

Unlicensed EFL Teachers Co-constructing Knowledge and Transforming Curriculum Through Collaborative-Reflective Inquiry

Profesores de inglés no licenciados construyendo conocimiento colectivo y transformando el currículo a través de la investigación colaborativa

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This paper describes a case study research project carried out in a public school in Bogotá, Colombia, with four unlicensed teachers of English as a foreign language. Although the institutional guidelines in the school suggest that teachers should collectively propose changes to shape pedagogical realities, there is evidence of little communication among them. This study emphasizes collaborative, reflective inquiry as a means to educative transformation. Findings suggest that collaborative inquiry prompts the language teachers to conjointly design teaching strategies and materials that articulate with students' contexts. Furthermore, along the way, the teachers were empowered to propose curricular changes to adjust contents and goals of the area with the students' contextual reality.

Key words: Collaborative inquiry, reflective teaching, teachers' professional development, unlicensed teachers of English as a foreign language.

Este artículo describe un estudio de caso realizado en un colegio público de Bogotá, Colombia con cuatro profesores de inglés no licenciados en lenguas. Aunque los lineamientos institucionales del colegio sugieren que los docentes deberían proponer cambios a nivel colectivo para transformar realidades pedagógicas, no hay evidencia de que existan escenarios de comunicación entre ellos. Este estudio se enfoca en la investigación colaborativa y reflexiva de prácticas de enseñanza como medio para la transformación educativa. Los resultados sugieren que la investigación colaborativa impulsa a los profesores a diseñar conjuntamente estrategias y materiales para la enseñanza del inglés que se articulan con los contextos de los estudiantes. Adicionalmente, durante el proceso, los profesores se empoderaron para proponer cambios curriculares con el fin de ajustar los objetivos y contenidos del área a las realidades contextuales de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: desarrollo profesional de docentes, enseñanza reflexiva, investigación colaborativa, profesores de inglés no licenciados.

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Introduction

Research on teachers' professional development over the past two decades has centered consistently on the potential educational benefit of collegial work in professional communities of learning (Little, 2002). Researchers converge on the idea that improving teaching and learning is plausible when teachers "collectively question ineffective teaching routines, examine new conceptions of teaching and learning, find generative means to acknowledge and respond to difference and conflict, and engage actively in supporting professional growth" (p. 917). In this sense, Richards and Farrell (2005) explain that when teachers work together, they have more chances to construct knowledge, shape their knowledge base and thus, their teaching practices. Further, an emphasis is often given to the benefits of collaboration within a community of inquiry for supporting teachers' learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004). This is believed to promote growth collectively as professionals (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

The body of work on collaboration as a legitimate source of development has increasingly demonstrated what communities of learning look like and the conditions for the construction of knowledge in different settings. Notwithstanding, there is relatively limited evidence on the type of knowledge that is constructed by teachers and what happens when they assume the necessary role of decision-makers as a result of interaction and participation in the core of teacher learning communities (Butler & Schnellert, 2012).

Regarding the attention given to teachers as agents of change in schools, stakeholders and administrators call for teachers' professional development programs to hone institutional and academic improvement (Butler & Schnellert, 2012). Albeit these administrators' interest is to promote teachers' development through imposed agendas, there exist conflictive assumptions about where to locate legitimate causes of classroom phenomena. Tierney (2006) argues that the consequence of these top-down initiatives, which lack sensitivity to local contexts,

is that they fail to capitalize on the local knowledge constructed within and by professional communities.

Some authors consider that schools need to make a special effort to develop teamwork among teachers, since teaching is mistakenly seen as an individual activity. Jerez (2008) agrees with this claim which portrays the local case of Colombia. She asserts that although some institutions in Colombia have models to foster professional development such as teacher collaboration, teachers seldom engage or are motivated to collaborate. The problem, according to Jerez, is not the lack of situated models or guidelines, but rather the lack of a collaborative culture in institutions. In this sense, I believe such a culture depends on the importance to work with collaborative, situated, and flexible agendas, sensitive to teachers' needs which, according to Aldana and Cárdenas (2011), are promoted by networking between teachers.

In this fertile ground for research, this study presents the results of providing a group of four unlicensed in-service language teachers with the power to explore teaching aspects so they can find reasons to work together. In this article, I describe the type of knowledge about language teaching aspects that the teachers constructed together when engaging in collaborative work. Consequently, I explore the influence of such collaboration in their language teaching practices in a learning community constituted in a public school.

