NEW PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: THE COLOMBIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: The main purpose of my talk in this conference on Language Teacher Education is to highlight teachers’ classroom projects as evidences of social transformation. Based on the work of scholars such as Dewey (1938), Freire (1970), Giroux (1992), McLaren (1989), and Pennycook (2001), I want to emphasize that critical approaches to language education require commitment to social transformation. Thus, teachers, researchers, teacher-educators and students might assume active roles and pedagogical interventions in classroom aiming at engaging participants in reflection and praxis to be able to achieve what Freire (1970, p. 69) called “transforming the world.” Examples of a pedagogy of action for social transformation used by teachers in Colombian classrooms will be presented to illustrate the outcomes of teacher commitment to making a difference and to their permanent interest in professional development.

1. Introduction

I would like to start by expressing my deepest gratitude to the Academic and Organizing Committees of this II Latin American Conference on Language Teacher Education for the invitation to be the plenary speaker today. It is with great pleasure that I address this topic since it is one of my professional passions in my academic life as language teacher educator.

As a language teacher educator in the context of public higher education in Colombia for close to fifteen years, through teaching and researching language teachers’ sources of knowledge in their practice, I have consolidated my belief that it is informed practice by committed, knowledgeable classroom teachers that generate social transformation. Teachers’ local knowledge constructed everyday in their teaching, their commitment to pedagogical practice and a strong institutional leadership as well as permanent professional development are valuable tools that help transform learners’ and teachers’ educational realities.

Based on the work of scholars such as Dewey (1938), Freire (1970), Giroux (1992), McLaren (1989), Short (2001), Johnson & Golombek (2002) and Colombian professional researchers such as González (2007), Cárdenas & Faustino (2003), Cárdenas (2000, 2006), Arias (1994), Pineda (2008), De Mejia (2005, 2006), among others, I have come to believe that critical approaches to language education require commitment to social transformation and to explore the “social visions” that pedagogical practices support (SIMON, 1992, p. 15).

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Thus, teachers, researchers, teacher-educators and students might assume active roles to promote pedagogical interventions in classroom aiming at engaging participants in reflection and praxis to be able to achieve what Freire (1970, p. 69) called “transforming the world.”

I have selected the following set of questions to guide my presentation:

(a) How are we envisioning language teacher education in our Latin American countries to promote learning and teaching for social transformation?
(b) What kind of opportunities for reflection and critical informed actions are we providing to new and experienced teachers based in their local realities and concerns?
(c) How do our ideologies value the production of local knowledge?
(d) What type of outcomes do we select as valuable and how do we make them visible?
(e) How are language teaching and learning national policies informed by contextualized needs assessment practices?

I would like to address the questions posed above by making connections that show the historical transformation of teacher education starting from traditional models that promoted transmission of contents in learning and teaching, move to more participatory ways of exploring the curriculum through reflection and inquiry where teachers and students can participate in communities of inquiry, to finally present the current emerging trends in Language Teacher Education (LTE) that focus on economic aspects of knowledge production.

2. Trends in teacher education

In theory we have read about, reflected upon and implemented Teacher Education (TE) models most of them produced by theorists from English speaking countries.

The traditional approach to Teacher Education based on the transmission model is defined as a system in which experts transfer knowledge to prospective teachers. It is a more teacher centered approach to teaching and the emphasis is in the transmission of ideas from teacher to students.

An emphasis on reflective teaching implies that teacher development is conceptualized as an ongoing process of experiencing practical teaching and learning situations, reflecting on them under the guidance of an expert, and developing one’s own insights into teaching through the interaction between personal reflection and theoretical notions offered by the expert.

Freire’s (1970) liberatory pedagogy that started in Brazil and was later on spread to other parts of the world has been a strong pedagogic influence in some countries in Latin America. His pedagogy questioned the traditional transmission model which he called
“banking theory of education” to promote reflection and inquiry through his problem posing theory that urge educational actors (students, teachers, parents, administrators) to have an active participation in the social transformation of school and society (FREIRE, 1970, p. 53).

Likewise, Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999, p. 288-289) consider that a way of taking an inquiry stance means teachers and student teachers working within inquiry communities to generate local knowledge, envision and theorize their practice, and interpret and interrogate the theory and research of others. Short (2001) envisions the curriculum as inquiry as a way of examining teachers ways of knowing and engaging them in posing relevant questions and Johnson & Golombek (2002) give central importance to the stories told by teachers as sources to understand their knowledge, perspectives, understandings and experiences that guide their work. Johnson & Golombek (2002, p. 7) believe that “teachers’ narrative inquiry enables teachers not only to make sense of their professional worlds but also to make significant and worthwhile change within themselves and in their teaching practices.”

