

Study Of a Non-Efl Elementary Teacher's Reflections Upon Her Roles as an English Teacher*

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Recibido: 28 de agosto de 2011 Aprobado: 25 de octubre de 2011

Questiones Disputatae | Tunja - Colombia | N° 9 | pp. 101 - 110 | julio - diciembre | 2011

Abstract: This Case Study was developed through the testimony of an Elementary teacher who worked at a Rural school of Paipa, with the “Escuela Nueva” orientation and who reflected upon her practice and the roles she performed when teaching English, bearing in mind that she had not been prepared academically to give any instruction in this foreign language. These reflections derived from reflective meetings that were held in a Study Group composed by this teacher-participant, four more elementary teachers working in the same municipality and, me as researcher and member of the group. Three reasons nouris-

hed this research: Teachers in most of the elementary schools of Paipa were neither prepared for teaching a foreign language nor they had studied English deeply. Secondly, the teacher development is an important issue to improve the teaching of English in any educational context; and finally, to inquire upon the role of the teachers themselves working collaboratively, through some actions such as a Study Group.

Key Words: Reflective teaching, Study Groups, Collaborative Reflection, Professional Growth, Teacher's role..

*This article is based on a Thesis presented as a requirement for obtaining the Master Degree in Language Teaching at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (U.P.T.C.) -Tunja, in 2009.

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Estudio Sobre Las Reflexiones de una Profesora de Primaria Acerca de Sus Roles Como Profesora de Inglés*

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Recibido: 28 de agosto de 2011 Aprobado: 25 de octubre de 2011

Quaestiones Disputatae | Tunja - Colombia | N° 9 | pp. 101 - 110 | julio - diciembre | 2011

Resumen: Este Estudio de Caso se realizó a través del testimonio de una profesora de primaria que enseñaba en una escuela rural de Paipa, de orientación “Escuela Nueva”, quien reflexionó sobre su enseñanza y los roles que llevaba a cabo como profesora de inglés. Estos datos fueron obtenidos en las reuniones que realizaba el Grupo de Estudio compuesto por ella, cuatro profesoras más de primaria de la misma localidad y yo como investigadora-participante. Tres razones alimentaron este interés: los profesores de primaria de Paipa que no estaban preparados para enseñar una lengua extranjera o que no habían estudia-

do la lengua a profundidad. Segundo, la importancia del desarrollo del docente como un aspecto que mejora la enseñanza del inglés en cualquier contexto educativo; y finalmente, indagar sobre los roles del docente en el trabajo colaborativo, a través del Grupo de Estudio.

Palabras Clave: Reflexión en la Enseñanza, Grupos de Estudio, Reflexión Colaborativa, Crecimiento Profesional, Rol del maestro.

* Este artículo está basado en la Tesis de grado presentada como requisito para obtener el título de Magister en Idiomas de la Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (U.P.T.C.) -Tunja, en 2009.

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Étude Sur Les Réflexions D'une Enseignante À L'école Élémentaire À Propos de Son Rôle de Professeur D'anglais*

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Recibido: 28 de agosto de 2011 Aprobado: 25 de octubre de 2011

Questiones Disputatae | Tunja - Colombia | N° 9 | pp. 101 - 110 | julio - diciembre 2011

Resumen: Cette étude de cas a été menée par le témoignage d'un professeur à l'école élémentaire qui a enseigné dans les régions rurales de Paipa avec le method "Escuela Nueva" et qui a réfléchi sur l'enseignement qu'elle a faite et les rôles effectués comme professeur d'anglais. Ces données ont été obtenues lors des réunions menées par le Groupe de travail composé par elle et quatre autres enseignants de la même ville. Trois raisons ont alimenté cet intérêt: premier, les cas d'enseignants à Paipa que n'étaient pas prêts à enseigner une langue étrangère ou n'avait

pas étudié la langue en profondeur. Le deuxième, l'importance de la formation des enseignants comme un domaine d'amélioration de l'enseignement en anglais dans un contexte éducatif; et enfin, d'enquêter sur le rôle des enseignants dans le travail collaboratif par le biais du Groupe d'Étude.

