

Towards a Proposal for a Professional Development Programme in Pedagogy for Autonomy¹

Carlo Granados Beltrán²
Universidad Central, Colombia

Abstract

This article aims to share preliminary results of an ongoing research project named 'Towards a Pedagogy for Autonomy' carried out at the Languages Department at Universidad Central in Bogotá, Colombia. The final goal of the project is to create a teacher development programme whose emphasis is on pedagogy for autonomy and whose theoretical and practical underpinnings are based on the findings of this specific study. The article discusses the origins of the project, the design and organisation of the initial teacher development workshops which will constitute the program, the limitations and some general results obtained from the experience up to the moment.

Keywords: professional development, teacher training, autonomy, workshops, research

Resumen

Este artículo tiene por objeto compartir los resultados preliminares de un proyecto de investigación que se está llevando a cabo en el Departamento de Lenguas de la Universidad Central en Bogotá, Colombia. El fin último del proyecto es el diseño de un programa de formación docente con énfasis en pedagogía para la autonomía cuya fundamentación esté fuertemente basada en los resultados obtenidos en el presente trabajo de investigación. El artículo presenta los orígenes del proyecto, el diseño y la organización preliminar de los talleres que harán parte del programa de formación, las limitaciones y algunos resultados generales de la experiencia hasta el momento.

Palabras clave: Desarrollo profesional, formación docente, autonomía, talleres, investigación

¹ Received: August 17th ,2011 / Accepted: September 5th, 2011

² Email: carlogranados@gmail.com

Resumo

Este artigo tem por objeto compartilhar os resultados preliminares de um projeto de pesquisa que se está levando a cabo no Departamento de Línguas da Universidade Central em Bogotá, Colômbia. O fim último do projeto é o desenho de um programa de formação docente com ênfase em pedagogia para a autonomia cuja fundamentação esteja fortemente baseada nos resultados obtidos no presente trabalho de investigação. O artigo apresenta as origens do projeto, o desenho e a organização preliminar das oficinas; que farão parte do programa de formação, as limitações e alguns resultados gerais da experiência até o momento.

Palavras chave: Desenvolvimento profissional, formação docente, autonomia, oficinas, pesquisa

This article aims to share an unfinished experience in professional development carried out at the Languages Department at Universidad Central within the framework of a research study named 'Towards a Pedagogy for Autonomy'. The purpose of this project is designing a proposal for a teacher development course in autonomy which has as a basis the exploration of teachers' autonomy by means of in-site workshops and practical applications for the classroom.

The interest in pursuing this project came as a result of a previous project, named Programa de Inglés por Módulos Semipresenciales, which dealt with the creation of a distance-learning (semi-presencial) English programme in which students had to attend about 50% of the classes but the other 50% of the work had to be done on their own by carrying out exercises on some software specifically selected for that purpose. The results of this project evidenced that students were not able to pursue the part of the course which was carried out independently. The reasons stated by the students during the group interviews for this to happen were, first, lack of time because of the assignments from their jobs and/or other classes; also they mentioned that even though the programme intended the promotion of autonomous work, their commitment in this part was low since they were not used to work independently and felt they needed to have the teacher around to guide and control the activities. Additionally, during the group interviews, the teachers expressed that they did not feel prepared to train students to work independently and they considered they needed some training in this respect. Therefore, the team at the Languages Department decided to work on a proposal of a course in teaching for autonomy which was founded upon a research study.

Background

Universidad Central is a non-profit higher education institution located in Bogotá, Colombia. The institution has three faculties: Economic, Accounting and Business Sciences; Engineering; and Social Sciences, Humanities and Art and it offers different majors, such as accounting, advertising, computer engineering, drama and music, among many others. The target population of the university belongs to the working class which may not have many opportunities to access higher education. This is the reason why most of the students belong to the night shift since they work and study at the same time.

One of the interests of the Languages Department has been the support it can offer students from the night shift who study and work and do not have enough time to devote to study English, so the Department has always explored issues related to technology and e-learning which can better respond to the particular needs of these students. However, for the implementation of such programmes and tools, it is necessary that students possess a higher level of autonomy and are able to manage their own learning processes, but in order to develop autonomous learners, the teachers need to be able to accompany them in the process and guide them in strategies and techniques which could help them to attain their goals. Thus, the Languages Department's idea to offer a teacher development course in this area was born.

