Professional Development of Mexican Secondary EFL Teachers: Views and Willingness to Engage in Classroom Research

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Abstract

The effective implementation of any educational reform is largely dependent on the preparation of teachers. In the case of the National English Program in Basic Education, (NEPBE) implemented in public schools in Mexico in 2009, teacher preparation options have been designed by both public and private higher education institutions in several states of the country. Most options have been based on the needs of teacher trainers and educational administrators, rather than on teachers' needs. This paper presents the partial results of a professional development needs analysis carried out with secondary English language teachers in northeast Mexico. The study examined the teachers' previous professional development experiences; their views on professional development contents and formats; and disposition to engage in inquiry-based professional development. Results indicated that stand-alone and degree courses were the only professional development activities the participants had experienced. Other practices such as mentoring, peer observation, attending conferences, or networking, were unfamiliar to the majority of them. Although most of the teachers considered that training courses had a high impact on teaching, some of them valued the impact of professional development practices that involve autonomy, reflection and collaboration. A high percentage of teachers reported disposition to learn about and engage in classroom research.

Keywords: classroom research, educational reform, language teachers, teacher professional development

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Basic education teachers throughout Mexico face the challenge of a curriculum reform. In the case of teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), the reform was implemented through the National English Program in Basic Education (NEPBE). 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 aim of the program is to achieve, at the completion of K-12 education, a B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference. The program requires a total of 1,060 class hours, and is intended to serve approximately 6.7 million students in 28,000 schools. Briefly, it is based on the view of *language as a social practice* and it focuses on monitoring individual students' linguistic abilities and creating *learning environments* to contextualize language use.

The NEPBE was implemented in 2009 for pre- and elementary education and in 2011 for secondary education. Throughout these years, no guidelines or criteria related to the professional development of teachers have been made available. Both public and private higher education institutions in different federal states of the country have offered professional development options. However, most options have been based on the needs of teacher trainers and educational administrators. Little attention has been given to the views and interests of teachers.

Professional development of basic education teachers is a hot issue at present in Mexico. After twenty-five years, the leader of the National Union of Education workers, with 1.2 million members, was arrested on corruption charges last year. The wide-spread practice in the Union of inheritance or sale of teaching jobs is now forbidden; access and progress in the teaching career must be made by means of merit. Also, last year the Senate passed a bill which makes it mandatory for teachers to undergo performance evaluations.

This study was conducted to analyze secondary EFL teachers' previous professional development experiences; their views on professional development contents and formats; and their willingness to learn about and engage in research-based professional development. The following section presents two perspectives in the design of professional development actions for in-service teachers.

1.2 Professional Development Models

A variety of strategies can be used to help teachers improve their teaching knowledge and abilities to cope with educational reform. In broad terms, strategies fall into one of two models (Johnson, 2006; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Richards, 2008; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Vélez-Rendón, 2002). One is the *knowledge transmission* model, which privileges the views of educational bureaucracies on what teachers should know. Generally, professional development actions that follow this model consist of short term courses and workshops in which teachers are trained to use teaching approaches and techniques suggested by specialists, external to their classrooms (Geyer, 2008). Although these actions may have positive effects on teachers' learning, *top-down* approaches are generally disconnected from their classrooms' realities. Once teachers finish the courses, approaches and techniques become irrelevant, and they go back to old routines.

A second professional development model, the *knowledge construction* model, focuses on encouraging teachers to reflect on their teaching beliefs and practices to meet the needs of students and/or the aims of a program. The actions taken from this *bottom-up* perspective are long-term and involve helping teachers become strategic thinkers, reflective practitioners and life-long learners that engage in discovering innovative ways to achieve the their objectives, in collaboration with other members of their schools (Burns, 2000; Crooks, 1997; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Geyer, 2008).

At present there is still no theoretical framework about the ways in which teachers continue learning about teaching to produce better learning results. However, there are some notions of how they develop knowledge that influences their teaching. For example, research conducted in English speaking countries has found that teachers' previous experiences as learners influence their teaching much more than the courses they take (Freeman, 1999). Courses may help them understand and use some concepts of teaching discourse (Richards et al., 1996); however the readings and discussions they engage in do not seem to have an impact on what they do in their classrooms (Johnson, 1994). Teachers' actions and decisions appear to be more related to their belief systems and the contextual factors of schools, than to the contents of teacher training courses (Burns, 1996; Meijer, Oolbekkink, Meirink, & Lockhorst, 2013). Teachers' views and beliefs about teaching and learning should therefore be the point of departure when preparing teachers for curriculum reform. The changes expected from educational reform may never take place if teachers do not believe such changes are necessary and feasible. Beliefs are not easy to change, though; teachers improve their teaching and abandon misguided beliefs only through long processes of discovery linked to their day-to-day teaching practice. The role of teachers' beliefs in educational change is hardly ever considered by curriculum implementers. Reform efforts would have more chances to succeed if teachers' views and beliefs were more carefully pondered.