Furthermore, in a context where the threshold for the language teaching field is becoming more accessible for different professionals other than licensed language teachers, it is necessary to avoid adjourning the discussion of how unlicensed language teachers develop professionally in schools, instead of backlashing the phenomenon. In general, empowering language teachers to be proponents of change in schools by working together goes a long way toward transforming the figure of teachers from simple instructors and knowledge consumers to knowledge builders and theorists in their contexts (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

This research demonstrates that when teachers are given the scenarios and tools to engage in collaboration, it is more plausible for them to encounter legitimate motives to unwind, share experiences and knowledge with peers and, ultimately, take action. A collaborative orientation in language teaching not only affects positively language teaching practices but can also transcend to institutional levels in the form of curricular transformation.

Theoretical Background

The Role of Collaboration in Teachers' Professional Growth

Collaboration can be defined as a continuous process of supporting one another's efforts to sort out problems in the classrooms and to enhance the quality of teaching in schools (Little, 1982); or simply, a practice of learning and working together to achieve common goals and tasks (Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, & Beckingham, 2004; Griebing, Harte, Dyke, & Bauer, 2011). In so doing, teachers learn and teach abilities and reinforce existing skills (Butler et al., 2004), and awaken to a more conscious stance of approaching teaching based on respect and appreciation for peers (Griebing et al., 2011). Ultimately, according to Griebing et al. (2011) and Butler et al. (2004), collaboration can be an essential element to bring about reforms at different levels, starting from teachers' own practice.

These theoretical contributions focusing on "the importance of collaboration in changing teacher practice have led to its widespread acceptance as an essential component of any effort aimed at (re)shaping teaching practices" (Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron, & Vanhover, 2006, p. 170). Interestingly, research has not sufficiently demonstrated in what way the teaching aspects that motivate English teachers to work with peers might vary amongst contexts and cultures. Also noteworthy is to find out how constructed knowledge in populations of teachers, who are professionals in

other areas other than language teaching, differs from knowledge constructed in conventional groups of English teachers. I find it worthwhile knowing about the aspects that motivate teachers who are not Modern Language bachelors by profession, to collaborate in their particular context; that constitutes the main inquiry of this investigation.

Collaborative-Reflective Teaching

Glenn (2011) defined *reflection* as an act of thinking that follows a series of steps such as doubting, inquiring, and searching for information that would solve the doubt. That doubt is formulated on the basis of an action performed by someone and how it is performed. On the other hand, Hagevik, Aydeniz, and Rowell (2012) gave the following definition of reflection: "it is the deliberate and purposeful act of thinking which centers on ways of responding to problem situations" (p. 660). Thus, reflection is associated with thinking about what a teacher does in the classroom and has to do with involving the cognitive processes of both problem finding and problem solving (Leitch & Day, 2000). The articulation between finding a problem and solving it was adopted in teaching under the concept of *reflective teaching* or *reflective practice*.

Reflective teaching then is understood by Farrell (2007) as the process of teachers consciously subjecting their beliefs about teaching and learning to critical analysis, assuming their responsibility in the classroom, and engaging in a process of improving teaching practices. Similarly, for Milheim (2010) reflective teaching is any type of critical reflection upon teaching practices which leads to career development. Collaborative reflective teaching is defined in the same way, yet this indicates that reflection is occurring with others. This process leads to the construction of shared knowledge that might benefit the students' learning and ultimately a community of practice (Onks, 2009).

Leitch and Day (2000) contend that "reflective teaching in these terms entails making conscious and

explicit the dynamic interplay between thinking” (p. 181), learning, and making decisions together. Most of the studies draw on reflection as an initial step toward interaction with others as members of learning communities (Chou, 2010; Halim, Buang, & Mohd Meerah, 2011; Wong, 2011). Other scholars complement this notion by arguing that it constitutes a central mainstay of a research-oriented conception of teaching (Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2003) and as such, is regarded as an important characteristic of newfangled outlooks in teacher education and professional development (Conway & Clark, 2003; Zeichner, 1996).

Language Teachers’ Professional Development

According to Richards and Farrell (2005) development facilitates the growth of “teachers’ understanding of teaching and of themselves as teachers” (p. 3). Professional development involves the analysis of different dimensions of teachers’ practice which is the basis of reflection. For this reason, it can be seen as a “bottom-up” process.