Within the inquiry stance to language pedagogy two most recent trends are dialogic pedagogy and Critical pedagogies to Language Learning. Dialogic pedagogy for Wong (2006) aims at supporting the inclusion of voices of those who have traditionally been excluded from academic discourse and proposes four features of dialogic approaches to TESOL: Learning in community, a problem-posing approach to curriculum, learning by doing, to pose the question knowledge for whom?/who does knowledge serve? And Norton & Toohey’s (2004) critical pedagogies calls for a need to use innovative approaches to language education research to inform critical pedagogical practices in the language classroom.

In addition to these trends in LTE, Cochran-Smith (2005) emphasizes that a new teacher education has been emerging with three closely related pieces:

(a) *It is constructed as a public policy problem*: For her, when Teacher education is defined as a policy problem the goal is to determine which of the broad parameters that can be controlled by policymakers can enhance teacher quality and thus have a positive impact on desired school outcomes.

(b) *Teacher education based on research and evidence*: In their second trend the preoccupation of the new teacher education with evidence is consistent with the way the standards movement has evolved and with the trend toward evidence-based practice in education.

(c) *Teacher education driven by outcomes*: Finally, they claim that the new teacher education is frontally about outcomes. Institutions providers of teacher education are struggling to demonstrate, document, and measure the effects, results, consequences and effects of teacher
preparation on school and other outcomes. The shift in teacher education from inputs to outcomes is part of a larger change in how we think about educational accountability.

Additionally, in recent years, there has been increasing attention given to the new synergies between universities and the business sector with an emphasis on the commercialization of research, new partnership arrangements, university start-up companies, technology transfer policies and the tendency of research competing for funding. Peters & Olsen (2005, p. 231) point out that this has led to a new ideology that is called “the ideology of useful knowledge” which emphasises on the marketization of university knowledge with the consequence of turning the university into yet another corporation.

This interestingly poses questions such as

(a) What forms of research are more valued?
(b) Who values those forms of research?
(c) If research is mainly valued for its economic benefits, what happens to research that explores theoretical issues?
(d) What would eventually happen to research that focuses on pedagogy?
(e) What happens to research produced by teachers through action research?
(f) How will teachers get funds for research that does not produce results that can be commercialized?
(g) Wouldn’t this tendency lead us to an instrumentalization of knowledge?

We could be talking about the Marketization and Businessification of education (GIROUX, 2004; HILL, 2006 cited in GONZÁLEZ, in press) teacher education and professional development. In this regards, Lundvall (2002) indicates that as universities open themselves up to the market, they must at the same time preserve the long term, creative and critical aspects of academic research. Market exposure of the university is not a policy aim and universities must consolidate their traditional ethical and social dimensions of knowledge in order to enhance the overall diversification and differentiation of knowledge production.

The question therefore is in practice, how are universities in Latin America leading with the marketization and businessification of education?

In practice, all Teacher Education programs in Colombia, since 1994, are required to develop research and produce research outcomes. Thus, faculty and students need to be engaged in pedagogical innovation and research projects and present and publish the results in nationally or internationally indexed journals. Therefore, TE programs in most Colombian universities now include a research component. Five-year initial teacher preparation programs in Colombia attempt to promote reflective practice, through which teachers’ experiences as
learners are central, provide theoretical tools to analyze the issues underlying language teaching in public and private schools in order to become critical reflective practitioners; and support the development of pedagogical innovation and research about teachers’ self-initiated classroom inquiry.

The 32 five-year undergraduate language programs in Colombia are planned around three main components: The Language component, which includes studying the formal aspects of the target language and developing linguistic and communicative competence in it; the Content component which includes ELT methods, second language acquisition theories, specialized seminars in ELT pedagogy and The Practicum research component which addresses students needs to become reflective teachers and researchers.

3. The Colombian framework for teacher professional development (TPD)

To address the question: How are we envisioning language teaching education to promote learning and teaching for social transformation? I shall say that in Colombia two waves in teacher professional development have predominated during the last years. One local framework centered on processes and practice of teaching was proposed by Antanas Mockus, the major of the city of Bogotá, and implemented by many teacher educators in Bogota. It includes three basic components: theoretical and pedagogical updating, classroom innovation and research. Within our local framework for TPD pedagogical updating provides additional theoretical perspectives for classroom innovation, shapes teachers’ discourses for teaching and promotes classroom inquiry. For Norton & Toohey (2004) innovations in teacher education practices that are centrally concerned with social change require reflection, thoughtful analysis and creative action. They state that “Innovative approaches to language education research can help to inform critical pedagogical practices in the language classroom” (NORTON & TOOHEY, 2004, p. 6).