Mots-clés: Réflexion de l'enseignement, groupes d'étude, réflexion concertée, la croissance professionnelle, le rôle de l'enseignant.

* Cet article est basé sur la thèse présentée comme exigence pour le degré de Magister en Langues pour l'Université Pédagogique et Technologique de Colombie (UPTC)-Tunja, en 2009.

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Introduction

Three legal governmental implementations in the teaching of English have framed the beginning of this study. The first, the law 115 issued in 1995, which stated the teaching of English in primary schools in Colombia, the second, the “Lineamentos Curriculares” for Foreign Languages (1999) as the pedagogical orientations that designed the correspondent school syllabus and PEI and, “Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés” (2006). These last define the communicative competences that Colombian students must perform according to their educational level. These criteria have been adapted from the international Common European Framework Standards for foreign language teaching and their intention is to reach the goal of Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo- Visión Colombia 2019 (MEN, 2006).

Based on those previous policies, I began to wonder how teaching English in primary schools of Paipa could be considered if it is known that very few primary teachers have studied English and are prepared for teaching English as a Foreign Language. For this purpose, I implemented a Study Group of five teachers in which they reflected upon their roles, they studied based on their teaching needs and, specially, the participant’s voices were heard as a data for this study. This research based on teacher–participant’s reflections and practices evidenced her roles as an English teacher in an elementary level.

Methodology

This research is a Qualitative-case study which centered its attention on a non-EFL teacher at the rural elementary school “Quebradahonda”, Instituto Técnico Agrícola in Paipa, Boyacá and explored her reflections upon the roles she was aware of and those that she assumed, when she taught English. The participant worked in an “Escuela Unitaria” using the “Escuela Nueva” type of teaching. She taught six preschool kids, five on first grade, three students for second grade, and three

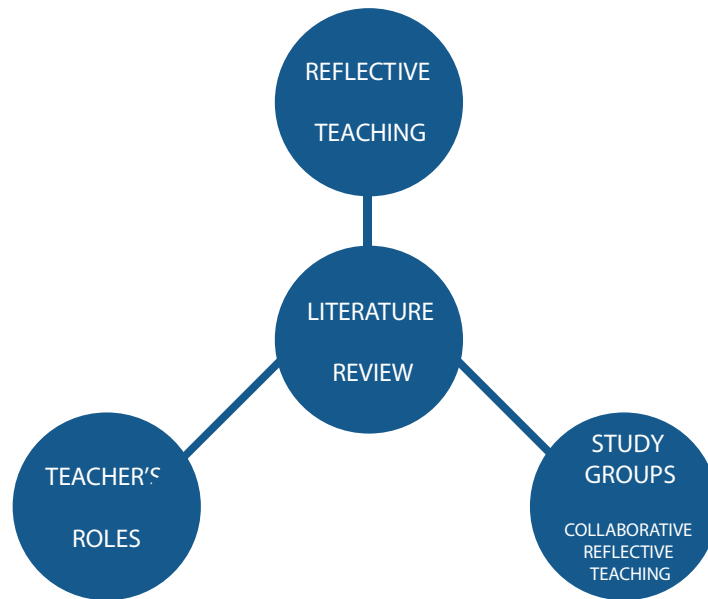
on third grade, four kids of fourth grade and four on fifth grade. The participant’s reflections were issued in some reflective meetings which were held in a Study Group composed by five elementary school teachers. Beside the meetings, the teacher was also interviewed and her lessons were recorded.

The Study Group had to meet, reflect, recall their own experiences, give opinions about problematic situations: how they planned their lessons, the implementations of standards, their beliefs as teachers of English, their perceptions about the teaching of English in elementary levels and the demands of the educational policies; they commented the solutions they would give to certain cases, their impressions about their English learning process and the importance of reflecting together.