The strategies that foster development in teachers are: “documenting different kinds of teaching practices; reflective analysis of teaching practices; examining beliefs, values, and principles; collaborating with peers on classrooms projects and conversation with peers on core issues” (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 4). Most of the aforementioned constitute the cornerstones of the teacher education model in this study.

One of the aspects to consider when adopting a model of professional development is to clarify that such process should not be seen as the result of a lack of teaching abilities or bad performance. Richards and Farrell (2005) argue that the need for a progressive renewal of professional skills and knowledge is not necessarily the response to inadequate training but the response to the notion that what a teacher needs to know does not only come from their pre-service period. It also comes from the fact that, in my opinion, one’s

knowledge-base for teaching needs to change as much as contexts, populations, and methods do.

From another perspective, Jerez (2008) contends that professional development programs (PDP) are not only the responsibility of universities where pre-service teachers prepare for the craft of teaching. Schools and institutions have also the responsibility to pursue the education and development of teachers in the in-service phase by establishing development programs as part of their work. Although not many schools advocate for these programs in Colombia, Jerez claims that important contributions to in-service programs have been made in the country during the last few years. Some examples are the studies conducted by Clavijo, Guerrero, Torres, Ramírez, and Torres (2004) and McNulty and Quinchía (2007), which “show the relevance of giving teachers the opportunity to pursue further professional development so that their practices can be enhanced” (Jerez, 2008, p. 93). Another relevant contribution to the local context is the work by Cárdenas and Nieto (2010), who explored how professional development can be strengthened through the formation of academic networks of English teachers in the form of study groups.

Cárdenas, González, and Álvarez (2010) converge with Jerez (2008) on the growing attention given to permanent teachers’ education in Colombia. According to Cárdenas et al. (2010), this interest increased in the years after the Colombian Framework for English—COFE—project (Aparicio et al. as cited in Cárdenas et al., 2010). This project highlighted the necessity to not only attend to teachers’ initial education but also aimed at achieving PDP for primary and high school in-service teachers. These programs were based on international models and local experiences in the field (Cárdenas et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the field should be more influenced by local research than by foreign pre-conceived models that inform PDP for in-service teachers in schools. In this sense, González and Quinchía (2003) assert that in Colombia the efforts to establish standards and directions

for teacher education programs have been made by individual institutions. The authors suggest the necessity of establishing “a joint effort to administer the teacher education programs using approaches discussed between teachers and teacher educators” (p. 88).

The Colombian advances in the field of professional development of in-service teachers open the door to continue looking into the nuances that promote teachers’ learning collectively. This paper contributes to exploring the inside of a learning community to ascertain the language teaching aspects that motivate four unlicensed English teachers to collaborate in a public school. This collaborative endeavor eventually prompted the teachers to act upon the curriculum based on informed criteria gained in the learning community over time. In order to respond to the inquiry of investigation, I designed a methodological path that will serve the purpose of collecting data for further analysis. To start off, the main aspects of the context are depicted in the following section.

Context of the Study

The study took place in South Star school (name changed by researcher), a state institution located in south Bogota, Colombia. The school offers grades from 1st to 11th. The curriculum has a constructivist pedagogical focus that fosters the collective construction of knowledge. Additionally, the Institutional Educational Project (IEP) of the school has an orientation for teachers to be agents of change in the educative process.

The four participating English teachers, three females and one male, have a proficiency in the foreign language ranging from A2 to B1. They hold degrees in areas different from English teaching such as Spanish, early childhood education, and psychology. Nevertheless, they were required by the administrator to teach English so as to cope with the demand of English classes, especially in primary courses. Their experience teaching English in the school ranges from 2 to 7 years.

My role as a researcher was of peripheral observer. This peripheral membership, according to Adler and Adler (as cited in Merriam, 2009), allows researchers to observe and interact so closely enough with the participants that an insider’s identity is established without participating directly in their activities. In this regard, Patton (2001) claims that qualitative methodologists can avoid affecting what is observed, specially when they are outsiders, by practicing long-term observations with people in the setting.

The participants partook of an academic year process of collaborative sessions in the school. Those sessions, along with semi-structured interviews, provided information regarding the sort of knowledge they managed to construct together and what they could do with it.

