Redefining the Role of Language in the Curriculum: Inquiry/based curriculum an alternative

By Amparo Clavijo Olarte Ph.D.
Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas

ABSTRACT

This article aims at analyzing the role of language in the development of curriculum in Colombian classrooms and intends to suggest a redefinition of language as a way to create a more participatory structure of curriculum. In the development of this inquiry plan, I used data collected from teachers in Colombia that reflect their perception of language in classrooms, literature that theoretically illuminates inquiry based teaching, and my own insights as a learner and teacher.

ANTECEDENTS

During the development of a graduate course: “Teacher as Researcher”, as a student, I was expected to think of aspects of my learning that could lead me into inquiry. Book browsing, class readings, class discussions, the formation of book groups and research interest groups were all activities that promoted a lot of thinking and questioning that in many ways provided multiple ideas for inquiry. Be-
cause inquiry was so explicitly the intention of the instructor in this class, the class environment all focused on facilitating access to research and inquiry.

I then became very interested in developing a similar inquiry-based structure of learning and teaching in my own context in schools in Colombia. Thus, I started to think about ways of introducing the idea of revisiting what teachers teach, the way they teach it and the purpose for teaching it in Colombian schools. I am most interested in studying the role played by language in the curriculum as a way to promote thinking through reading and writing.

INTRODUCTION

This inquiry aims at analyzing the role of language in the development of curriculum in Colombian classrooms and intends to suggest a redefinition of language as a way to create a more participatory structure of curriculum that puts inquiry at its core. To be able to carry out this inquiry plan, I used data collected from teachers in Colombia that reflect their perception of language in classrooms, literature that theoretically illustrates inquiry based teaching, and my own insights as a learner and teacher.

The contents of this article include an overview of the educational context in Colombia, a rationale and justification of the study, a review of literature, collection of data from Colombian EFL teachers, interpretation and discussion of the data, and pedagogical implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education.

I would like to start by providing a rationale that places my concerns for curriculum changes in the current situation of school systems in Colombia. The fact that I am a participant in such an educational context explains my understandings of how it works as well as the need to implement innovation and changes that reflect my evolving thinking in graduate school.

CURRENT ORIENTATIONS IN COLOMBIAN EDUCATION

According to regulations in Colombian public education (Ley 115, artículo 104), teachers play a central role in education. They are considered agents of change who are expected to educate students in an integral way promoting social, cultural and moral values of our society. The same regulations also require educators to prepare themselves to improve their pedagogical practices. Teachers are expected to receive permanent instruction for professional development, develop an institutional educational project, and work continuously on the bettering of the educational practices in schools.
In all school settings, language is used to communicate institutional plans, to come to a consensus on how to approach a project, to decide on the implementation of teaching strategies and techniques, to make decisions about evaluation, to give and receive feedback from and to students, parents and peers and for an infinite more number of social and educational purposes. In sum, language represents the vehicle of communication to express thoughts and to construct knowledge in classrooms. Classrooms structures that do not consider the purpose of using language for social, educational and cultural functions are depriving students from connecting their personal world with the world of school.

The lack of articulation and integration of the subject areas in the curriculum, the consideration of language as an object of instruction rather than as the vehicle to express thinking and communicate thoughts in the construction of knowledge and the resulting separation between language and thinking in classrooms are school situations that justify this discussion because they represent a big problem in educational settings in Colombia.

My paper is an invitation to reconsider the role of language in the curriculum in Colombian schools. Through this invitation I would like to suggest to teachers and schools in Colombia, ways in which teaching and learning be more authentic and not based solely on facts but on learners' active engagement.

I believe that curriculum organization and development represents a way of thinking and acting in school by teachers and students. Their active roles influence their decision about how to construct curriculum. Teachers' concern about "covering" the content in a fixed curriculum imposed to them should be guided towards deciding about ways to uncover such content in many interesting ways. It takes for teachers thinking and searching about different ways to teach and strong belief that their students will learn, and from students an active rather than passive role in classroom activities.