The topic-centered study group we constituted agreed on the agenda for the meetings, which were always socialized and discussed. We also studied some topics about the language (vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation), discussed some methodological principles to be used, designed some material or solved some inner questions about teaching English to their learners. This second part was a motivator agent for the participants in the group to work on.

Apart from recording the reflective meetings, It was also used the individual phenomenological semi-structured interview recordings, according to Seidman’s (1991) contributions in this regard and Classroom Observation video-recordings. Once obtained the data, at the moment of analysis, the attention was focused on all the utterances of the participant. To a better understanding to the reader, the data is followed by the word Interview, Meeting or Lesson and the number of the sample in which the researcher took the utterance. i.e. (Lesson, N° 4)

I begin referring to Reflective Teaching mentioning the necessity of reflecting individually and in group, methodically, in order to learn from others and to explore possible conditions to the personal experience of teaching our own children in particular contexts. Reflective teaching also implies connecting thinking with what is happen-



ning into the classroom following some systematic steps (Barlett (1990), Wallace (1993), Pollard and Tann (1995), Tice (2005) and Viáfara (2005)). When this process is done rigorously, it reveals rich and complex details about the one's own teaching practice as Rodgers (2002) stated.

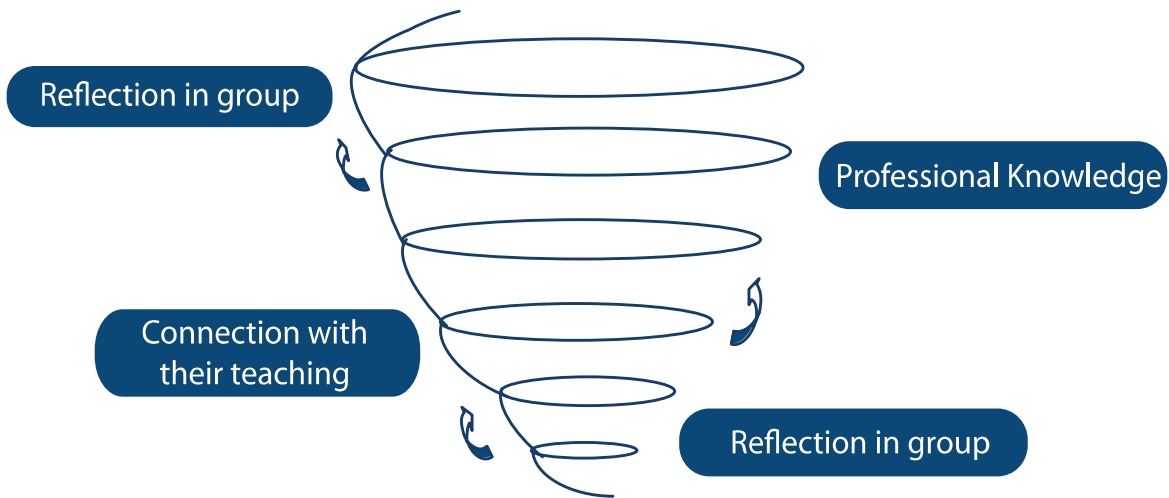
Moreover, teachers can meet together to reflect, to dialogue and to analyze upon their pedagogical situations in order to solve their own particularities through peer support by means of Study Groups. They are a way to reduce the isolated work of our teachers in primary schools, to create a community, to learn together by means of the exploration of the member's experiences, conceptions and purposes in teaching and, beyond that, it is fruitful to invite experts or inservice teachers (Birchack, et al. 1998) to collaborate in fulfilling the group's goals and needs.

Under the context of Study Groups and especially, the Topic-centered Study Group, (Birchack, et al. 1998) the team of teachers involved in this research developed Collaborative Reflection on Their Professional Development. When reflection is made in group, we obtain a wider view of situations and some solutions to problematic situations. The peer sees what the individual can not and the

other way around, members discuss, inform, give each other advice and suggestions, and the debate given through it strengthens the focused topic.