Diagnosis

During an initial phase of analysis in the school carried out by administering surveys and interviews, it could be evidenced that each language teacher had a quite different perception of what the reasons for students’ low achievement in the English class were. For example, a 7th grade teacher said it was because the instructional basis in 5th and 6th grade was poor. Opposite, a 6th grade teacher said in an interview that the lack of linguistic basis occurred in elementary courses. Another 7th grade English teacher mentioned the reason was the students’ lack of interest in the foreign language and failure to see the usefulness of it in their lives. The following comment by a teacher exemplifies the former statement:

It is really difficult to find activities to keep [the students] involved, because some of them just seem not to be interested at all... I sometimes feel that I have tried it all. (Interview 1, T2)¹

After surveys and interviews were administered, I proceeded to collate the information obtained with

¹ Participants are identified with a letter T followed by a number.

institutional documents so as to find coincidences or discrepancies.

Thus, the teachers' profile, included in the School's official documents, has an orientation for teachers to be agents of change in the educative process. This means that pedagogical changes in the school should not be imposed by administrators but promoted rather by the teachers. In the document, it is also stated that:

The process of pedagogical practice will have as a fundamental axis the interpretation and the construction of knowledge. In education, it is not possible to detach the pedagogical practices from reflection. (IEP, p. 49)

Notwithstanding, there was no evidence of mechanisms or scenarios for language teachers to reflect and collaborate to propose joint solutions in the school, as established in guidelines. These samples collected from an interview demonstrated that even though those mechanisms are inexistent, there is willingness on the part of teachers to professionally work and learn from their peers:

The meetings are only to talk about information that we are supposed to know, like informative, but we do not have other type of meetings like to share opinions about what to do with the classes. We don't have much time for that. (Interview 2, T1)

A 5th grade teacher stated:

It would be interesting to learn from others since we lack many things. Some [teachers] are even afraid to talk in English. I am not, though. Besides, there are colleagues that have more expertise, I guess. (Interview 2, T3)

All in all, it was observed that there is not a collective consensus to pin down the causes that hamper students' achievement of curricular goals in the foreign language. This entails a distance in terms of teachers' communication along the courses, yet institutional guidelines in the school suggest that teachers should propose changes in their pedagogical reality by reflecting and working collectively.

A possible way to bridge that communication gap among teachers is by fostering scenarios and opportunities for English teachers to socialize and eventually work together. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate: What possible language teaching aspects drive a collaborative-reflective work among a group of four unlicensed language teachers?

Method

The study used a qualitative descriptive and interpretive case study. Since I wanted to describe a phenomenon occurring in a natural setting, this design is the one that fits the investigation. The phenomenon to describe is the language teaching aspects that moved a collaborative inquiry process among four language teachers. According to Merriam (2009) a qualitative case study is intended to describe, give insights, and interpret rather than to test hypotheses. Qualitative studies focus on the phenomena that take place in a natural setting.

Merriam (2009) also presents a descriptive case study as a detailed account of the phenomenon under investigation. In this article, I want to present a thorough description of the phenomenon of collaboration, more specifically, the language teaching aspects that motivate the collaboration among the teachers. Moreover, I aim to describe the way in which knowledge constructed collectively is interwoven with language teaching practices.

The instruments employed to collect the data were audio recordings of the collaborative meetings, teaching journals, and semi-structured interviews. These provided sufficient information to describe the language teaching aspects that move the four teachers to share and co-construct knowledge.

The Collaborative-Reflective Inquiry Process

The intervention carried out in South Star School with four non-licensed language teachers consisted

of an inquiry process based fundamentally upon a reflective-collaborative work. According to some authors, inquiry can be associated with activities ranging from reflective teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990), to “teachers’ recursive engagement in planning, enacting, monitoring, and revising practices in order to achieve valued goals for students” (Butler & Schnellert, 2012, p. 1208).

The reflective-collaborative model took on sociocultural principles that encompass knowledge construction as mediated by social interactions (Vygotsky, 1986/2000). Those interactions can be conceived within a collaborative environment. Moreover, the model is grounded on properties regarded by Cárdenas et al. (2010) as a basis for teachers’ PDP:

- Support systems for teachers’ collaboration and reflection.
- Collaboration among the participants of the pedagogical process.
- Knowledge constructed collectively from teachers’ experience.
- New ideas are flexible and situated.
- Teachers’ empowerment and agency.

During the inquiry process the teacher participants were given the opportunity to think and socialize their experiences and reflections about teaching the foreign language in the school. Throughout this process, the teachers gained knowledge on what it takes to become a collaborative-reflective practitioner by looking into their practices and analyzing information from them. As time went by, the teachers started to interact using the information they gathered from their language classes. Collective reflections endowed the teachers with tools and knowledge to begin collective tasks. Some meetings also constituted the opportunity for the teachers to assess the achievements of the tasks they carried out together. The collaborative meetings were sustained during an academic year (9 months approximately).