Review of Literature

In order to decide on the methodology and the means that were going to be used for the teacher development programme, the team at the Languages Department considered the principles for the development of INSET (In-Service Educational Training) courses on autonomy proposed by Dam (2008) as well as some of the features in relation to workshop design established by Richards and Farrell (2005).

For the development programme to be effective, we needed an activity which was limited in time so that it could be included in the regular meeting schedule of the Department. Also, we felt it had to involve both theory and practice in such a way that it kept teachers' engagement. We decided to use workshops because in this sense, Richards and Farrell (2005) inform us that they are short-term learning activities designed with the purpose of providing opportunities to acquire specific knowledge and skills. However, in these kinds of activities, participants are expected to put that knowledge into practice afterwards, such as implementing procedures for class observation or carrying out action research projects. Moreover, workshops allow teachers to examine and discuss beliefs about learning and teaching

processes, and contribute to the process of institutional improvement and individual betterment.

Workshops have been widely used in teacher training programmes for two main reasons. First of all, they are easy to organise because they are short and can be held in a time out of teachers' schedules and secondly, because they offer the opportunity to connect theory and practice more easily. Richards and Farrell (2005), for example, inform us that some of the advantages we can attribute to workshops are, on one hand, the fact that they can be held in out-of-class schedules and therefore, they are relatively easy to implement since they are short-term; and on the other hand, the authors say workshops provide participants with practical classroom applications, help to increase teachers' motivation, develop comraderie and collegiality, support and foster innovation and are flexible in terms of the activities to be carried out since they can be adapted to teachers' interests and needs.

Another of the theorists considered was Dam (2008) who stated some of the characteristics required for a development programme, whose purpose is the development of autonomy, to be successful. She stated that one of the first features is that both the organization and contents of the workshops should be planned as an ongoing process of negotiation, open to change depending on the particular needs of the teachers involved and the demands of the curriculum. It is also necessary to make explicit to the participants both the aims and the expected outcomes of the programme.

For implementing the workshops proposed for the development programme, there was an initial meeting with the teachers in which they were informed about the nature of the project and what was expected both at group and institutional level after the development of the workshops. During the execution of the project, some of the ideas provided by the teachers were considered. However, there was not enough time to carry them all out during the workshops. Nonetheless, they are going to be considered for the elaboration of the final proposal.

Additionally, some other features proposed by Dam (2008) are to set up an atmosphere of trust and openness among the participants and with the facilitators, to emphasize both raising awareness and establishing links with each teacher's situation so that the programme has a higher impact. The ideas for the workshops proposed for this development programme started with an initial group discussion in which teachers tapped into their experiences with their students at Universidad Central and at other institutions and the results of these conversations enhanced the understanding of the theory since teachers were able to make clear associations between what they had faced in

their classes with the theories proposed by the experts and methodology textbooks. Most of the teachers participating in the programme have been working at the Department five years or more and were familiar with the facilitators, which were the full-time teachers of the Department, so the workshops had the feeling of taking advantage of equality relationships and reducing the idea of verticality or following the direction of an authority.

Finally, the other features proposed for INSET courses were to have participants actively involved in their own learning and to have the emphasis of workshops lie on learning rather than teaching, that is to say, that participants have to ‘take off their teacher’s hat’ in order to become learners again and be free to experiment and test hypotheses in relation to teaching again as when they were starting in the field and did not have any pre-conceived ideas about it. Based on this feature for INSET courses, the research team decided to include in each one of the workshops a practical application which consisted of an inquiry project following an action research model so as to renew the participants’ interest in classroom phenomena and look at them in a different light. These reflections kept teachers engaged in the process and provided them with new insights in relation to their daily practice.

Participants

The Languages Department has a total of 30 hourly-paid teachers. At first, the team had decided to work with all of them; however, due to the tasks teachers had to do during the development of the workshops and their time availability, we decided to count on 15 of these teachers who had signed a consent form. As mentioned before, these teachers have been working with our academic unit for about five years or more and are familiar both with the institutional and the Department policies and procedures. A few of them had been engaged in the previous research project related to distance learning and knew the origins of the current research. One of the teachers’ characteristics which could have facilitated the development of the project is the fact that most of the participants had graduate studies in applied linguistics, translation and education, among others; therefore, they were somehow familiar with the dynamics the team implemented.