1.3 Professional Development through Action Research

Research-based professional development refers to the on-going renewal of professional skills and knowledge through conducting classroom research that clarifies and resolves practical teaching issues and problems (Richards & Farell, 2005). A growing body of international research advocates that teachers should engage in inquiries about their teaching practice (Zhang, Lundeberg, McConnell, Koehler, & Eberhardt, 2010) as an effective way to enhance their professional development because it promotes reflection (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), and self-efficacy beliefs (Cabaroglu, 2014).

To improve teaching, teachers first need to understand the effects of their actions on their students' learning. They, therefore, need to systematically observe their teaching, interpret what happens in their classrooms, detect problems, and find solutions. In other words, they have to become strategic thinkers and practitioners (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). They require time and strategies to reflect on the specific needs, situations, and processes of learning and teaching. To do so, they need to develop knowledge and skills that help them self-observe, self-analyze, and self-evaluate their own teaching acts. The problem is that acquiring those abilities takes time and teachers are not always convinced that their efforts can be worthwhile; they are not always willing to engage in and with classroom research (Borg, 2010).

This study focused on the professional development opportunities Mexican secondary EFL teachers had previously taken up, their beliefs about the effect of professional development strategies on teaching, and their willingness to learn about and engage in research-based teaching. The results of this study are expected to contribute to find ways to provide adequate support for secondary education English language teachers, and

overcome the lack of reform induction guidelines and program.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants in the study were 297 secondary English language teachers who accepted to respond to a survey (43.80% return rate). They were affiliated to one of the 32 State Ministries of Education, located in the northeast part of the country. The participants were 70% female and 30% male teachers. Most of them (92%) were between 26 and 55 years old; only a small percentage (8%) were younger than 26 or older than 55. A large percentage of them (79%) had undergraduate degrees, some (15%) had master's degrees, and a smaller percentage of them did not provide information about their studies (6%). Among those who had undergraduate degrees, these were in education (38%) and other fields (62%). Very few of the participants reported having an English language teaching certificate (11%) and even less had an English language proficiency certificate (5%). Almost half of the participants (46%) taught 19 hours or less per week; more than half (54%) taught 20 hours or more. In terms of teaching experience, 68% had six or more years, while 32% had five years or less. Almost all of the participants (97%) had tenure in their teaching jobs.

2.2 Instrument

This paper focuses on the responses to six items of a 49-item questionnaire written in Spanish. The first version of the instrument was designed by four EFL teachers, three of them with Ph.D. and one with Master's degree in EFL teaching. It was pilot tested three times on samples of 10, 16 and 12 secondary school English language teachers. After every test, the researchers discussed and corrected the questions that were considered unclear or confusing by the participants.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took four weeks and was conducted by the researchers and three assistants in the six largest cities of the state. Participants had unlimited time to individually respond to the questionnaire. Completing the questionnaire took an average time of 12 minutes. Data from the questionnaire were analyzed in terms of percentages.

3. Results

3.1 ELT Professional Development Experiences

To investigate the professional development practices of the participants, an item of the questionnaire asked about the activities they had participated in during the previous year and provided a set of response options. The response options were: *training courses, degree courses, conferences, peer observation, teacher networking, research* and *mentoring*. As Table 1 shows, 142 (48%) of the 297 teachers 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 stand-alone training courses and 18 (13%) were courses that led to university degrees. Other professional development activities such as mentoring, peer observation, conferences, networking with other teachers and conducting research, were responses not selected by the participants.

Table 1. Participation in professional development activities in the previous year

Professional development model			
Top-Down (knowledge transmission)	142 (48%)		
		Stand-alone courses	124 (87%)
		Degree courses	18 (13%)
Bottom-up (knowledge-construction)	155 (52%)		
		Mentoring	0
		Peer observation	0
		Conferences	0
		Networks	0
		Classroom research	0
Total	297 (100%)		142 (48%)

Almost half of the participants took part in a professional development activity in the year previous to the study. They engaged in activities that belong to the *knowledge transmission* model of professional development. Practices that involve reflection, autonomy, self-initiative and are direcly linked to classroom teaching were not marked in the questionnaire by more than half of the participants.

3.2 Perceived Impact of Professional Development on ELT

A questionnaire item requested teachers to indicate the perceived impact of the different professional development strategies. The scale included the categories: *none, low, moderate* and *high*. Table 2 depicts the results for this item. Most participants did not know the impact that the different strategies could have on teaching. In the case of *stand alone courses*, the professional development strategy reported as used in the previous year by 87% of the teachers, it was marked as having a *moderate* impact on teaching by a bit more than half of the participants (51%).