Promoting a collaborative environment for pedagogical innovation and classroom inquiry requires considering teachers as experts on their particular educational contexts (CLAVIJO et al., 2004). For Burns (1999) the importance of collaboration is to promote dialogic forms of learning. She claims that “collaborative action is potentially more empowering than action research conducted individually as it offers a strong framework for whole-school change” (BURNS, 1999, p. 13)

Norton & Toohey (2004) also defend that pedagogy can be enhanced through the collaboration of teachers-as-researchers and researchers-as-teachers.
Another local framework for teacher professional development was designed by Arias (1994) in Medellin to illustrate the dynamics for TPD and it includes four moments: awareness, reflection on teaching, reflective teaching and action research and move from an individual teacher work to the work of a group of teachers, to groups of teachers, to institutions and groups of institutions.

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*Teachers’ needs, resources available, curriculum, evaluation systems*

**Figure 1: Dynamics for TPF (ARIAS, 1994)**

With the adoption of these local frameworks we understand the need to unite experience with practice in education and value the experiences presented in teachers’ personal life as learners to understand how they construct their own explanations of teaching through their narratives which in turn inform us about their sources of knowledge in their practice. Therefore, the implementation of local frameworks for TPD is supported by theories that value learning and teaching experience, learning through inquiry; and teachers’ knowledge construction and transformation.

Regarding the value of experience in education Dewey (1938) asserts that there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education considering that our knowledge and beliefs are framed within experiences that are part of our life and literacy histories.

Johnson & Golombek (2002) also believe that inquiring into teachers’ personal and professional growth reveals teachers as constructing their own explanations of teaching. Research argues that what teachers know about teaching is largely socially constructed out of the experiences and classrooms from which teachers have come. Such socially situated views of knowledge and knowing argue that the processes of learning are socially negotiated,
constructed through experiences in and with the social practices associated with particular activities, in particular social contexts (COBB & BOWERS, 1999; WENGER, 1998).

Cochran-Smith & Lytle’s (1993) extensive research on teaching and teacher research present a rather unique way of looking at teachers’ knowledge. From their perspective, knowledge for teaching is not something received by teachers from universities to be used at schools, -outside-in- a position that focuses on the linear transmission of knowledge. They consider a different theory of knowledge for teaching that views teachers as knowers and as the primary source of knowledge generation. Their notion of knowledge for teaching draws on teachers’ interpretive frameworks built from their own histories and intellectual interests used in their practice to have a positive effect on the learning community. This inside/outside structure creates a dynamic that is inside-out rather than outside-in.

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) consider that teachers generate both local and public knowledge through doing inquiry in their own classrooms. Local knowledge, for them, is used to signal both what teachers come to know about their own knowledge through teacher research and what communities of teacher researchers come to know when they build knowledge collaboratively. Public knowledge, on the other hand, is knowledge generated through teacher research that has the potential to be a significant way of knowing for the larger communities of both school-based teachers and university-based researchers and teacher educators.

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) assert that inquiry generated and written by school-based teachers presents knowledge about teaching and learning in classrooms through the questions teachers ask and the interpretive frames that teachers use to understand and to improve their own classroom practice. “Research by teachers in their own classrooms represents a radical change to current assumptions about how teachers learn and about what constitutes a knowledge base for teaching” (COCHRAN-SMITH & LYTLE, 1993, p. 5).

4. An imposed model of TPD for EFL teaching: a second colonization

Although the previously described framework for TPD is supported in local and foreign language theories of teacher education and development and have proven successful, a model of teacher education in Colombia proposed by the British Council as a foreign agency has placed new standards aligned with the Common European Framework (CEF) that need to be fulfilled by language teacher and students in the whole country. Their goal is to have all Colombian teachers of English be tested for their proficiency levels in English with the tests designed exclusively by Cambridge University and as a result of their low proficiency take
the training courses designed only by the British institutions which do not include key components like pedagogical updating, innovation and research. We believe this is an act of linguistic colonization and imposition of the English language as the only foreign language required to be taught in all schools in our country.

These political decisions that undermine the existence of other second languages in our country, that do not consider the different regional and local conditions and needs of teachers and students in schools in Colombia and standardize the procedures and outcomes for teaching and learning are greatly affecting the language teachers, the students and the schools. We, as teacher educators and researchers, strongly react to that situation and publicly announce our academic position through articles published in academic journals, presentations in local, regional, national and international conferences and research projects proposed to document the situation in public and private schools.

