

Sociocultural factors involved in the teaching of English as foreign language in rural areas of Colombia: an analysis of the impact on teachers' professional development

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Abstract

Bilingual education has been a very controversial issue in the last decade in Colombia because national laws now aim at fostering English–Spanish bilingualism. In particular, it has been evident that special attention has been paid to privileged, urban contexts, leaving aside the realities of disadvantaged and rural areas. This article attempts to raise awareness of critical sociocultural factors involved in the teaching of English in rural areas to understand the complexity of teachers' professional development considering the particularities of their local work settings. Within the outcomes of this exploration, we found that teachers' development in rural areas is quite different from that in urban areas. The sociocultural issues in the language classroom frame both teachers' labour and their professional development needs.

Keywords: Professional development, rural English teachers, rural education, sociocultural factors.

Introduction

Colombia has established a language policy of bilingualism in education; thus, multiple changes have occurred at different levels in English as a foreign language teaching. The current bilingual policy has provoked an impact at the social and cultural level since every Colombian community, in urban and rural settings, has been mandated to learn English at school. Consequently, English-teachers have been impacted professionally in the sense that they are both in charge of helping everybody else learn English and, in this endeavour, have to be ready to assume new professional challenges.

Even if the new challenges have been considered from the government, researchers and society in general, a few of these challenges have been situated in underprivileged rural areas. Gonzalez (2010), Usma (2009), Guerrero (2008), Sanchez & Obando (2008) and Cardenas (2006) have pointed out how conditions and features of disadvantaged areas such as city suburbs, indigenous communities and rural sectors are not part of the target of the national programme of bilingualism. Furthermore, foreign language teachers in rural areas are immersed in quite difficult situations framed by a range of multifarious sociocultural factors that have made the language teaching profession quite complex.

Stemming from this reality, we wanted to explore the impact of these sociocultural aspects on the growth of professional teachers working in rural areas of Colombia. In this report, first, we outline the main theoretical tenets of the study. Then we explain how we conducted the research with a group of rural teachers from different parts of the country. After that, we discuss the findings regarding the challenges these teachers face in the development of their professional practice. Finally, we present the main conclusions and implications.

Rural education in Colombia

There is a clear historic difference between urban and rural systems of education (Perfetti 2003). Lackin & Gasperini (2004) and the World Bank (2007) explain how rural education is marginalised because of low concentrations of children, economic constraints and lack of materials and resources. Furthermore, Lackin & Gasperini point out that teachers who work in rural areas face adverse working circumstances and are immersed in conditions of under-qualification, inadequate support and poor remuneration. Being a language teacher in a rural area implies unbalanced sociocultural, economic, ethnic and political conditions (Cruz Arcila 2013). Da Silva (2004) explains that rural education is a term used to talk about areas of scarce population which can more clearly be understood from a geographical perspective. On the other hand, Astro

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& Reborati (2008) propose a continuum on which the complexity of what can be understood as rural is elucidated. For our study, we contacted language teachers who work in rural areas at different levels of the continuum proposed by Astro & Reborati.

A sociocultural view of English-teaching in Colombian rural areas

In order to establish connections between the sociocultural factors discussed above and the profession of teaching English as a foreign language, it is highlighted here that language is the core intercultural dialogue between the participants involved (Kramersch 2008; Cruz 2007; Vez 2001). Language should be the basis for human expression and, as an instrument, eases understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of the human individual. Language is an expression of social diversity, ideologies and power relationships. Language, through words and gestures, is what permits the interrelation of values, beliefs, attitudes and actions (Gee 2005; Hall 1997; Bourdieu 1998; Foucault 1984; Velásquez 2002).

In accounting for a wider view of language, consideration of the sociocultural aspects of the teaching of English is crucial. In this sense, it is possible to say that the cultures involved in the language learning process might have shared or different aspects which may facilitate cognitive associations or make the process problematic (Kramersch 2008). Several authors have pointed to intercultural communication as a crucial factor in foreign language teaching (Abdallah-Preteuille 2001; Byram 2000; Cruz 2007; Kramersch 1998, 2001; Lustig & Koester 1999; Oliveras 2000; Real 2007). These studies have contributed, from different perspectives, to understanding the relationships between language and culture. In this exploration, we try to shed some light on English-language teachers' work in rural areas and their professional development.

The term sociocultural contains two ideas. (1) Culture is understood as a collection of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles that constitute an objective hierarchy and which produce and accept certain discourses and activities (Webb et al. 2002: 22). Hence, culture is composed by various elements which, as a whole, model the behaviour of the participants in a group, and these elements can also make this group perceive reality in different ways and have different interests regarding the place they occupy in society (Brislin 1993). (2) The social side of the sociocultural concept, in agreement with Bourdieu (1976), is understood as an objective structure that tends to reproduce capitals

through institutions like family, education, marketing and so on. Then reality becomes naturalised in the human interaction, and this fact makes it recognised as common sense.