Data Collection

Data collected were coded using Atlas.ti software. The coding was open and axial. “Open coding is the part of the analysis concerned with identifying, naming, categorizing, and describing phenomena found in the text” (Strauss & Corbin, 2003, p. 78). Essentially, each line, sentence, paragraph, and so on, is read in search of possible relations with the language teaching aspects that moved a collaborative inquiry process among four language teachers. According to Strauss (1987), axial coding “consists of intense analysis done around one category at time in terms of paradigm items.” (p. 32) This could indicate that some elements allied with the grounded approach theory, like the type of coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2003), were employed to analyze the data in the study.

At the beginning, the transcriptions of the collaborative-reflective meetings and interviews were read in search of aspects related to collaboration that aimed at answering the main inquiry of the investigation. Then, as the analysis progressed by reading the teachers’ journals, commonalities were sought in the data that helped to strengthen the presence of codes.

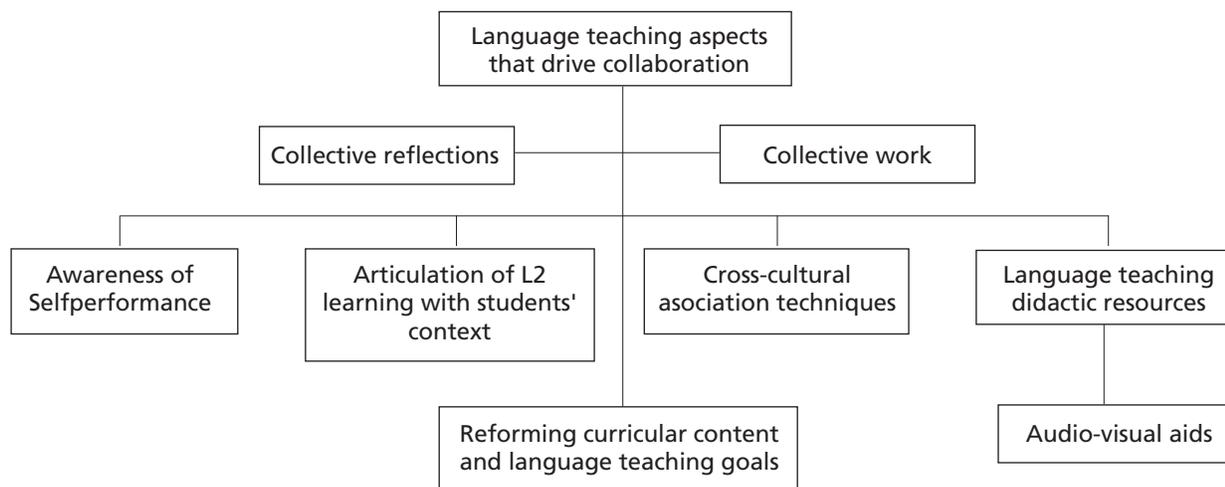
Findings

As a result of the analysis, the data revealed five language teaching-related aspects that drove the reflective-collaborative process between the unlicensed language teachers. Figure 1 illustrates how those results interweave.

Awareness of Self-Performance

During moments of shared reflection, there was evidence of the participants’ recognition of strengths and weaknesses when reflecting upon the connection between the aspects related to their performance as language teachers and students’ outcomes. As Brookfield (1995) states, the fact of understanding and reflecting on the impact that teachers have on their students is important for their development. Likewise, Eslami and

Figure 1. Results of the Inquiry Process



Fatahi (2008) posit that studies that focus “on teachers’ perceptions and beliefs [of their own performance] indicate that these perceptions and beliefs not only have considerable influence on their instructional practices and classroom behavior, but also are related to their students’ achievement” (p. 1).

The following excerpt taken from a reflective-collaborative meeting is a salient example of this aspect:

My problem is since I don’t...I am not fluent when it comes to talking [in English] for example; I look for mechanisms for them [students] to learn listening because I find that important.