To this respect, Ayala & Alvarez (2005) consider that the implementation of a foreign framework like the CEF may be quite complex for our setting since there are profound differences between Colombia and Europe. González (2007) considers that the imposed leading role of the British council holds back the development of a local community with enough validity to construct a language policy and Cardenas (2006) additionally presents critical points of the national ‘Bilingual Colombia Program’ planned for the period 2004-2019.

She claims that the Bilingual Colombia Project planned with the purpose of improving the quality of English language teaching at all educational levels requires that by 2010 students reach a B1 or pre-intermediate level and teachers a minimum of B2. By 2019, the students’ school exit level be B2 and their teachers at least B2. These established proficiency levels to be attained in the long-term are problematic and unrealistic since decisions have been made and monitored by relying mainly on tests and therefore language teaching is only focused on language testing.

González (2007, p. 327) considers that “the current teacher development model is a representation of colonial traditional, and central discourses in ELT that must be reshaped by the new, local and peripheral knowledge constructed by Colombian ELT scholars and teachers” and argues that its most notorious weakness is probably the failure to recognize and value teachers’ expertise and knowledge outside the dominant discourses.

The intellectual moment we are currently living calls for a more critical view of teacher education and to how to promote local development and value local knowledge in Colombia and Latin America. The current postcolonial wave questions how colonial views
impose hierarchies that are very unhealthy in the shaping of local identities. In this dynamic the peripheral countries still feel they need to be colonized by central countries considered the producers of knowledge.

5. Challenges in teacher education

The current socio-political situation with an imposed ‘bilingualism’ (English-Spanish) in Colombia has narrowed the view of an overwhelming reality that we are a multicultural country with more than 60 indigenous languages (LANDABURU, 2005 cited in GUERRERO, 2008) to impose a political agenda that only protects the development of English as a foreign language as in colonial times.

This situation poses many challenges in the teacher education field as it necessarily implies to be informed and prepared to evaluate critically the educational policies for language teaching and learning, in our particular case, related to national projects such as Bilingual Colombia, Uses of ICTs in schools, adoption of EFL standards, Research issues in Teacher Education and Teacher Leadership and Teacher professional development within consolidated communities of practice.

Becoming more independent intellectually as a nation from the imposed dominant ideologies and being able to value and support local knowledge and production is a priority in our country. It requires understanding the powerful political and economic status that English as a foreign language holds in our national context in Latin America as a language of power and prestige (DE MEJIA, 2002)

6. Local knowledge construction and promotion

To this respect, González (2007, 2003, 2005) and Canagarajah (2005) consider important to value local knowledge construction to consider it more relevant to address context specific problems. Canagarajah (2005, p. xiv) claims that

The local should not be of secondary relation or subsidiary status to the dominant discourses and institutions from powerful communities, whereby the global is simply applied, translated or contextualized to the local. A local grounding should become the primary and critical force in the construction of contextually relevant knowledge if we are to develop more plural discourses.

He strongly believes that we have underestimated the knowledge traditions of minority communities in our effort to systematize knowledge from the perspectives and contexts of the powerful (CANAGARAJAH, 2005, p. xix). He cites a relevant example to illustrate local
practices. Souza (2005), a Brazilian researcher who attempted to recover local literacies explicates the logic of a multimodal literacy tradition as practiced by the Kashinaw’a in Brazil. The texts of this community feature the complex integration of diverse symbol systems – that is, words, pictures, icons, color, and spatial arrangement. Such local traditions of literacy provide useful information to understand the new texts emerging in postmodern communication, especially in the multimodal, polysemiotic, and hypertextual examples in cyberspace. To cope with these emergent ‘multiliteracies’ and redefine existing literacy paradigms, local practices from precolonial times provide useful hints. His study confirms the paradoxical power of local traditions to contribute constructively to translocal knowledge (CANAGARAJA, 2005, p. xix).

7. Promoting academic networks and alliances

Academic alliances are very valuable when academic agendas are set for developing pedagogical and research projects. Within institutions team working with teachers from different subject areas to carry out curricular innovations prove to be very useful and it is more possible to achieve the goals proposed and a wider impact in the educational community. Within the academic community in higher education institutions joining efforts to carry out research projects among research groups (local, national and international levels) is strategic for economical purposes because both institutions provide funds and human resources from different fields and disciplinary perspectives to dialogue and consolidate communities of practice. Collaborations at the local, national and international levels also create opportunities for academic production.

An example of academic alliances at the local level that contribute to consolidate our communities of practice already existing at Distrital University in Bogotá is the academic collaboration among three masters programs of the School of Sciences and Education: M.A. in Applied Linguistics to TEFL, Masters in Pedagogy of Spanish as the Mother Tongue, and Masters in Language and Communication. We collaborate sharing faculty to teach specialized courses, we also exchange research experiences among the three research groups and we also make graduate student work visible through our publications.