54

Research Procedure

The research design we considered appropriate was that of action research since its purpose is to improve daily practices and educational systems in a more critical way (Burns, 1999; Wallace, 1998; Nunan, 1992, among others) in relation to the fostering of autonomous learning

processes as enacted, in a first moment by teachers, and in the later future, by students. We decided to keep the study as a collaborative action research since some of the teachers who manifested in the previous project (*Programa de Inglés por Módulos Semi-presenciales*) that they needed training in this area in order to improve their practices were involved in this new study.

We used the introspective cycle proposed by this model, as shown in Figure 1. That is to say, we had the stages of planning, action, observation and reflection in order to theorise about the experience obtained through the study. The end goal of the study was to construct a more effective educational practice and design a course in pedagogy for autonomy that could be offered to a wider number of teachers. The process for the development of this study was as follows, based on the results from the previous project. First, we identified a starting idea in relation to the need of fostering autonomy. Secondly, we started searching for evidence and ideas with the help of the teachers with the initial meeting. Afterwards, we started designing the workshops taking into consideration what the teachers had said, and finally, we started applying the professional development workshops. At present, we are in the stage of evaluating the impact on both students and teachers through the data obtained by means of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Based on the results of this analysis, we are going to propose a final version of the in-service training

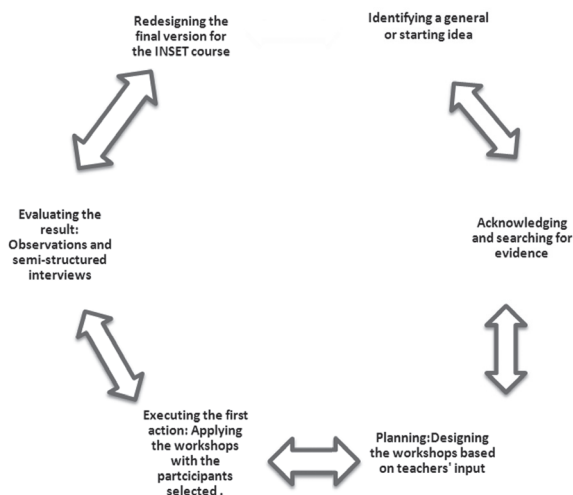


Figure 1. Action research cycle for the research study

Initial Pedagogical Proposal

As stated before, there was an initial meeting in which the teachers were informed in detail about the research project the Department was carrying out as well as the expected impact of the study results on the three areas of action of the academic unit, that is to say, teaching, continuing education and research. Also, in this meeting together with the participants we discussed our conceptions about autonomy, autonomous learning, teachers' autonomy, as well as the possible key topics to tackle during the workshops.

After this initial meeting, the topics selected to be developed during the workshops were reflective teaching, classroom interaction and evaluation in connection with autonomy. Taking into consideration the time constraints, two workshops were designed for each one of the themes, giving as a result 6 workshops as a whole. However, these were the key themes mentioned at the beginning, some other topics came up from the discussions and these are to be included in the final proposal for the teacher development programme.

Steps in the Workshops

Based on the features mentioned in the literature review (Dam, 2008), the workshops followed this procedure: First, there was a discussion in order for the participants to conceptualize based on their experiences. Second, there was a section related to the theory as presented by relevant authors and methodology textbooks but articulating it with what the teachers have said in terms of their daily practice. Lastly, an inquiry task for the participants to develop in the classroom was proposed following the model of action research, that is to say, determining a problem, identifying a possible course of action, implementing it, collecting data, and refining the plan based on the results gathered, as shown in figure No. 2.

STEP	ACTIVITY	OBJECTIVE
1	Discussion	To recall teachers' experiences in order to articulate it with the theory
2	Presentation of theory	Some of the authors related to the particular aspect were selected and their theories were revised in connection to teachers' experiences.
3	Inquiry	Teachers were asked to decide on a classroom problem they wanted to work on and to define a plan action to address that problem. Then, the teachers implemented that plan of action and refined them based on the results obtained.
4	Discussion	After the application of the plan of action, teachers shared their experiences in their next session and when online, through the forums.

Figure 2. Steps in the development of the workshops

Three topics were included in the workshops: reflective teaching, classroom interaction and evaluation. Both participants and facilitators considered the inclusion of reflective teaching very important since it provided a general framework for the proposal of a teacher development initiative. Additionally, the participants expressed that if teachers wanted to be autonomous, they needed to be able to reflect on their contexts and make informed decisions about their practice in relation to how better to respond to students' needs, institutional needs and their own needs.