Taking into account these conceptions and what has been developed by Nostrand (1967) and Seelye (1984) from a sociolinguistic perspective when defining the concept of culture in language teaching, we have identified five elements intertwining in a sociocultural view of English teaching in rural areas. (1) *The economic situation*: this has to do with the money-making development each of these cultures embraces. According to Bourdieu (1976), this factor creates possibilities and expectations, which in turn contribute to accessing or comprehending each other's cultural capital. (2) *The formal and functional constructs*: these refer to the levels of formality that language involves and the functions it has in the specific society. (3) *Social needs and class*: these determine what each culture would state as priority goals. (4) *Social relationships and behaviours*: these deal with the social roles recognised by members of the group as well as the behaviours that frame politeness, confidence, insecurity and the like. (5) *Cultural and historical heritage*: this sociocultural element packs all the traditions involved in the rituals of the members of a community and the value they provide to them (Nostrand, cited in Kramersch 1996 and Seelye 1984). The comprehension of these elements leads us to draw some conclusions regarding foreign language teaching and rural language teachers' professional development.

Research techniques

In this study, the data collected was mostly textual, its focus was on the participants' views of the phenomenon, and findings were reached following an interpretative process. These characteristics made the study qualitative (Dörnyei 2007). Since our main concern was to contact language teachers from rural areas, we decided to be flexible in terms of the procedures we should follow to collect data from them. We used audio-recorded interviews and questionnaires. Investigator triangulation (Freeman 1998) took place to prevent biases.

Participants

Due to the difficulty in locating rural teachers, convenience sampling criteria (Merriam 2009) were used. We obtained six participants. Three of them were our students in a master's programme, two of them were contacted in a lecture they attended and the other was referred by a colleague. It was

positive and interesting to finally get a group of six rural language teachers who had diverse profiles. Five of the six participants were professional language teachers. One of them holds an MA, and four were in the process of finishing their graduate studies. A point of interest here was that the most experienced teacher was actually a paraprofessional. He had gained teaching experience by teaching itself and was studying for a teaching degree.

Procedures for data collection and analysis

Since we had the idea to gather rural teachers' insights into their professional growth in their work settings, we implemented questionnaires and semi-structured interviews (Freeman 1998; Dörnyei 2007). We collected information regarding the professional background of the participants, their feelings about working in rural areas, their knowledge and opinions about the Colombian linguistic policy, etc (see Appendix 1). We also interviewed the participants to gather more in-depth data about their experiences, concerns and values (Gay and Airasian 2000) related to the teaching of English in rural areas (See Appendix 2). The data were analysed using the grounded approach. We began by naming key ideas and concepts, grouped those ideas, found relationships and patterns, displayed the data and finally came to terms with the emergent categories (see Freeman 1998).

Findings

As noted previously, this research report is part of a wider study which yielded four different categories. However, since our intention with this paper is to highlight the implications of foreign language teaching in rural areas for professional development, we decided to report in depth the category that embraced this issue.

It is undeniable that rural areas of Colombia have limited access to the tools that urban areas have (Corbett 2005). It is also clear that this issue impacts teachers and challenges what they do because, as mediators of the process, they have to find ways to achieve the goals expected of their learning process considering the aforementioned ideas (Vigotsky cited in Swain et al. 2011). For instance, when learning English today in Colombia, urban areas have privileged access to media and technology because language comes implicitly with the use of those tools (Crystal 2001). At the same time, access to other cultures' knowledge is aided (Castells 2001). Meanwhile, the access that students in rural areas have to technology is restricted to the time in schools, where they do not

have the proper access students in urban schools are more likely to have. This reveals how factors of access related to economic capital increase the gap between different students' expectations of having access to other kinds of knowledge, in this case, foreign language (Castells 2001).

The participants in this inquiry highlighted the fact that big cities offer more and better conditions to learn a foreign language, for various reasons such as a higher need to use the second language to talk to foreigners, more opportunities to participate in cultural activities, more chances to listen to their favourite bands, etc. When we asked teachers about the average amount of time they considered their students spent being exposed to the foreign language, they said: *'It is minimum, almost null. Students have a very basic level because in primary they do not have an English teacher. In the community there are not habits not even to listen to music in English'* (Participant 5).ⁱⁱ

Language teaching nowadays is mediated with tools that facilitate access not only to information but also to the development of the language that is deeply involved in the language of technology (Crystal 2001). This fact has put teachers in rural areas at a disadvantage since opportunities to learn the language are diminished and the students' progress is measured in parallel with that of students from urban areas (see Lackin & Gasperini 2004). Despite the general awareness of these socio-economic factors specific to rural areas, English-teachers in these regions are being called on to respond to the general policies stated by the Ministry of Education, and this has made them give both pessimistic and optimistic accounts of their intercultural work. *'The lack of materials, didactic resources, books and more... children do not even have [money] to buy an English dictionary'* (P5).ⁱⁱⁱ Teachers expressed dissatisfaction when we asked them about the kind of resources they could use to orient the learning process.