So, I take a lot of...like songs, so they can listen to and watch them ... because sometimes they end up enunciating like me, that’s why I use a lot of videos. (Collaborative reflective meeting, T4)²

Interestingly, this comment evidences a critical response to a problematic situation known as *teacher agency* (Priestly, Biesta, & Robinson, 2013), since the teacher implements and adapts audio materials for her students to have a proper exposure to English pronunciation as she is aware of her own limitations in this

² The teacher participants communicated in Spanish for the sake of obtaining deeper reflections. I translated the excerpts into English, trying to keep their responses as verbatim as possible.

sense. As Priestly et al. (2013) argue, agency in this case is not a capacity that resides in individuals but rather is an action that is done through engagement with very specific contextual conditions, in this case, the conditions required for the teacher to provide a proper teaching model despite her lack of skills in pronouncing English words properly.

Articulation of L2 Learning With Students’ Context

The teachers expressed conceptions about establishing connections between what the students learn and the context associated with their reality, so as to make learning more meaningful. The following excerpt, extracted from a teacher’s journal and written after one language session, can show those connections:

They learn when they relate what they see with their lives. When they are able to incorporate the new knowledge to their lives, to their individual and social life. (T4’s journal)

Based on the linguistic outlook that the teachers have about teaching, they use their theories to find the source of the problem they evidence in class. They agree that whenever they as teachers find ways to

incorporate new knowledge in the students' lives, learning is promoted since learners find legitimate ways to apply it to their reality.

According to the data obtained from journals and meetings, it is contended that, in spite of having different professional backgrounds, the teachers managed to theorize about language teaching and learning. Hagevik et al. (2012) suggest that nothing matters more in language teaching than teachers being able to generate theories about the craft as the ultimate purpose of their practice. This process of theorizing in a situated context could be informed, *inter alia*, by teachers' experiences, knowledge-base, and by putting knowledge co-constructed collectively into practice in language classrooms. Those dimensions of knowledge socially constructed by the unlicensed teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), took particular forms in this context, which were categorized as language teaching strategies and resources.

Initially, the language teaching strategies that the teachers designed as a result of collaboration aimed at helping students to assimilate knowledge through cross-cultural association techniques which are explained as follows.

Cross-Cultural Association Techniques

These techniques relate to the teachers' use of students' L1 cultural backgrounds to teach English contents. The participants' challenge was to know the aspects that were interesting to the students or at least that could connect to their socio-cultural context. Due to the students' social conditions, the teachers knew they did not have access to certain socio-cultural practices that some children in other contexts have, such as going to amusement parks or traveling on vacations. An example of this aspect is evidenced in the following segment of interaction during a collaborative meeting.

T1: I got something. For example, what you said about sports.

T2: But I need to cover the vocabulary of sports to be able to...

T1: I have an idea. There are sports that people can practice here [in Colombia], which children happen to know, and others that they don't, right? Can people play soccer here? Yes, they can play soccer. Can people ride on a sleigh? No, they can't.

T2: So, are you proposing to do a sort of song?

T1: no, no, no.

T3: that is for the association purpose. (Collaborative reflective meeting)

In this example, T1 was suggesting the utilization of social-practice-oriented associations to teach abilities with the verb "can". He presented the option to teach it with soccer since it is a sport the children know about.

In general, the language teachers were concerned about creating a bond between teaching contents and students' knowledge of the world that spurs learning. In so doing, they shared teaching strategies based on cultural aspects to create associations that they implemented in their lesson plans. Along with them, the four teachers also designed teaching resources which are described in the following section.

Language Teaching Didactic Resources

These resources refer to the different activities and materials that the teachers jointly proposed and designed for their classes as a result of the collective work.

Audio Visual Aids

The teachers agreed to utilize audio visual tools to support the teaching of the foreign language using multimedia resources, something that, despite their having technological aids at their disposal in the school, they had not used in their classes before. These materials were used as a means to engage students during the classes with entertaining footage and expose them to a standard pronunciation of the language. In the next excerpt, one teacher proposes the use of videos:

T4: Why don't you start with a video? Do that, a video that treats the topic of "the clock". You could find something on YouTube™. (Collaborative reflective meeting)

YouTube™ and blogs with audio visual material were the main sources of videos suggested by teachers for their classes. This material became the major resource for topic presentation. This excerpt from a journal that reported a class experience shows an example of how T4 introduced her class:

The children watched a video about "parts of the body" and they repeated the pronunciation and touched the part of the body accordingly. Then, they wrote the words they were learning in their notebooks in one page each, so they could draw the body part afterwards. Finally, we listened to the song "head and shoulders" (from the source: <http://keivanemediosaudiovisuales.blogspot.com/>). (T4's journal)

Audio materials were another main resource that the teachers proposed to work out as regards the curricular contents and resorting to the technological resources they had at hand. In the following segment of a conversation during a collaborative-reflective meeting, one teacher proposes the use of a pop song to teach the modal verb "can/can't":

T2: Yes, have [students] recall those verbs.