Through The Spiral Collective Reflection Diagram (Espitia, 2008) I stated a cycle of reflecting with peers. The reflection made in group contributes to the teacher's professional knowledge and development through its connection with practice. The teacher obtains useful feedback from the partners, who are participating in that reflection through listening to one-self and to peers. Consequently, the teacher makes some decisions which are contextualized into the classroom. As more conclusions arise, they reconstruct the teachers' professional knowledge. This new knowledge has to be discussed in a collaborative way and again put it into practice. In this way, the ascending spiral starts again but from a different and –probably- better point of view. Collaborative reflection about teacher's development permits to identify and solve problems at school, to make decisions and to grow as professionals (Wright,1987).

Another aspect taken into account was the Role of the Teacher. A role implies developing some tasks or functions in which the teacher uses the

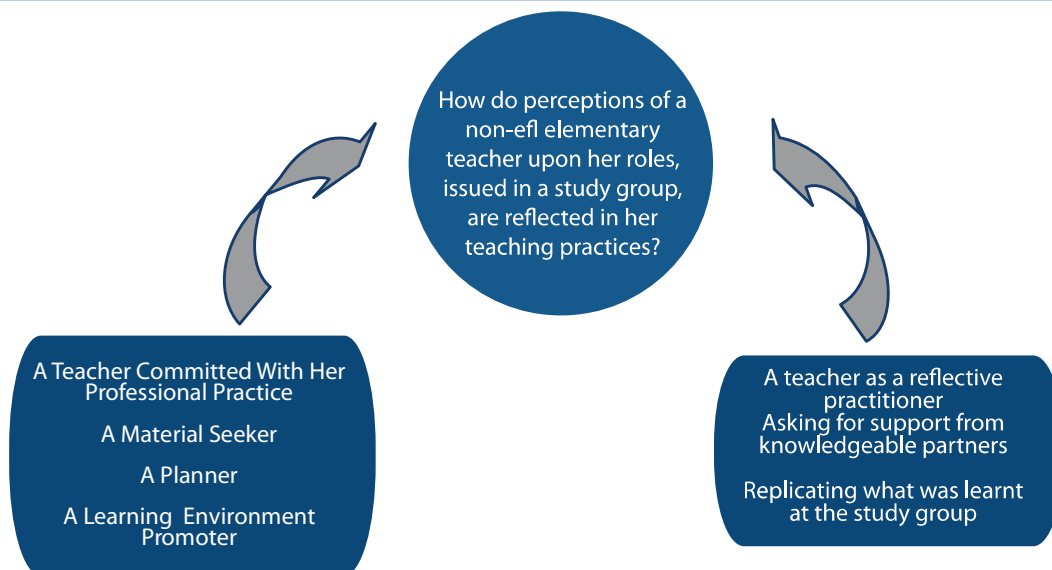


pertinent terminology, expresses some concern and responsibility, proposes some goals and performs some behavior. As an example Legutke and Howard (1991) state that the main role of the teacher is to become a coordinator of the learning process. This process is carried out both inside the classroom or outside. Beyond provoking merely language learning, the teacher also promotes attitudes regarding learning, language and life

producing changes in learners (Richards, 1997).

Findings

Two categories are summarized in the following chart describing my understanding of the study developed.



A teacher committed with her professional practice

This category reveals the interest that the participant denoted through her reflections and developed in practice about structuring her teaching and doing her job in a professional way.

A material seeker

She perceived that one of the strategies to foster her teaching was the use of material which helped her in her job. For that purpose, the teacher adapted some material. She took some didactic resources available in other subjects and used them to teach English (prints for preschool level, posters with information in Math, Sciences or Spanish); she also obtained some books from free markets to be used as reference for vocabulary and she designed material herself. The participant designed her teaching material based on her practice. She was aware about how to create material available to the learner's interests or their socio-cultural background. For example, the group she taught belonged to a rural context thus, the exposure to the foreign language outside the classroom, was weak or null. The material she designed took into account those details.