In order to further explain my ideas and beliefs about the functions of language and the type of curriculum that view learners and teachers as inquirers, I would like now to briefly introduce the reader, to Halliday's model of language and Short's authoring cycle as a curricular framework for inquiry.

Halliday (1979) articulated the concept that there are three types of learning that involve language: learning language, learning through language and learning about language. According to Halliday, these three kinds of learning are interdependent; they happen simultaneously in the course of real speech events and literacy events. These are instances of the use of oral or written language by real people with real purposes, needs and intentions, in the context of real events.
Short, K. (1996) adapted Halliday’s concept of learning to visually represent his model of learning in three circles that overlap each other and placed inquiry at the center. She extended his concept of learning to develop the *Authoring Cycle as a Curricular Framework* that supports teachers in putting their beliefs about teaching and learning into action in the classroom. This framework reflects the relationships and connections across curricular engagements. Short’s curricular framework includes seven key moments in the cycle: building from the known, taking the time to find questions for inquiry, gaining new perspectives, attending to differences, sharing what was learned, planning new inquiries and taking thoughtful new action (Short, K. & Harste, J. with Burke, C. 1996). The interplay of the seven moments in classroom learning events allows instruction to develop learners as authors and inquirers.

Since Colombian educational system seems to be moving away from traditional teaching and promoting active participation of both students and teachers in classrooms, inquiry based teaching could be a well received suggestion. The implementation of inquiry based curriculum would permit teachers and learners to develop as authors and inquirers and language and thinking would take a central role in learning.

Because the issues of language learning, inquiry and curriculum, and language and thinking are issues widely discussed by theorists, researchers and educators in multiple sources, I would like to present a literature review that provides theoretical and practical perspectives that have contributed to my inquiry.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

My experience finding sources that support my inquiry project represent a dialogue with different authors on very different terms and tones. Freire and Dewey brought me into political and sociological discourses of power and pedagogy. Their arguments promote educational change on the basis of liberation from social and school structures imposed upon the learner. Halliday presents his theory of language learning that is later expanded by Goodman et al (1987) in their conceptualization of language and thinking in a dual curriculum. Wells (1995), from a social constructivist point of view, suggest a theory of learning and teaching enacted through an inquiry-oriented curriculum. His suggestions are based on observations of classrooms where such curriculum is implemented. And Short (1996), with a group of teacher researchers, wrote about their own experiences in creating curriculum and the implementation of the *Authoring Cycle*. Those experiences in classrooms at different educational levels led them to theorizing about learning, teaching and curriculum from reflective practice.
The common concerns and perspectives of the authors from my understanding of their readings are: their view of education as a way of constructing and re-constructing knowledge, the central role they give to language and thinking in learning, their beliefs about learners and their creative powers, and finally, their consideration that such creative power can be maintained and developed through inquiry.

Freire's most relevant contribution to my paper is his banking concept of education in which he criticized the lifeless, traditional transaction between a depositor: the teacher and the depositories: the students. In such traditional pedagogical practices the learner is perceived as the empty vessel whose thinking needs to be shaped by a more knowledgeable one: the teacher. He/she chooses the program content, and the students adapt it. Learners are presented with solutions for already solved problems. They are not given the opportunities to pose problems because that is the job of the teacher as the most knowledgeable actor in classroom instruction.

Freire (1970) suggests an alternative pedagogy that engages students in critical thinking in a participatory way. He urges educators to abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of problems. Through problem-posing education students will be able to find a way to relate themselves to the world around them. His problem-posing education theory is justified by his conceptualization of knowledge:

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry of human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other (p.53).

The problem-posing educator, in Freire's terms, constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students. He/she creates, together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of concepts becomes true knowledge, at the level of experience and practice (p.62).

Freire's legacy to us as educators is an important one. If we are to convert his ideas into pedagogical praxis, I believe we must, as educators, reflect on what the essence of education is. We ought to think about what is it that we are giving the greatest attention: to content, the physical aspects of school, our teaching or the learners? What are we transforming? We are not transforming material matter, we are transforming and having an impact on the thinking of a huge group of human beings being children, adolescents or adults. And finally how do we perceive them? Freire very nicely guides us into how we should perceive learners:
The teacher’s efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them. (p.56)

Finally, his problem-posing method encompasses a strong philosophy of education as liberation of systems of oppression. It includes the actors: teachers and students, their beliefs, attitudes, thinking and knowledge about themselves, and the curriculum that represents their connection with the world. Freire presents to us a different and unique point of departure for pedagogical practice one that is not static but aims at discovering and transforming. One that permits creating and re-creating through the every day transformation of our thinking and our believing.