The inclusion of the key topic of classroom interaction was based on the understanding that for the students to become autonomous, teachers have to redefine the roles in the classroom. In other words, they have to 'give up' some of the power to students by giving them more responsibilities in regards to administering their learning, such as setting objectives, choosing activities, and evaluating outcomes, among other aspects. Additionally, students need to be accustomed to using other resources apart from their teachers, such as their classmates, thus, the need to enhance pair and group work.

Moreover, evaluation was an important aspect to be considered since for students to be autonomous, they have to be objective enough to determine whether they have attained the learning objectives set by themselves and if they have not, to organise an appropriate plan of action with the help of the teacher, who in this case acts as an advisor and facilitator rather than as the only source of approval. In this sense, techniques such as self- and peer evaluation were also explored in the workshop as well as the use of rubrics for guaranteeing objectivity during assessment.

Other components which came out during the discussions held in the workshops were the development and adaptation of classroom material which fostered processes of autonomous learning and language learning strategies in order to give students enough tools which could help in the transition to an autonomous dynamic in the classroom. However, due to time limitations they were not included in the series of workshops, although they are going to be considered for the final teacher development course proposal.

Limitations

Even though one of the advantages of carrying out workshops as a mechanism for teacher development programmes is their duration, this constituted one of the limitations encountered during this project. Due to the fact that the participants were hourly-paid teachers whose

academic load is shared with other institutions, it was difficult to count on all the members on all of the occasions. Likewise, the development of the practical activities proposed in the workshops was limited by the pressures of complying with the English courses syllabi, designing tests for the courses allocated and other functions belonging to their daily practice.

Day (1999) explains that due to the fact that historically teachers' labour has been considered as 'contact time' with students, there are very few opportunities for them to collect data, share practices with colleagues or reflect collectively and in-depth upon their teaching procedures and contexts, thus, the challenge for facilitators in developing teachers as inquirers. In our particular case, despite having planned the workshops in the most appropriate time frame for teachers so that we could work with all of them (30), we could not count on 100% of the teachers but only with the 15 who had time available and who had signed a consent form.

In order to solve this inconvenience, the team at the Languages Department, with support of the Virtual Education Team at the University, decided to use the Moodle platform for teachers to analyse and discuss their insights based on the assignments set in each one of the workshops. Therefore, the team created a course in the platform with the name of the project. Within that course, the material used in the six on-site workshops was uploaded as well as the assignments and additional material in relation to the topic obtained from methodology textbooks and specialised web pages. At the end of each unit, a forum named "How are your projects going?" was incorporated with the purpose of having teachers post their ongoing concerns and conclusions in relation to the practical classroom applications.

Nonetheless, and because of the fact that this was a solution which came up while the project was already in progress, we consider that the use of these mechanisms for participation could have been more effective had there been a more rigorous accompaniment for teachers and also if the dialogue through the forums had been more continuous or for a longer period. Despite the inconveniences we had with this integration of ICTs, we do consider it can help overcome problems in relation to attendance and participation; therefore, for the final course proposal we will consider its integration but in a better articulation with the rest of the components of the teacher development programme.

Preliminary Results

In order for the team to analyse the experience, we used various instruments to collect data. We included a semi-structured interview (Appendix 1) to participant teachers in order to discuss their inquiry projects, a series of observations to see innovations in situ (Appendix 2), and a survey for the students belonging to the participant teachers' classes in order to determine whether they had seen any impact and/or gained any understanding of their teachers' new practices (Appendix 3). Additionally, we had some other sources of information, such as teachers' artefacts obtained during the on-site workshops and their reflections and discussions as posted in the Moodle platform forums (Appendix 4).

At present we are analysing the data gathered by these means, however, some of the preliminary results indicate that a process of transformation was triggered in the teachers by means of recognising problem situations in the classroom, sharing them and reflecting collectively, this reflection led to a rediscovery of both teaching strategies and interaction dynamics that had been concealed due to the 'routinisation' of classroom practices; thus, some of the common practices which were considered ineffective started to be questioned and alternatives were explored by sharing with colleagues. There was a revisit of collaborative work in classes understanding it beyond having students doing activities in pairs or groups but also as a mechanism of evaluating the attainment of objectives.

