

Part 2

Pre-Service and In-Service Teacher Training & Learning and Teaching Styles

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MEXICAN TEACHERS' TRAINING EXPERIENCES, PERCEIVED NEEDS AND INTEREST IN INQUIRY-BASED TEACHING

Abstract

The effective implementation of any educational reform is largely dependent on teachers' preparation. In the case of the National English Program in Basic Education (NEPBE), implemented in secondary schools in Mexico by the Secretariat of Public Education in 2009, teacher preparation strategies have been designed by both public and private higher education institutions throughout the country. Most strategies have been designed from the perspective of teacher educators and based on administration needs. Little attention has been given to the views, needs, and interests of teachers. Teachers are required to know how to analyze their learners' needs. However, no attempt is made to understand the teachers' perspectives on their own learning needs. This paper presents the results of a survey that examined the training experiences, perceived training needs, and interest in classroom research of 297 English language teachers of secondary school in northeast Mexico. Results indicated training experiences of teachers were limited to standalone courses. Other training strategies such as mentoring, peer observation, conferences, networking and conducting research, were not common among the teachers. Taking courses and conducting classroom studies were considered as training activities that have a high impact on teaching performance. Contents that were thought that would strengthen their teacher were related to: lesson planning; use of technology; the pedagogical approach of the NEPBE; and knowledge on how to identify students' needs. Little more than half of the participants considered that knowing how to identify and satisfy students' needs was most important for teaching English. A high percentage of teachers reported disposition to learn about inquiry based teaching. These results are the base on which a carefully-planned teacher training program should be designed.

Key words: teacher training; English as a foreign language; secondary school teachers, Mexico

Introduction

Secondary teachers throughout Mexico are faced with the challenge of a curriculum reform. In the case of English language teachers the reform has taken the form of the National English Program for Basic Education (NEPBE), implemented in 2009 and launched in 2010. The purpose of the NEPBE is to prepare students to demonstrate “multilingual and multicultural competencies to successfully respond to the communication challenges of the global world; build a broad view of linguistic and cultural diversity; and demonstrate appreciation for their own and other peoples’ cultures” (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*, 2011, p. 9). The NEPBE will eventually include standards for language teaching and learning; guidelines for materials design, evaluation, certification of language competencies; and criteria for teacher development activities and programs. Four years have passed since the creation of the program and no guidelines or criteria related to the professional development actions that would meet the needs of the program are available yet.

The field of English language teaching (ELT) has developed a variety of strategies to improve the knowledge and abilities of teachers. Strategies fall into one of two strands (Johnson, 2006; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Richards, 2008; Vélez-Rendón, 1998). One strand is focused on the managerial aspects of professionalism; it represents the views of education bureaucracies, teaching organizations, and regulatory bodies. Generally, actions that correspond to this “top down” strand promote short term courses and international certifications. Teachers are trained in the use of the methods promoted by international book publishers and training programs are based on the opinions and intuitions of course designers. Although these actions may have positive effects on teachers’ learning, their top-down approach is disconnected from the teachers’ everyday reality, turning them into consumers of theories and approaches that become irrelevant once the courses and workshops are over.

A second strand of strategies for teacher development focuses on the teachers’ own views of teaching and the processes by which they reflect on their teaching beliefs and practices. The actions taken from this “bottom-up” perspective are long-term and involve helping teachers become autonomous, strategic researchers and decision makers that engage in knowledge-construction activities in collaboration with other members of their communities of practice (Burns, 2000; Crooks, 1997; Freeman & Richards, 1996).

Although there is still no theoretical framework about the way in which teachers learn to teach, how they relate theory to practice, and how they construct their belief systems, there are some notions of how they develop knowledge about teaching. Research conducted in English speaking countries in the past decade have found, for example, that previous experiences as language learners influence their way of teaching in the classroom much more than what they learn in teacher education programs (Freeman, 1999). Studies have also found that although teacher education programs allow them to understand and use some concepts of teaching discourse (Richards, et al, 1996), the readings and discussions they engage in during courses do not always have an impact on what they do in the classroom (Johnson, 1994). Research results also indicate that the actions teachers take and decisions that they make in the classroom are more related to their belief systems and contextual factors

related to administration matters, than with what they learn in certification courses (Burns, 1996).