Dewey, on the other hand, as educator presents us with a sociological perspective on how society affects schools. He also studies in great detail the impact of school in the life of the child and the child and the curriculum. The last two aspects are the most directly relevant to my present concerns in this publication.

His ideas supporting active rather than passive learning agree with Freire’s problem-posing method as opposite of the banking concept of education. Dewey’s terms to explain the dependency of students’ thinking upon the teacher’s thinking, however, are framed within a unique example related to the activity of looking for suitable chairs for children at his school. From the response of one of the dealers from whom he was trying to buy chairs and desks for children Dewey found out how education was perceived in the most traditional sense. The dealers’ remark to Dewey’s search for chairs and desks for children is as follows: “I am afraid we have not what you want. You want something at which the children may work; these are all for listening” (Dewey, 1990. p.31).

Education and schooling then are perceived as merely about “listening”. According to Dewey, the attitude of listening constitutes passivity and also explains the uniformity of method for teaching and curriculum. If everything is on a “listening” basis, you can have uniformity of material and method, argues Dewey. Passivity does not reflect the life of the child, it might say about the studying of the child but the school is not where the child lives (p.34).

Dewey then suggests to reverse the order of activity occurring in the classroom. Instead of children activities preceding the giving of information on the part of the teacher, it should antecede it, where the children have a motive for demanding the information. This comment suggests the consideration of student originated inquiry, so that learning starts from questions raised by children rather than from concerns that the teacher has on what children should learn.

His thinking influenced by Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel clearly acknowledges human conditions and the natural need for inquiry. He considered that first
humans, and specially young children, are active and curious by nature and second that educators need to be aware of that fact. (Dewey, 1990 p.xxii) His ideas are reflected in the way he defined curriculum. He considered that curriculum instead of integrating knowledge for the child compartmentalizes it into a set of sciences that the child is to learn at school.

Dewey’s early work highlights the importance of the integration of curriculum, in his claim that “we do not have a series of stratified earths, one of which is mathematical, another physical, another historical, and so on. All studies grow out of relations in the one great common world. When the child lives in varied but concrete and active relationship to this common world, his studies are naturally unified....Relate school to life, and all studies are of necessity correlated.” (Dewey, 1943 p.91)

Dewey’s solution to the problem of the existing gap between the child’s world and experiences and the subject-matter that make up for the course of study is for the adult, in this case the teacher, to abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready made in itself, outside the child’s experience; stop thinking of the child’s experience as also something hard and fast; see it as something fluent, embryonic, vital; and we realize that the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process (p.189).

Goodman et al (1987) present their theory of language and thinking as the center of the curriculum. As they discuss it, both language and thought development are nurtured through social interactions and both reflect social and individual characteristics of life within a community. Their proposed thought and language-centered curriculum is also called the “dual curriculum”. It is dual according to them because it has a double agenda: It is a curriculum for the development of language and thinking and it is a curriculum for learning through language and thinking.

Goodman et al (op.cit) utilized Halliday’s concept of learning language which involves three main aspects: learning language, learning through language and learning about language. They see these three types of learning as interdependent and happening simultaneously in the realization of real every day events involving people use of oral and written language for their needs, purposes and intentions. (p.6)

Goodman et al (op.cit) strongly recommend that teachers be able to articulate learning language, learning through language and learning about language through the development of school curriculum. They consider that teachers cannot teach language apart from its use as a prerequisite to learning through lan-
language. That means that, for example, when children are reading and using language for a functional purpose they might need to stop and think about how language functions to be able to learn that language being read. At this point all three opportunities are present but as part as an authentic, meaningful literacy event for both children and teachers.