Another gain from the project has been the redefinition of observation as a tool. In fact, teachers admitted they observed students all the time but rather in the sense of determining behaviours (participative, shy, troublemaker students). After, the teacher development programme, teachers started considering observation more systematically and with much more specific purposes. Additionally, the implementation of diverse strategies had an impact both on teachers' autonomy and students' attitudes towards the classes: both teachers and students rethought the teachers' role, which started to be seen less as a transmitter of knowledge and more as a facilitator for students to develop each one of the assigned tasks independently, however, this is a gradual process and there is still a lot to be done in order to help students become more autonomous.

At the end of this process, it has been evidenced that teachers, who initially described their daily practice and observation in a context of informality, started to make aware and informed decisions about the teaching-learning processes. Richards and Lockhart (1996, p. 3-4)

explain in relation to reflective teaching that “much can be learned about teaching through self-inquiry”, “experience is insufficient as a basis for development” and “critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching.” After the preliminary results, the benefits we consider teachers will gain through this professional development programme have been providing a space for that self-inquiry, critical reflection and systematising of experiences to happen and therefore, creating changes in daily practices and impact on students’ learning.

Finally, the shift to defining teachers as inquirers contributes to a great extent to their own development as autonomous professionals and the development of the workshops created a space to construct an academic community with its corresponding sense of empowering of teachers as developers of knowledge and professionals in language teaching. McGrath (2000) clearly explained teachers’ autonomy in two senses: self-directed professional development and freedom from control by others. With this professional development programme, we are aiming at both providing opportunities for self-improvement but also creating spaces for academic discussions in which there is negotiation and the exercise of independent judgement based on academic arguments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as mentioned in a previous document (Granados, 2009, p.42), we English teachers can contribute to the construction of an academic community in different ways. First, we can contribute by keeping up our good quality as language professionals in both language competence and pedagogical skills. Second, by reflecting on what we do in our day-to-day job and – as knowledge is not constructed by itself but is built by discussion and cooperation – by sharing with our colleagues the reflections we do about our job. Third, we contribute to form an academic community by being autonomous people and critical thinkers who are able to evaluate what is better for the benefit of all. Becoming someone who is capable of making informed professional decisions on their daily practice and of executing plans in relation to students’ needs and interests with the freedom of control by other people is a first step to become an autonomous teacher.

As stated before, this is a preliminary report of the research experience carried out. The team still has some work to do in relation to the analysis of each one of the inquiry projects carried out by the teachers and their impact on students’ autonomy. Also, we need to analyse the data collected, including some of the artefacts teachers

produced during the workshops in the light of our research interest. Once the project is concluded, the team will show the outcomes and pedagogical implications of this enriching experience in the exploration of professional development and autonomy by means of a final report.

References

- Dam, L. (2008). In-service Teacher Education for Learner Autonomy. *Independence*, 43. IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG, Spring – Summer. (20-26). Retrieved July 11, 2009 from <http://www.learnerautonomy.org/dam2008.pdf>
- Day, C. (1999). *Developing Teachers. The Challenges of Lifelong Learning*. London: Falmer Press.
- Granados, C. (2009). A Framework for the Construction of Academic Communities. *Folios*, Segunda época, No. 30. Segundo semestre. (39-49)
- Richards, J.C. and Farrell, T.S.C. (2005). *Professional Development for Language Teachers. Strategies for Teacher Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J.C. and Lockhart, C. (1996). *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview for teachers

FORMATO DE ENTREVISTA PARA EL DOCENTE
PRIMERA TAREA: 'ENSEÑANZA REFLEXIVA'

PROFESOR	
NIVEL	
HORARIO	
FECHA	
¿CUAL FUE EL PROBLEMA DESCRITO?	
¿QUE INSTRUMENTOS UTILIZO PARA HACER EL SEGUIMIENTO DEL PROBLEMA IDENTIFICADO?	
¿CUAL FUE EL PLAN DE ACCION IMPLEMENTADO?	
¿QUE BASE TEORICA UTILIZO PARA ESTABLECER EL PLAN DE ACCION?	
¿HUBO ALGUN IMPACTO AL IMPLEMENTAR EL PLAN DE ACCION? EN CASO AFIRMATIVO, ¿CUAL FUE?	
¿CUAL FUE EL IMPACTO DEL PLAN DE ACCION EN LA PRACTICA DOCENTE?	