This study was conducted to obtain information about the training experiences, perceived learning needs, and interest in classroom-research of secondary education English language teachers. The aim was to design a teacher training proposal, based on teachers' realities. Specifically, the study was intended to respond to the following research questions:

1. What are the teachers' previous training experiences?
2. What are the teachers' perceived training needs?
3. To what extent are they interested in inquiry-based teaching?

Research Methods

The Sample

Non-probability, convenience sampling was used; the participants were drawn from the part of the population which was readily available and convenient, which reduced costs and made data collection relatively fast. The participants in the study were 297 secondary English language school teachers in the State of Tamaulipas in Mexico. They taught in 32 municipalities. They were enrolled in English language courses specifically opened for secondary education teachers, offered by the State public university in six cities.

The participants were 70% female and 30% male teachers. Their ages were mostly (92%) in the range between 26 and 55; only a small percentage (8%) were younger than 26 and older than 55. Most of them (79%) had undergraduate degrees, some had master's degrees (15%), and a smaller number had high school or technical studies (6%). The undergraduate degrees were in the field of education (68%) and other fields (32%) such as accounting and engineering. Very few reported having the Teaching Knowledge Test certification (11%) and even less indicated that they held the TOEFL certificate (5%). Almost half of the participants (46%) taught 19 hours or less per week; 54% taught 20 hours or more. 68% had six or more years of teaching experience, while 32% had five years or less. Almost all of the participants (97%) had tenure in their teaching jobs.

Design of the Study

This study used survey methodology. The decision to use a questionnaire was based on its capacity of wide application and its efficiency in terms of researcher time, researcher effort, and financial investment (Dörnyei, 2003). The project included other data collection techniques such as interview, focus group discussion and classroom observation. This report, however, focuses only on part of the data collected by means of the questionnaire.

Instrument

The questionnaire contained one open-ended and forty eight closed-ended questions. The questions were about the teachers' (a) educational and career development, (b) perceived training needs and interests, and (c) attitudes towards inquiry-based teaching. The instrument was written in Spanish to ensure a better comprehension of the items and response options. It was tested three times on samples of 10, 16 and 12 secondary school English language teachers. After every trial, the researchers discussed the appropriateness of the procedures and the

instrument, and questions that were considered unclear or confusing by the participants of the pilot test were corrected.

Procedures

Data were collected in the facilities of the public state university in which the teachers of the Department of Secondary Education of the State Ministry of Education were taking special English language courses. Data collection took four weeks and was conducted by the researchers and three assistants. Teachers were not given a time limit to individually respond to each item. Completing the questionnaire took an average time of 14 minutes. After data were gathered, they were put through the SPSS program. The next step was to calculate frequencies and percentages. The results are presented in the following section.

Results

Results are presented in relation to the research questions they respond to.

1. What are the teachers' training experiences?

To investigate the training experiences of the participants in the study, an item of the questionnaire asked about the activities they had participated in the previous year, and provided a set of options for them to select. The response options were: *courses, conferences, degree programs, peer observation, teacher networking, research and mentoring*. Results indicated that of the 297 teachers, 142 (48%) took courses, and 155 (52%) did not participate in any professional development activity in the previous year. Of the 142 teachers who took courses, 124 (87%) were standalone, non-degree and 18 (13%) were courses that led to a university degree. Other training strategies such as mentoring, peer observation, conferences, networking and conducting research, were not marked by the teachers.

Results seem to indicate that the training experiences of teachers were limited and followed the top-down, *knowledge transmission* model of learning. Teacher training practices that involve autonomy, self-initiative and decision-making were not in the day-to-day social activities in which the teachers got involved.

2. What are the teachers' perceived training needs?

Even though teachers did not participate in a variety of training activities, they valued the impact these activities can have on teaching. Another item requested them to mark the impact of the strategies on a scale that included the categories *none, low, moderate and high*. Results indicated that what they considered to have *high impact on teaching* were: 57 (19%) *taking courses*; 44 (15%) *conducting research*; 34 (11%) *obtaining a degree*; 18 (6%) *networking with other teachers*; 16 (5%) *attending conferences*; 11 (4%) *participating in peer observation*; and 9 (3%) *participating in mentoring activities*.

Although teachers valued taking courses, probably because that is what they do, they also recognized that conducting classroom research could have an impact on their teaching. This may indicate their need to receive guidance and support on how to adopt an inquiry approach to their teaching. Teachers probably require opportunities to better understand how to identify a problem, design an intervention, and evaluate the results of the intervention. Working with a problem-solving perspective in collaboration with other teachers can improve their teaching.