From the optimistic perspective, teachers show that the intercultural exercise of learning another language is possible as they can find ways to bridge the rural students' culture with that of the target language. Likewise, creativity for them is the way to cope with the problems that may emerge *'I think that if the teacher makes easy things complicated is because he wants to. Today there are many means to work with... if you know and you are prepared for that, then you are resourceful you could use clippings, do some stuff, you try in any way'* (P4).^{iv} As seen here, English-teachers in rural areas are challenged by the sociocultural aspects involved, more specifically the socio-economic factors encountered in rural areas,

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and this shapes their subjectivity from optimistic and pessimistic views of their professional endeavour. From this perspective, English teaching in rural areas cannot arbitrarily be compared with English teaching in urban areas as this provides a high level of inequality and challenges the purposes of democratic education (Freire 2000; Nieto 2002).

We also found that professional development evolves differently in rural than in urban areas. As commonly understood, teaching professional development is an upgrading of the dimensions of teachers' knowledge (Vez 2001). When teachers are in-service, their professional growth depends more on their attendance at formal professional meetings, conferences, academic spaces or even time spent sharing in an academic community of practice; in other words, those elements which are part of what Wallace (1991) calls 'received knowledge' depend more on teachers' or institutional efforts to make them accessible. In terms of academic communities, these rural language teachers see that it is a utopia for rural contexts. '*Communication is very isolated. There are no spaces of focalisation, we are isles*' (Participant 6).^v They explain that there are very few colleagues based nearby; in addition, difficulties with transport as well as heavy workload make it almost impossible to share or work collaboratively with other foreign language teachers. Alternatively, teachers would like the opportunity to work more on their experiential knowledge as this does not correspond to a certain group of principles developed in theory but to intuitive judgments about their professional practice. In this sense, teachers value being part of the particular community where they work. Therefore, they appreciate learning about that community as much as possible.

Teachers consider that they would rather find themselves in the cultural context of the community, understanding their cultural environment, their social relationships and symbols, than formal instruction. '*[Teaching in rural areas] gave me the possibility to know a culture that many think does not exist, I could have contact with industrial farming*' (participant 4).^{vi} In this regard, Vez (2001) asserts that the teaching of a new language implies cognitive changes that include even changes of personality which are inherent to professional growth. Similarly, Tsui (2003) cites Elbas (1983) to explain that an important element of professional knowledge is personal practical knowledge and that this works as a response to a given situation. This kind of knowledge is oriented to a particular practical and social context; it is highly experiential and social.

In a nutshell, teachers prize the time shared with students not only in the context of the classroom but in other social contexts. The learning they gather from those experiences becomes more powerful than attending academic conferences or formal courses. Additionally, most of them reported, travelling long distances to receive training in themes like technology – training that often cannot be applied due to lack of access to computers – makes them feel it is more fruitful to spend time with the rural community and to be able to relate what they do with their class.

Conclusions and implications

Through the development of this small-scale project we sought to explore in detail the sociocultural elements involved in the intercultural exercise of teaching a foreign language in rural areas of Colombia. Our main focus in this analysis was to determine the impact of professional development on teachers in rural areas. They were rooted in social needs and class, the economic situation and cultural and historical heritage (Nostrand 1967; Seelye 1984; Bourdieu 1976) and they were the bases for understanding the impact on professional development.

The analysis showed that because rural language contexts do not offer appropriate conditions for learning a second language, rural teachers face different professional challenges and have to cope with different needs. Thus, comparing the processes and outcomes of teaching foreign languages in rural areas with teaching foreign languages in urban areas is highly unfair. For example, one different need rural language teachers have relies on their professional development. As stated in this paper, rural teachers find opportunities to enhance their professional action in being familiar with the sociocultural factors of the community they work with.

We highlight the fact that little research has been done in the area of foreign language teaching in Colombia. Most research done in the field of language teacher education is framed by urban contexts. This fact in turn also evidences that education in Colombia is urban-centred. We firmly believe that language teacher educators and researchers should also contribute to the betterment of language learning and teaching processes in disadvantaged, less privileged contexts such as most rural areas of the country. Thus, this paper also represents a call for it.

Notes

¹ This article is derived from a study that set out to explore the sociocultural factors involved in the teaching of English in Colombian rural areas. The general study revealed four different categories; this paper concentrates on the one related to professional development. For further reading about the other findings, please check 'Critical sociocultural elements of the intercultural endeavor of English teaching in Colombian rural areas'.

² Original transcript: 'Es mínimo, casi nulo. Los estudiantes tienen un nivel básico porque en primaria no tienen profesor de inglés. En la comunidad no hay hábitos ni siquiera de escuchar música en inglés.'

³ Original transcript: 'La falta de materiales, recursos didácticos, libros y demás... los niños no cuentan con recursos ni siquiera para un diccionario de inglés' (P5).

⁴ 'Yo creo que si el profesor trabaja con las uñas es porque quiere trabajar con las uñas. Hoy en día hay muchos medios para trabajar... si usted sabe y está preparado para eso entonces usted es recursivo, hacer recortes, hacer cosas, se ingenia' (P15).

⁵ Original transcript: 'La comunicación es muy aislada. No hay espacios de focalización. Somos islas.'

⁶ Original transcript: '[Enseñar en áreas rurales] me dio la oportunidad de conocer una cultura que se cree que no existe y me ayudó a hacer contacto con los industriales del agro.'

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