Appendix B: Class observation format

FORMATO DE OBSERVACION
PRIMERA TAREA: 'ENSEÑANZA REFLEXIVA'

PROFESOR	
NIVEL	
HORARIO	
FECHA	

ACTUACIONES DE LOS ESTUDIANTES QUE EVIDENCIAN LA EXISTENCIA DEL PROBLEMA	
FASE DE IMPLEMENTACION DEL PLAN DE ACCIÓN	
ACTUACIONES DE LOS ESTUDIANTES QUE EVIDENCIAN LA SOLUCIÓN AL PROBLEMA	
ACTUACIONES DEL DOCENTE QUE EVIDENCIAN QUE IMPLEMENTO UN PLAN DE ACCION	

Appendix C: Survey to students



UNIVERSIDAD
CENTRAL

DEPARTAMENTO DE LENGUAS
HACIA UNA PEDAGOGIA PARA LA AUTONOMIA

Apreciado estudiante,

El propósito de esta encuesta es conocer sus apreciaciones acerca de algunos aspectos de su clase de inglés.

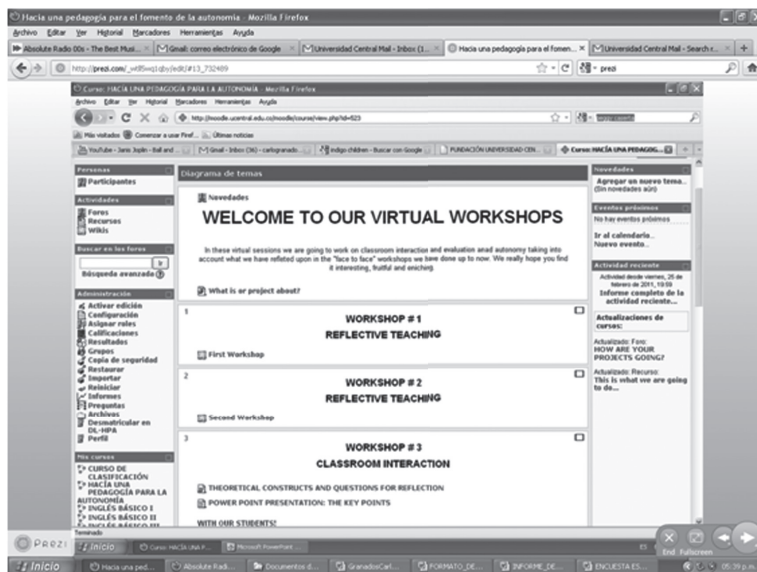
1. Teniendo en cuenta las diferentes formas de interacción en la clase, ¿qué tipo de trabajo le permitió aprender de una manera más efectiva?
 - a. En grupo
 - b. En parejas
 - c. Individualmente

2. ¿Qué herramientas utilizó el docente para evaluar su desempeño en la clase de inglés? (Puede marcar más de una opción)
 - a. Exámenes escritos
 - b. Trabajos de expresión oral
 - c. Portafolios
 - d. Talleres
 - e. Tareas
 - f. Libro de trabajo
 - g. Actividades lúdicas
 - h. ¿Otra? ¿Cuál? _____

3. ¿De qué manera se realizó la retroalimentación de las actividades mencionadas en la pregunta anterior? (Puede marcar más de una opción)
 - a. El profesor solo dio el resultado (nota).
 - b. El profesor explicó aspectos positivos y negativos del desempeño en la actividad de manera individual.
 - c. Hizo observaciones generales a nivel individual.
 - d. Hizo observaciones generales a nivel grupal.
 - e. Mis compañeros de clase evaluaron mi desempeño.
 - f. Autoevaluación.

4. ¿Qué rutinas, diferentes a las de inicio de semestre, utilizó el profesor para complementar el desarrollo de la clase?
 - a. Uso de herramientas virtuales
 - b. Énfasis en alguna habilidad comunicativa (escucha, habla, lectura y escritura)
 - c. Se realizaron más trabajos en grupo que de manera individual
 - d. Se realizaron más trabajos de manera individual que en grupo
 - e. Búsqueda de información acerca de temas específicos con el fin de realizar actividades en clase.
 - f. ¿Otra? ¿Cuál? _____

Appendix D: Moodle course screenshot



The Author

Carlo Granados Beltrán earned his degree in Spanish and Languages from Universidad Pedagógica Nacional. He holds two MA degrees, one in Applied Linguistics from Universidad Distrital and another in British Cultural Studies and ELT from University of Warwick. Currently, he is a full-time professor at Universidad Central, guest lecturer at the MA programme in Language Teaching at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC) and professor at ÚNICA. He has also worked as a language teaching methodology professor at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana and as an international consultant in methodology and evaluation for Pearson Educación de Colombia.