In the national context, collaboration among three recognized research groups from three different public Universities two in Bogota and one in Medellin supported the creation of the new graduate program in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning at Universidad de Antioquia to fulfill the needs of Language Teacher Education expressed by EFL teachers and
documented in research projects and articles by teacher researchers from Universidad de Antioquia.

8. Transnational collaborations

Academic programs within Colombian institutions promote communities of practice interested in joining efforts with academic groups from Universities in different countries through Institutional agreements: Three research projects have been carried out:
(a) On processes of teacher innovation by researchers at Universidad Distrital with the support of researchers from University of Arizona and University of Massachusetts-Amherst in USA.
(b) On digital literacy in schools carried out by researchers from two groups at Universidad Distrital in Colombia and one group at University of Dundee, Scotland.
(c) On undergraduate students’ interaction through debate blogs at Universidad Distrital in Colombia and USACH in Chile.

9. Publications

The results of local, national and international research is published by teacher educators and researchers, evaluated by peers and published in nationally recognized journals to continue the dialogue among Colombian ELT teacher communities with other communities of practice in the Americas.

National journals such as Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal (http://calj.udistrital.edu.co), Profile Issues in Teacher Professional development, Ikala Journal of Language and Culture, Lenguaje, and Folios, all from public universities exchange publications and maintain permanent reciprocal academic support.

10. Language teachers projects in search for social transformation

The following projects briefly present inservice teachers’ work in pedagogical and research projects that aim at social transformation in their educational contexts, make visible the voices of teachers and students from the America’s and critically evaluate social, political and moral issues sometimes made invisible in our classrooms.

This research study analyzes and interprets Colombian children’s oral narratives victims of forced displacement. The corpus of this study is composed by 100 girls and boys’ oral narratives between 7 and 14 years old which were recorded in interaction with an adult. Based on an enunciative, interactional and social analysis the discursive characteristics and the identity features of these oral narratives were understood. To resort to interpretation made the various meanings of discursive, affective, social, cultural and political nature understandable as well as the characterization of the narratives of displacement as a discursive subgenre. Besides, we have been able to identify that regardless of the apparent similarity of these narratives, a great heterogeneity exists that reveals the uniqueness of the experience lived by these children as authors.

10.2. Experiencing literacy in Bogota’s megalibraries by Amparo Clavijo Olarte (Bibliored project http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub113/pub113english.pdf)

With the purpose of having EFL teachers know and experience Bogotá’s three public mega libraries a class project was proposed as part of my graduate seminar on literacy. This activity promoted Murrell’s (2001) concept of The Community Teacher which he defines as an approach to teaching and learning that pays careful attention to the situatedness of learning – that the setting, context and fabric of human relationships in which learning occurs is important to the quality and impact of that learning. His view resists the separation of learning from practice and purposeful activity. This view also resists the separation of schooling from everyday world of students.

The concept of Community Teacher also takes advantage of the fact that our activity and our cognitive learning is always bound up with the co-participation and activity of others. It is an approach that views learning as a process of co-participation and activity with other persons and human systems. During this activity EFL teachers experienced and documented through video and text the literacy practices observed and promoted in the libraries (Tintal, Tunal and Virgilio Barco), the facilities and inclusive systems offered for minority populations (blind, handicapped) in the community where the library was placed and to reflect upon the multiple experiences that children, adolescents and adults have in the library as readers and writers.
10.3. Stories of communities: students and teachers leading school broadcasts by Carolina Rodriguez (forthcoming)

This pedagogical experience explores ways of encouraging secondary school students to communicate in mother tongue and in English as a foreign language through the use of media and ICT’s in classroom and curricular activities while building and sharing the acknowledged students’ experiences in an international community: http://www.proyectemonos.org.

The central goal in this project is to provide students at San Agustin School a public school in the south of Bogotá, Colombia, with literacy resources that are interesting, fun, and non-traditional. The core is to set up a community where radio, newspaper, television, video, images and ICT’s play the role of additional inputs and increase the community interest in literacy.

11. Closing remarks

This meeting of Latin American Teacher Educators in Brazil provided a space to reflect upon the value of local knowledge in Language Teacher Education and the need to look critically at the ideologies supporting LTE programs. A critical ideological stance would allow to look at motivated interests coming from the economic and corporate worlds that might be underpinning national policies for LTE. Based on the interest of Latin American leaders and the reflections presented we may create communities of inquiry to collaborate among Latin American countries through academic networks and alliances that would place local knowledge as a valid source to orient LTE.

12. References