A Planner

The teacher seemed to be interested in planning her practice, from the broader aspect of designing curriculum as a guide for her to teach to a narrower aspect such as planning a lesson. In order to perform the role of learning organizer she expressed her interest in two main fields; taking into account her students' interests as well as proficiency and appealing to her experience as a learner and as a teacher to make decisions.

In order to diagnose her learners' interests, she took into account her students' real life situations. She involved students in talking about themselves as well as expressed her consciousness upon the need of noticing the differences of age when teaching. She evidenced knowledge of her learners and one of the reasons was that she was in constant contact with children and parents.

The second field is related to how the participant made use of her previous experience as a learner of English to teach this language in her particular context. Additionally, her experience as a teacher of children provided her also with a pedagogical construct to make decisions in the classroom in relation to the way she managed the classroom or the motivational techniques and instructional strategies she used in practice. As she had not been prepared to teach English and she had not carefully studied the language, she assumed her teaching according to her own pedagogical, didactic and human resources. These are two examples:

“A lo sumo enseñamos unos dialoguitos pequeñitos; que a saludarse, que el nombre, que deletrear su nombre...”
(Meeting N°4)

“...uno les hace dibujos y canciones... yo les ayudo, yo les colaboro, les hago las guías y así...” (Interview N°1)

Beyond providing students with basic topics, she encouraged learners to pronounce some words or expressions. For this purpose, she provided the model of pronunciation and used repetition and error correction as the technique for reaching her teaching goal. The participant made her children repeat many times the letters as a way to memorize them. The internal belief consisted of considering that learning is acquired by drilling exercises and she was replicating the teaching style her teachers used with her, as she unveiled it in an interview, talking about the way she was taught English at school.

A Learning Environment Promoter

Teachers as professionals have a rich background in pedagogical and experiential knowledge to put into practice. The participant managed the process in order to “maximize learning” as Richards, J and Lockhart, Ch. (1994: page 99) The teacher fostered, for example, a learning environment regarding two issues; solving problems which arouse in the classroom and minding about the student and his or her process of learning. For these purposes she encouraged kids to help one another, she offered individual support to learners who had

problems in understanding the tasks, she responded to her students' suggestions, and she gave instructions and corrected the mistakes according to the educational level of the child.

In regards to solving the learning problems she evidenced the use of the mother tongue as a help for students to grasp meaning and she provided them her explanations. She used contrastive grammar explanations, compared pronunciation and used translation as a strategy to teach. This piece shows the use of the Mother tongue for teaching the foreign language.

“Teacher: A ver, ésto es para que aprendan nuevas palabras.
(she erases the words and write them again in a more visible part of the board)

Teacher: A ver, qué dice aquí.
(she shows the song)

Un pequeño, dos pequeños...

Teacher: Aquí se lee pequeños niños indios.
En inglés va primero éste que éste.

Teacher: A ver para que me entiendan, entonces en el vocabulario escribimos primero la palabra en inglés y luego lo que significa. Entonces Little significa pequeño. Indians?

Kid 5: Indios

Teacher: Boys?

Kids: Niños” (Lesson N°3)

The reflection made by the participant developed a perception of how to decide on varied activities and strategies to be used in the classroom that promoted learning. Through the observations made of the recordings of her English lessons I could perceive that this variety is not fully presented. Facts such as the number of levels she was teaching at the same time, the need for materials to

promote that plurality of learning activities and the disciplinary knowledge the teacher manages; might be some reasons for the lack of the wide-ranging activities for learning that the teacher stated in her reflections. The standard of activities that she implemented was choral drillings after the teacher, singing a song or a rhyme, playing a game and developing a workshop.