It is precisely the study and analysis of Halliday’s theory of learning language which has determined my interest in proposing a change in curriculum organization and teaching in schools with traditional models of teaching. As I mentioned before, Halliday presents a concept of learning that includes three major aspects that involve language. Within his concept, he defends meaningful learning occurring only if real purposes, needs and intentions, are placed in the context of real events.

He clearly states that teachers and curricula cannot usefully sequence these. They cannot teach about language in order to facilitate learning language. They cannot teach language apart from its use as a prerequisite to language. Thus, the school curriculum should develop language through learning and learning through language, and in the process of doing both, children develop an authentic interest in language itself and learn about language.

Wells’ reflection on language and the inquiry-oriented curriculum represents another source of information for my inquiry. He claims that a social constructivist theory of learning and teaching enacted through an inquiry-oriented curriculum would serve the two goals of education: transmission of knowledge and skills to students and fostering students’ individual potential and creativity. He sees those two goals as compatible rather than in conflict.

Wells (1995) observed classrooms where inquiry-oriented curriculum was implemented, and from his observations he concluded that the most effective learning takes place when the learner is faced with a question of problems arising from an inquiry to which he or she is committed (p.233). He believes that because learning and teaching are social endeavors knowledge is constructed not within, but between individuals. Wells’ ideas suggests the co-construction of knowledge through collaboration in the classroom. Collaboration in the construction of meanings implies sharing personal experiences that bring together community and school.

Teachers, according to Wells, as participants in collaboration and co-construction of meanings and knowledge with the students in the classrooms should
adopt a responsive attitude towards students interests and needs. A way to reflect that responsive attitude for teachers is by organizing teaching around students' inquiries. In other words by incorporating inquiry as a key component of the curriculum.

Short et al's (1996) concerns about developing learners as inquirers were in this respect similar to Well's, Goodman's, Freire's and Dewey's. In their search for a model that fully captures what they view as learning they encountered themselves with different definitions of curriculum and a variety of teaching practices. They experienced, as many of us might have in our first years of teaching, a traditional way of teaching and implementing the curriculum. In this traditional way, teachers teach reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies as separate subject areas. The traditional type of curriculum, as Short et al have presented it, is merely focused on the teaching of facts (p.253).

Their nonconformity with teaching as a transmission of facts led them to move from facts into activities as ways to create curriculum around a different unit. They explored units and thematic approaches and taught them through activities. Later, the authors report, that activities were connected across subject areas around a common theme through webbing and brainstorming the topic or theme with students. A definite transition from a curriculum that reflected the teaching of facts to a curriculum based on activity, according to the authors, was determined by their understanding that learners as inquirers needed to be problem-posers rather than problem solvers, as stated by Freire (p.257).

As a response to this concern Short et al suggest the implementation of a curriculum that allows learners to author each one of the components in the curriculum and thus become active participants through inquiry. Inquiry is viewed as a way to connect the child's world with new understandings, new questions and issues that the child wants to explore further. They view the authoring cycle as a cycle of inquiry that integrates personal and social knowing, knowledge systems, and sign systems within a social context based in education for democracy (p.261). They called their model of curriculum The Authoring Cycle Model of Curriculum.

The authoring cycle is set in motion when students engage in individual expert projects that grow out of a personal focus for each student that is not connected to a particular class focus, but it is personally significant to that student's life. (p.263) The major components of the Authoring Cycle are:

**Building from the known:** Connecting to and building from children's own life experiences is essential to learning. Initial engagements need to support stu-
dents in making connections to what they already know and in telling their stories about these experiences.

**Taking the time to find questions for inquiry:** Learners need time to “wander and wonder” as they explore a topic from many different perspectives. They do not immediately develop a question, but take time to explore new understandings, gather interesting facts and ideas, and notice contradictions and connections. Through observations and conversations, an interest or feeling of tension begins to grow, and this gradually leads learners to select a focused question to investigate.

**Gaining new perspectives:** as students move into focused inquiry, they examine their questions from new perspectives to increase the complexity and depth of their research. They collaborate with other learners in inquiry groups and investigate their questions by using many different resources, materials and tools from a range of knowledge systems and sign systems.