T4: So, first I will have them revise the verbs.

T1: There is this song by Phil Collins I think...I'm not sure if it's Phil Collins' or Genesis, I don't remember. That goes like "cuz I can't dance, I can't jump, I can't do whatever I want." And the song is pretty much the same chorus.

T3: Oh yes, that's cool!

T1: That one can work.

T3: And it has some of these verbs.

T1: At least to work on the chorus.

(Collaborative reflective meeting)

Songs were the basis for most of the lessons planned by the teachers during the meetings. Additionally, they also gauged their functionality after their application,

which calls for collegial accountability and further inquiry for improvement. In their journals, some teachers reflected after their sessions on the impact of the audio-based materials.

Afterwards the students listened to the song in English about the parts of the body for the kids to keep touching the corresponding parts of the body as the song was playing. (T3's journal)

In this other excerpt, the teacher explains the procedure to use a song in class, previously shared in a collaborative meeting:

First, the students will listen to the song "Hello, how are you?" Then the students will try to write as many words they remember as possible from the song. After that, they will write the song with the help of the teacher and they will draw the moods depicted in the song. (T2's journal)

The aforementioned results can shed light on the correlation that exists among collaboration, reflection, and action (Mena, Sánchez, & Tillema, 2008) and professional learning (Diaz Maggioli, 2012). All four constitute building blocks of teachers' professional development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004; Schnellert, 2011).

The collaborative endeavor at South Star Public School was then driven by the teachers' willingness to design language teaching strategies based on socio-cultural associations, as well as teaching materials based on audio-visual alternatives. Both strategies and materials, designed with the intention to help to enhance students' learning, constitute the language teaching aspects that answer the research question of the investigation reported in this paper.

Beyond the boundaries of the collective work, but propelled by it, the four unlicensed teachers felt the necessity to engage in an ongoing process of curriculum transformation. That is how they came to re-dimension objectives and contents in their English courses, which constituted another motivation to continue collegiality across time.

Reforming Curricular Contents and Learning Goals

This last category describes the teachers' evaluations of guidelines related to curricular contents and objectives of the English area in the school. Moran (2007) argues that one avenue for teachers' willingness to intervene in curricular reform originates in their awareness of the importance to collaborate with colleagues to transform the school reality at institutional levels.

The following statement illustrates the teachers' intention to reform curricular guidelines as regards the English area during sessions of collaboration:

T1: But then the next year we need to make up a team...I mean, we already have it; we need to try reforming those competencies, those objectives in English especially for elementary courses.

T3: We are going to restructure the English area next year.

T2: Yes, let's start restructuring the syllabus.

(Collaborative reflective meeting)

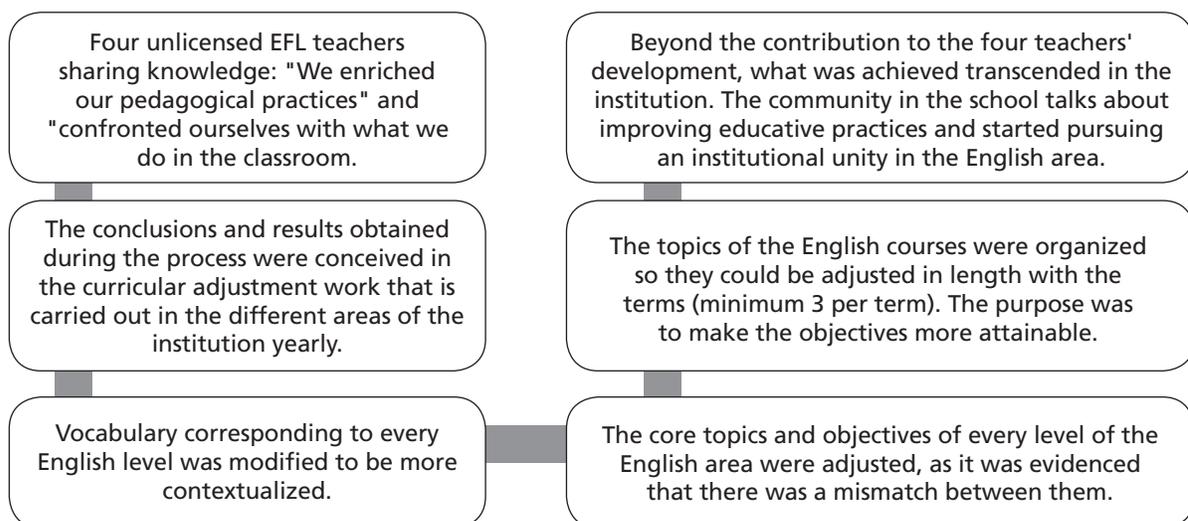
Apparently, the possibility that institutions allow teachers to adjust curricular aspects in schools could be a far-fetched one in practice. Notwithstanding, in the case presented in this paper, the precedent set by these four unlicensed EFL teachers has obtained support