A teacher as a reflective practitioner

The teacher evidenced to play a professional role developing a long exercise of reflection (individual or in group), analyzing her practice, understanding what was happening into the classroom, changing her beliefs and reflecting again on her practice (Wallace,1993; Pollard and Tann,1995). Besides, the teacher is informed about the national and regional policies regarding education as the issued by the Ministry of Education regarding Standards. This fact made her to have a position upon her practice which has been shaped by the reflection she has made on those regulations.

As a reflective practitioner, the participant perceived herself firstly as a teacher in need of support from people who knew English and were prepared to teach that language: Asking for Support from Knowledgeable Partners. Under this perception she acknowledged her limitations as a foreign language teacher. Reasons as the lack of time, interest or facilities to start a new career among others might make some instruction in ELT become difficult. Through her reflections she openly expressed her need to account for some assistance from teachers that know the discipline or from a mentor. As Richards (1997: page 100) states, the mentor “assists less experienced teachers with their professional development”. The participant and teachers in the Study Group also stated the problem of working alone at school because they had no one to discuss with upon her practice. See two pieces of evidence below.

“Es importante recibir la colaboración de usted que es la que entiende más sobre este tema, aunque es muy importante trabajar entre todas porque uno viene como con pequeños brochazos del colegio y si vamos a evaluar lo que en esa época se hacía, hace 17 años con lo que se debe hacer

ahora... pues, nada que ver.” (Meeting N°1)

Besides, identifying her limitations in didactics she also acknowledged another reason to ask for support. She pointed similar disadvantages in the kind of knowledge she possessed regarding pronunciation or vocabulary management. See some assertions aroused when the participant was asked in an interview to narrate experiences in teaching English.

“La experiencia menos agradable en mi vida profesional es la pronunciación ya que nunca he tenido una formación profesional en este aspecto y con una persona especializada en la materia. Esto me lleva a un cambio de superación urgente”
(Interview N°3)

The participant reflected on three of the teacher's perceptions regarding her role; to know the foreign language, to adapt or adopt a textbook and to manage the ELT methodology for teaching children. She insisted on getting some help on designing the syllabus, on diagnosing students' needs and also, on providing students with basic functions of the foreign language. She was conscious that, in spite of doing her job, this work needed to be improved by means of technical and pedagogical knowledge. Below, I present two pieces of evidence in which the participant reflected the need of help from a knowledgeable partner in practice.

“Lo poquito que tenemos lo hicimos en grupo pero nos falta terminar y nos falta asesoría, porque nosotras no sabemos si lo que estamos haciendo está bien...”
(Interview N°1)

The third element is related to the way or the strategies she took advantage of in order to improve her practice. She commented how she contextualized the use of activities outside the classroom as a way to motivate children, she gave instructions and explanations, promoted peer and individual

work, she referred to a remarkable previous experience in team work and how it contributed to her professional job and, finally she referred about her role as curriculum designer; in particular, the kind of activities the teachers develop in class. Two pieces of the former ideas are:

“Teóricamente sabe o lo hace uno con sus alumnos pero por alguna razón deja uno de ponerlo en práctica, entonces aquí uno aprende o retoma, recuerda, reactiva sus conocimientos. Eso es algo muy bueno de las reflexiones”
(Meeting N°4)

“Extrañamos mucho los microcentros¹ y eso se perdió. Porque nosotros aprendíamos muchas cosas, compartíamos experiencias y a veces hacíamos cosas así como usted lo hizo con nosotras, no? Pero como todo se acaba... ahora cada uno mire a ver cómo saca adelante lo suyo”
(Interview N°3).

Additionally, she evoked the results of Teachers' Support Through The Group and stated to what extent she changed her beliefs. The second was rooted in two situations outside the classroom that influenced the teacher's beliefs and perspectives in her practice. They are educational policies and students' socio-cultural context.