**Attending to difference.** Learners are constantly faced with perspectives and ideas that challenge their thinking as they interact with others. They feel tension as their ideas are challenged, and need quiet, reflective time to reconsider what they believe and understand related to their inquiry.

**Sharing what was learned.** At some point, learners need to go public with what they currently know and understand about their inquiry focus. When they pull their ideas together to present them to others, their understandings are transformed.

**Planning new inquiries.** Students need opportunities to reflect on what they know (content), how they come to know (process), and why they inquire (purpose and goals). After their presentations, students are able to take a more reflexive stance on their learning and consider broader implications for their lives.

**Taking thoughtful new action.** The inquiry cycle is a never ending process and so each set of inquiries leads to new questions and invitations. As student end a particular inquiry experience, they live time to think about actions they want to take in their lives that go beyond the classroom.

The Authoring Cycle Curriculum is better illustrated in the following figure.

**Halliday's model and the perceptions of Language by Colombian Teachers.**

With the purpose of knowing the different uses of language in classrooms in which English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), eighteen Colombian EFL
THE AUTHORING CYCLE.

Building from the known
Browsing, talking and listening

Taking the time to find
Questions for inquiry
Wandering and wondering
Experience centers
Observing and exploring

Taking Thoughtful
New Action
Invitation for action

Planning New
Inquiries
Group reflection
Reflection portfolios
Strategy lessons

COLLECT IDEAS

THE AUTHORING CYCLE

Gaining New Perspectives
Inquiry groups
Indepth researching
Tools for inquiry
Studio time

Sharing What Was Learned
Inquiry presentations

Attending to difference
Revision on inquiry
Learning logs

teachers were presented with Halliday’s model of language (adapted by Kathy Short, 1996) and their responses were registered. Teachers were asked to think of classroom activities they apply in their classrooms and classify them into the three aspects of the model. Halliday considers that in addition to learning about language, learning through language and learning language are two aspects that contribute to making language learning a more integrated, realistic experience. The following diagram presents the responses by teachers:

**LEARN LANGUAGE**
- Learn vocabulary in context
- Contextualize new words in sentences, paragraphs and stories
- Use of idiomatic expressions
- Contextualize vocabulary and grammar structures
- Analyze the register of the language and compare
- Reading and answering questions
- Independent reading, choral reading, buddy reading
- Using tag questions for emphasis
- Develop skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking
- Spelling and writing of self reports
- Pronunciation exercises, oral story telling, book talks
- Writing guidelines for writing, focusing the students on a topic
- Role plays

**LEARN THROUGH LANGUAGE**
- Students learn through speaking and writing tasks
- Analysis of the language used in context
- Analysis of structure of spoken and written discourse
- Writing sentences and paragraphs
- Role plays, text discussion texts, news, debates, current events
- Reading a Listening
- Reader’s theater, oral storytelling, essays and plays, literature, songs, video sessions
- Theme units
- Oral/Written summaries of technical texts
- Development of short projects (research)

**LEARN ABOUT LANGUAGE**
- Compare the structures based on meaning
- Categorize words according to their function in the sentence
- Analyze word order in the sentence
- Compare theory from different texts with the actual use in context
- Error analysis sessions (taken from the products of the students)
- Practicing pronunciation, Reading aloud (stress and intonations)
- Reading theories on language acquisition
- Make grammar points clear. Comparison of sentences in clear distinct contexts
- Shades of meaning in vocabulary
- Language functions
- Focused lessons on syntax, grammar, phonetics, morphology, vocabulary, pragmatics and semantics
- Teacher-students tasks. Word and Grammar exercises

Interpretation and Application of Halliday’s model by Colombian School Teachers.
My interpretation of the responses given by EFL teachers is that although they present a wide variety of classroom activities for students to be in contact and get familiarized with the foreign language, their teaching seems to be oriented basically towards the developing of language skills. Due to that emphasis on skills development, classroom language activities are more focused towards learning about language. Teachers, however, classified activities in “the learn language” and “learn through language” circles, but they are also related to the manipulation of language structures, lexicon, register, and analysis of discourse, among others. This labeling of activities to me reflects the teachers’ perceptions of what students should learn to be able to perform in their second or foreign language and what includes their own experiences with language.