from the administrators in the school that could make this intention feasible. In any event, this finding shows the degree of teacher involvement in the process and the trustworthiness that their work has attained in the institution. The influence of the collaborative inquiry process in the development of a collective sensitivity when working together and the initial traces of consolidating a culture of collaboration in this particular setting are conclusive outcomes of this investigation.

The school academic committee holds yearly encounters to discuss curricular aspects and possible adjustments to academic processes in the English area. The year following the study reported in this paper, the four unlicensed English teachers participating in this investigation were invited to take part as a result of the process of shifting practices through collaboration. They could propose changes as far as topic and lexical contents of the English courses per level, as well as adjustment of the objectives. The results of the entire process are summarized in Figure 2.

Overall, what was evidenced is a multi-layered sequence of changes in the school. First, at the classroom level, teachers achieved an influence in students' learning processes, as well as in their own professional learning.

Figure 2. Results of Curricular Reform as a Result of Collaboration



At the institutional level, teachers were empowered to provoke changes in curriculum as part of the motivation to collaborate; and ultimately, not only did the teachers invest in the practices of the community, transforming it, but also in their own professional development through becoming generators of knowledge and agents of change.

Conclusions

In this article, I reported the findings from a case study of a group of four unlicensed EFL teachers in a state school in Bogotá, Colombia. To address the main inquiry of the investigation, I described the language teaching aspects that drove a collaboration process among the research-participant teachers. In this concluding section, I comment on the most salient aspects suggested by the findings.

The collaborative work among the four teachers was initially informed by two aspects that emerged from their reflections on teaching practices. The first one is the awareness of how the teachers see themselves and perform as teachers. The second one is the awareness of articulating language contents with the students' contexts and needs.

Taking into account the initial participant teachers' awareness, the collaborative-reflective work was driven by the teachers' willingness to design language teaching strategies based on socio-cultural associations that benefited students' learning, as well as teaching materials based on audio and visual alternatives that hone students' assimilation of contents in the foreign language.

In the same vein, the collaborative-reflective work was also triggered by the participants' interest and intention to suggest curricular changes that fit the contextual reality of the students in this particular setting. The teachers invested in performing an in-depth analysis of curricular contents and goals to better fulfill students' learning outcomes. This initiative needed a higher effort and commitment that empowered the teachers to make their voices heard in other institutional power structures. What is discussed here reaffirms Benesh's (1996) critical

analysis of schools as sites for possible reform where the people at the bottom of the hierarchy in institutions are entitled to more power than they have.

Although the results reported in this article cannot be generalized, in-service teachers in general can benefit from this study as they can take an active role in their respective communities with their voice and knowledge when they are shared and nurtured with colleagues' experiences.

Collaboration is an important source for unlicensed language teachers to find avenues to master their craft, break down isolation barriers, theorize about teaching, co-construct knowledge, and propose informed initiatives that impact the learning community. This reality exists regardless of the circumstances that put them in the not less demanding position of teaching English. However, I consider that collaboration should not be another external imposition of what others think is good for teachers. This study is about creating opportunities for practitioners who are not professional language teachers, for them to share their knowledge and find a motivation to collaborate with other professionals.

Finally, it is argued in this paper that an authentic culture of collaboration emerges in a learning community when two factors interplay. One, when there is a relevant problem-solving necessity, and two, when a problem-solving necessity arises from the teachers' own initiative and willingness to collaborate, since imposed, vertical agendas might hinder sustained collaboration endeavors. These conditions meet to position teachers as knowledge generators in local communities, empowering them to provoke change at higher levels in educative institutions.

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