Table 2. Perceived impact of professional development activities on EFL teaching

Professional Development Activity	Level of Impact				
	None (%)	Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)	Don't know (%)
Stand alone courses	2	9	51	19	19
Classrooom research	1	4	30	15	50
Degree leading courses	0	1	5	11	83
Teacher networks	0	4	15	6	75
Conferences	1	4	17	5	73
Classroom observation	1	0	6	4	89
Mentoring	1	2	15	3	79
n = 297					

Another item of the questionnaire focused on what participants considered most important for effective EFL teaching. A list of activities that benefit teaching was provided with five response options: *totally agree, agree, undecided, disagree, totaly disagree*. Considering only the optons *totally agree* and *agree*, the teachers responded as follows: 120 (51%) satisfying students' needs; 33 (14%) identifying own strengths and weaknesses; 24 (10%) designing teaching 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. Data obtained are shown on Table 3.

Table 3. Aspects considered important to achieve effective EFL teaching

Response Options	F	%
Proposing innovations	08	04
Interacting with other teachers to solve common problems	12	05
Reflecting on practice	14	06
Preparing classes carefully	23	10
Designing materials	24	10
Identifying own strengths and weaknesses	33	14
Satisfying students' needs	120	51
n = 297. Figures integrate results of response options *totally agree* and *agree,* only.		

Roughly, half of the teachers considered important satisfying students' needs. The NEPBE specifies that teachers must be able and ready to evaluate the students' abilities before, during and after their teaching intervention to teach them according to their needs. This result could be reflecting the programs' emphasis on the importance of

identifying students' language learning needs.

To continue examining the participants' views on the impact of professional development activities on teaching, another item of the questionnaire required them to mark the type of knowledge they considered would strengthen their EFL teaching. A list with a wide variety of topics was provided for them to order the three abilities they considered most important. First importance was marked as follows: 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. These results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Knowledge that would strenghthen participants' EFL teaching

Knowledge on…	F	%
Action research	02	01
Autonomous learning	03	01
Reading/writing	04	01
Educational policy	06	02
Critical thinking	07	02
Speaking/listening	16	06
Materials design	23	08
Teaching strategies	23	08
Identifying students' needs	34	12
Pedagogical approach of the NEPBE	44	16
Instructional technology	51	18
Lesson Planning	72	25

n = 297. This table depicts responses marked with a number one only.

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 Mexican teachers' digital abilities possibly explains their interest in knowing more about instructional technology to strengthen their teaching. Finally, due to the incipient stage in the implementation of the NEPBE, it seems reasonable that some teachers considered that knowing more about the program would strengthen their teaching performance.

3.3 Interest and Willingness to Engage in Research-Based Teaching

Research-based teaching refers to systematic ways of collecting and analyzing evidence of teaching and learning, documenting classroom experiences, and making visible to others what is perceived and learned from these processes. 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 or unattainable.

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.* As Table 5 shows, 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%) affirmed that research is necessary for the professional development of EFL teachers; 261 (88%) asserted 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.

Table 5. Views about research-based teaching

Questionnaire item	Strongly angree/Agree (%)	Strongly disagree/disagree/ Undecided (%)
Doing classroom research can be of great help for me in the future.	84	16
Doing research positions English teaching as a profession.	77	23
Research is necessary for the professional development	83	17
Research helps teachers identify and solve teaching problems.	88	12
All teachers can learn how to do classroom research.	89	11
I am interested in acquiring the abilities to do classroom research.	89	11
I am interested in doing classroom research.	76	21
n = 297		

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 that involves the use of technology and different techniques to identify and meet students' EFL learning needs.

4. Conclusions

Degree and non-degree courses were the only professional development activities that half of the EFL teachers had engaged in the previous year. The other half did nothing in terms of their continuous teaching preparation. They all need to be guided into new and varied strategies to continue improving their teaching, especially those with degrees in fields different from education. Teachers need to know about and experience other long-term, knowledge-construction type of development practices such as mentoring, classroom observation and teaching networks or conferences.

Although almost 70% of the participants had more than five years of teaching experience, more than half still needed to know how to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. They also seemed interested in learning about lesson planning, instructional technology and the pedagogic approach of the NEPBE.

Teachers reported that they did not know much about the impact on teaching that the different professional development strategies produce. However, a large percentage expressed their interest in developing research abilities and engaging in classroom research. These results suggest that actions to promote more reflective types of professional development could be well accepted.

Further studies regarding the professional development of secondary EFL teachers in México could focus on comparing the effects of the use of the different bottom-up strategies on teaching and learning. The incipient stage in the implementation of the NEPBE and the national focus on the professional development of basic education teachers provides an ideal context for such effort.

Acknowledgments

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