A particular expression used by teachers in their responses is “in context”. They mention learn vocabulary in context and compare sentences in different contexts as some of the activities proposed. Their use of teaching “in context” is limiting to my perception of language as a dynamic process. My view of language puts socialization and interaction at the core of learning. Learning about language is a result of exploring and experimenting with language in a natural way.

Teachers’ interpretations of “in context” corresponds to a grammatically correct use of words in a sentence or a paragraph. The idea of using words in context in specific situations does not necessarily mean that students can interact with the text, create a new text and be critical about it. It only requires that students understand specific meanings of those words used within a sentence and given appropriate applications to that knowledge. More than knowledge about the correct use of words in a sentence is needed by learners to make sense of the language.

With this partial but significant description of classroom activities developed in EFL classrooms, I consider that there is a need to find a different starting point to teaching language. Learners’ experiences and previous knowledge are not present and learners’ interests and needs are not either. The voice of the learners is not heard in this classrooms because they are being considered as passive recipients of knowledge. Because their voice is not heard, we do not see other routes to learning based on inquiry or novel questions whose answers could be found through research projects.

Teachers’ ideas of language might be that it cannot be changed or inquired about. All about language is said and has to be taught as said for proficiency to occur. For this reason, teachers might think that there is no place for explorations
and innovations with language. Also, they might have never experienced language through inquiry and that limits them to present it to students in that way.

From my understandings and teaching experiences my application of Halliday's model of language in classrooms includes the following activities:

**LEARN THROUGH LANGUAGE**
- Freewriting/dialogue journals
- Group discussions of literature read
- Book reviews
- Responses to literature
- Development of individual of group inquiry projects
- Socialization of classroom projects in intra and inter-school events
- Theme Units
- Writing for school newspaper

**LITERATURE LOGS**
- Literature discussions
- Computer programs inquiry
- Genres studies

**SHARE READING**
- Reading conferences
- Reading discussions

**LEARN ABOUT LANGUAGE**
- Mini-Lessons
- Strategy Lessons
- Whole group studies about culture represented in different uses of language in texts and vice versa.
- Studies of different genres
- Authentic writing tasks that represent personal interests, needs and concerns as well as academic growth.

Interpretation and application of Halliday's model by writer
Short's application of Halliday's model of language in teacher education programs also serves to identify teachers' beliefs and philosophies of teaching because they lie at the surface of curriculum organization. Short & Burke (1991) express such relation between beliefs and curriculum. They consider that curriculum helps them not only to clarify their beliefs but to express what they value. Therefore curriculum is defined on the basis of their beliefs.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION**

The object of study in this article goes beyond the examination of a model that appropriately suits the needs for a single educational grade level. It is a discussion that serves as the starting point to rethink the way we as teachers explore language through multiple activities in the classroom.

For experienced teachers this reflection can contribute to raising their awareness about the organization of meaningful learning activities that can be placed in the context of real events through which learning language and learning through language can occur. Teachers can also reflect about how to organize curriculum in a way that language is not taught about but used as a way to learn about the world and ourselves.

For pre-service teachers the discussion can present a concern that prepares them to think about ways to uncover the curriculum through meaningful activities with students. It is also a reflection that aims at raising pre-service teachers' awareness about their future teaching in classrooms and about how their students learn language through experiences.

It is my hope that the presentation of a model of inquiry such as the Authoring Cycle Curriculum by Short et al will contribute to the integration of the subject areas in the curriculum by teachers. It will help eradicate the erroneous consideration of language as an object of instruction, and will promote learning through thinking and communication of thoughts that result in the construction of meanings and knowledge through the application of multiple sign systems.

The Authoring Cycle will also support the development of readers and writers as learners engaged in creating meaning in a collaborative process. As reported by Short and Burke (1991) Reading and writing are not just integrated
into their subject area units but are tools they used along with other communication systems to learn.

REFERENCES


References