To identify the participants' training interests, a questionnaire item asked what they considered most important for teaching English as a foreign language. Of the 297 teachers, 120 (51%) considered as most important strengthening their professional development to satisfy students' needs; 33 (14%) identifying own strengths and weaknesses; 24 (10%) designing materials; 23 (10%) preparing classes carefully; 14 (6%) reflecting on practice; 12 (5%) interacting with other teachers to find solutions to common problems; and 8 (4%) proposing innovations to the academy.

Roughly, half of the teachers were more interested in satisfying students' needs, which may reflect the high demands that the National English Program for Basic Education is placing on teachers on issues of evaluation. The program specifies that teachers must be ready and able to evaluate the students' competencies before, during and after their educational intervention to teach them according to their needs.

To continue investigating the teachers' needs and interests, the instrument required them to mark the type of knowledge they considered would strengthen their teaching. The options of response included a wide variety of topics; some of them more technical and others more theoretical. Participants were more interested in practical knowledge. The participants marked the following as important to improve their teaching: 72 (25%) lesson planning; 51 (18%) use of technology; 44 (16%) knowledge regarding the pedagogical approach of the NEPBE; 34 (12%) knowledge of how to identify students' needs; 23 (8%) knowledge about teaching strategies; 23 (8%) materials design; 16 (6%) speaking and listening development; 7 (2%) critical thinking; 6 (2%) educational policy; 4 (1%) second language reading and writing; 3 (1%) autonomous learning; and 2 (1%) action research.

Although 68% of the participants had six or more years of teaching experience, 32% had studies in fields not related to education and only 5% had a teaching certification. These could be reasons for the interest of one fourth of the teachers in knowing more about lesson planning. The students' skillful use of technology in comparison with the lack of technology skills of teachers may explain their interest in learning about technology use to strengthen their teaching. Finally, due to the incipient stage in the implementation of the NEPBE, it seems reasonable that some teachers consider that knowing more about the program would strengthen their teaching performance.

3. *To what extent are they interested in inquiry-based teaching?*

Inquiry-based teaching refers to systematic ways of collecting and analyzing evidence from teaching, documenting teaching and learning classroom experiences, and making what is perceived and learned from these processes visible to others. Classroom research can be very helpful when changes in teaching practice are needed. Most teachers, however, do not perceive themselves as researchers and conceive research activities as difficult.

In this study teachers were given a set of statements that expressed views on classroom research. Teachers were asked to evaluate the statements with the use of a scale that included five categories: *strongly agree*, *agree*, *undecided*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*. Teachers had positive views on classroom research. Considering the 297 teachers of the sample, 249 (84%) strongly agreed and agreed with the statement that classroom research can help them in the future; 229 (77%) strongly

agreed and agreed that doing research positions English teaching as a recognized profession; 247 (83%) agreed with the statement that research is necessary for the professional development of EFL teachers; 261 (88%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement that research helps teachers identify and solve teaching problems; 264 (89%) considered that all teachers can learn to do classroom research; 264 (89%) reported that they were interested in acquiring the abilities to do classroom research; and 235 (69%) were interested in doing classroom research.

This disposition to learn about teaching through classroom research can lead to high levels of professional development in the long run, if proper support and guidance is given to teachers. A carefully-planned strategy should be designed to prepare teachers to collect information about students' needs and the results of their teaching on the use of English as a foreign language by their secondary students. Such strategy should involve the use of technology.

Conclusions

EFL teachers should be guided into new and varied ways of professional development, especially those with degrees in fields different from education. Although almost 70% of them had more than five years of teaching experience, some considered important knowing how to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, probably because they are not aware of what they have learned from practice.

Degree and non-degree courses are the only professional development activities that the teachers had engaged in. They seemed aware, however, that classroom research impacts teaching more than degree courses and the majority expressed their interest in developing research abilities. These results suggest that actions to promote more reflective types of professional development could be well accepted. Teachers need to know about and experience other training practices such as peer observation and participation in teachers' networks to improve the results of their teaching.

Further studies regarding the training needs and interests of secondary English language teachers in México could focus on the participants' knowledge about and attitudes toward the National English Program for Basic Education. Information obtained in the incipient stage of the program's implementation could provide more ideas on the specific issues they could investigate in their classrooms.

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