia de 1 a 3.

¿Cuáles otros temas sugiere para un programa de capacitación? _____

Temas	1. Muy importante	2. Medianamente importante	3. Poco importante
Motivación de los estudiantes a aprender inglés Estrategias de enseñanza del inglés Cursos de inglés avanzado Solución de problemas de disciplina Solución de problemas afectivos de los estudiantes Juegos y dinámicas Investigación en el aula Uso de computadores y multimedia			

4. Escoja la opción que mejor refleje su opinión. Para usted, los programas de capacitación deberían ser diseñados teniendo en cuenta :

- a. La separación de los profesores por sector (público/privado) y el nivel de los estudiantes (primaria/bachillerato/universidad) haciendo programas diferentes para cada grupo.
- b. La combinación de profesores de sectores público y privado de diferentes niveles dentro de un mismo grupo.
- c. La conformación de los grupos de profesores no le parece un factor decisivo en los programas.

5. Escoja la opción que mejor refleje su opinión. Para usted el mejor horario de un programa de capacitación sería:

- a. Durante el horario de trabajo
- b. Fuera del horario de trabajo
- c. Durante los fines de semana
- d. Durante las vacaciones

5. Escoja la opción que mejor refleje su opinión. La duración de un programa de capacitación ideal sería :

- a. Un día
 - b. Una semana
 - c. Un mes
 - d. Un semestre
6. Escoja la opción que mejor refleje su opinión. En caso de que un programa de capacitación requiera pago de su parte, usted:
- a. No lo tomaría.
 - b. Haría un esfuerzo por pagarlo si es un buen programa.
 - c. Lo tomaría si consigue cofinanciación.
7. Escoja la opción que mejor refleje su opinión. El lugar más adecuado para desarrollar la capacitación sería:
- a. Su sitio de trabajo
 - b. Una institución académica cercana al sitio de trabajo
 - c. Un sitio cercano a su hogar
 - d. Un sitio de recreo o de descanso
8. Las siguientes características han sido consideradas como importantes para un orientador de programa de capacitación. Clasifíquelos en orden de importancia de 1 a 3

¿Qué otra característica considera importante?

Tipo de orientador	1. Muy impor-	2. Medianamente importante	3. Poco impor- tante
Que sea hablante nativo(a)			
Que tenga un buen nivel de inglés			
Que sea investigador(a)			
Que tenga experiencia docente			
Que conozca la realidad educativa colombiana			

Sus opiniones son de gran valor para nuestra investigación. Complete la

siguiente información si le gustaría participar en nuestro estudio.

Nombre

Institución donde labora

Teléfono del sitio de trabajo

Teléfono residencia