On the first hand, the Study Group reflections provided her some insights regarding her role as foreign language teacher for her children of elementary levels and contributed to her professional growth as the study evidenced. The participant mentioned that she replicated what she learned at the study group. When teaching, she evidenced the need for using more strategies to make her students learn in a more joyful way. In spite of the

¹ Microcentros: A meeting of teachers of Primary school held in order to study about some specific topics on her teaching practice such as planning, teaching strategies or curriculum design. These meetings were previously scheduled by the Secretaría de Educación.

fact that she admitted she was more motivated to teach English and the importance of using pleasant tasks she might need to improve in the implementation of those tasks. She also recognized this need of improvement when she expressed not to have “la capacidad de enseñar un buen inglés”. On the other hand, this was her perception when evaluating the Study Group sessions in a reflective meeting:

“Pues, reunirnos a estudiar y a expresar nuestras inquietudes y experiencias es muy chévere. Uno se da cuenta que uno tiene mucho, que está haciendo algunas cosas bien, que le hace falta conocer más inglés pero que hemos progresado con respecto a hace unos años. Ha sido difícil cuadrar el horario nuestro con el de las reuniones pero ha sido útil hacer el esfuerzo.” (Meeting N°11)

According to this teacher’s perceptions about what she has experienced through the Study Group, there are some insights to talk about. Firstly, she expressed her contradictory feelings. She was encouraged to do her job but she felt unable to do it properly; as she stated: “...pero no tengo la capacidad de enseñar un buen inglés”. She added that she had a lot to learn on teaching English as a foreign language. Then, she expressed some insights about the benefit of working, reflecting and studying together. She expressed her personal limitations and how a Study Group could help her to improve her teaching practice. She had applied some of the activities shared in this study and she even changed some of her beliefs; for example, to take into account the intention of teaching for the children’s future life.

Finally, she compared the work performed with and without peer-reflection. The microcentros that she mentioned were in some sense, much more like a Study Group. In sum, it was a sensitive point for the teacher to recognize the need of support in teaching English; whether it was a professional in languages as she has expressed or

a Group for studying and learning together.

Conclusions

Reflections developed in the Study Group showed the commitment the teacher who participated in this study had to be a professional as she worked in teaching English to children in a rural sector. She acknowledged her weaknesses as well as the positive experiences in teaching that she had obtained. She was open to reflections, to learn with the help of others and to change or improve her conceptions of teaching. For example, she acknowledged the importance of planning, using pertinent didactic material and promoting learning in children.

The study revealed another element that contributed with the process of the teacher’s professional growth. The teacher reflected continuously upon her practice as a way to improve it. This process requires from herself inner observation of her practice, her understanding of what happens into the classroom and her constant evaluation of beliefs. In this regards, the teacher develops a never-ended process of reflection and change, specially, when this activity is developed systematically through The Study Group (Peer Collaborative Reflection).

Teachers obtained continuous support from others, a problem-solving environment which was analyzed from different points of view, better identification with the role of being a teacher of a foreign language and, participants experienced new trends to face teaching, making decisions or using language. In fact, one of the benefits on participating in these reflective meetings was to gather new ideas for teaching or corroborating the old ones. Additionally, the teacher-participant took into consideration the impact of the Study Group in her professional growth. She stated that she put into practice what she has experienced and reflected through the Study Group.

Teachers of English at Elementary schools are underpinning the responsibility of the English teaching’s future. In Colombia and, according to the MEN’s pretentions; they are supporting what the participant called the future of “bilingualism”

in Colombia. Such policies seem to be challenging for teachers, but as I realized through the participant's experience, they put her in a conflictive situation because she did not have all the required resources to learn a foreign language or to learn EFL methodology for teaching. It is not fair to leave elementary teachers alone with this ruling execution. Administrators have to pay more attention to the teaching of English since the elementary levels.

For this reason she acknowledged her need for support in order to improve her teaching. The teacher expressed her interest in achieving her professional development. As Richards (1994: page 106) mentions, when this decision is taken by the teacher, "new skills are often required and institutional support may be needed" The participant's school is a branch of a larger school of secondary level, but unfortunately, help or mentoring in this institution has been absent.

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