The Development of a Novice Teacher's Autonomy in the Context of EFL in Colombia

El desarrollo de la autonomía de una profesora principiante en el contexto de la enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera en Colombia

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This article reports the experience of a novice English teacher taking part in a collaborative action research project with a group of children in a bi-national language center in Colombia, where a theme-based approach to teaching had been recently introduced. The purpose of the study was to learn how to solve problems encountered with the approach and to develop learner and teacher autonomy. The findings show how reflection, collaborative work and critical thinking were promoted and enabled the teacher to find alternatives in her teaching, to gain a new understanding of this approach, and to develop teacher autonomy.

Key words: Action research, professional development, novice teachers, foreign language teaching, theme-based teaching, collaboration, reflection

Este artículo informa acerca de la experiencia de una profesora principiante de inglés que formó parte de un proyecto de investigación acción colaborativa con un grupo de niños en un centro binacional en Colombia, en el cual se había introducido recientemente un enfoque basado en temas. El propósito del estudio fue aprender a resolver los problemas encontrados con el enfoque y desarrollar la autonomía de los estudiantes y de la profesora. Los hallazgos muestran cómo se promovieron la reflexión, el trabajo colaborativo y el pensamiento crítico de manera que hicieron posible que la profesora encontrara vías alternativas en su enseñanza, comprendiera mejor el enfoque y desarrollara su autonomía como profesora.

Palabras clave: Investigación acción, desarrollo profesional, profesor principiante, enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, enseñanza basada en temas, colaboración, reflexión

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Introduction

When I was an undergraduate student, I joined a study group on the development of learner and teacher autonomy in EFL classrooms. The discussions held in that group led me to believe that through collaborative dialogue with the other group members and by learning to carry out action research, I would be better equipped to tackle the problems I was encountering with my students, and would develop professionally in order to become a more autonomous teacher. After a while the group decided to conduct a collaborative action research project in which we followed a series of interrelated experiences that included the following phases: exploring, identifying, planning, collecting data, analyzing/reflecting, hypothesizing/ speculating, intervening, observing, reporting, writing, and presenting (Burns, 1999). The aim of the project was to observe and understand the processes of promoting learner autonomy and developing teacher autonomy through critical examination of each of the group member's actions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 5). In this paper I will focus on how collaborative work, critical thinking, and reflection contributed towards enhancing my professional autonomy.

Autonomy seems to be a very idealistic and abstract concept, difficult to measure, quantify, observe and define. In the field of foreign language learning, some experts have defined learner autonomy as "the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (Benson, 2001, p. 47), and in this sense it has been used to refer to both learner and teacher autonomy. Freeman & Cornwell (1993) state that learning to teach "remains principally the responsibility and work of the learner" (xii), and McGrath (2000) takes a similar stance when he asserts that being an autonomous teacher involves exercising some kind of freedom over the curriculum, and taking responsibility for our own professional development. Huang defines teacher autonomy as "teachers' willingness, capacity and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning" (2005, p. 4) and Usma further expands it to include "the exercise of control over school matters, including teaching and assessment, curriculum design, school functioning, and professional development, which is shaped by different personal and environmental factors, and is limited by the educational project of the school community" (2006, p. 63).

The relationship between learner and teacher autonomy has been highlighted by the Shizuoka group (Barfield, 2001). According to them, since society assigns different roles, rights and responsibilities to teachers and students, there is no perfect match between the processes of learner autonomy and teacher autonomy; however, there exists a similarity between them, since both emphasize the value of co-learning, self-direction, collaboration and democratic participation regarding three principles of action: critical reflective inquiry, empowerment, and dialogue. It is via observing, inquiring, negotiating and evaluating our performance as teachers with our students and colleagues that these principles are put into action and we develop professionally.

This type of inquiry is clearly related to action research, whose contribution

to teacher autonomy has been widely discussed. Hopkins (1993) states that, although action research is not a panacea, its practical applications help teachers to have more control of their professional and personal life, providing them with logic and method. Stenhouse (1991) stresses the use the teacher can make of action research in curriculum improvement, and proposes a "broad" practitioner, i.e. a teacher with a capacity for self-development by means of systematic self-analysis, the study of other teachers' work and the testing of ideas by means of classroom research. Schön (1983 as cited in Hopkins, 1993) establishes a relationship between teacher autonomy and their participation in research processes by proposing a "reflective practitioner", one who controls knowledge instead of being subjugated by it, and one who is committed to theorizing and reaching self-knowledge. This self-knowledge involves the clarity and power we obtain when we understand a concept and can use it in our personal and professional lives. Also Zeichner (2003) advocates teacher research in professional development endeavors, because of its impact on the transformation of schools and for the effects it has on those who conduct it. Among the reasons for this are that teachers become more self-directed and proactive, their attitudes and skills for self-analysis are enhanced, and they engage in more collegiate dialogue with other teachers, which are all features of an autonomous teacher.

This article intends to show in practice how a novice teacher, like me, first developed professionally by carrying out action research; second, how collaborative dialogue with colleagues and members of the research team contributed to the development of my critical thinking and reflection, which led to a new understanding and transformation of the teaching situation; and third, how all this enhanced my willingness and capacity to take control of my teaching and learning, i.e. my autonomy.

The Starting Point

In the year 2000, when I still was a student, I was invited to attend an English language teaching conference that took place in Medellín, where I lived. I had recently finished a course on academic writing where the professor in charge, Cristina Frodden, had carried out action research. She invited me to attend that conference to see what she and two other classmates had prepared. During the presentation I was greatly impressed by the way she had analyzed and reported on some actions that had been taken during this course relating to the importance of educating future teachers in values (Frodden, Picón, & Usma, 2001). I agreed with what I saw that day, knowing that I myself had experienced those events and validated them as true.

After the presentation, another former student of Cristina's and I joined her and the two other students and built a study group to learn about action research. I was very happy with the idea of being part of this group because the work proposed would give continuity to the topic of the presentation I had attended. Targeting the development of students' autonomy in foreign language teaching, and learning how to carry out action research was a new field for me, due to the fact that the

teacher education program I pursued at that moment didn't include research in the course work.

At the beginning, the idea was that I act as a critical friend for my partners, since I was the only one who didn't have any experience in teaching. The other two, although still studying, had already begun teaching. That year, while Cristina was abroad for her sabbatical, the four of us met every week to discuss what we had read about autonomy and action research. We wrote a report of our discussions in each meeting, and sent it to Cristina via e-mail in order to receive feedback and orientation, such as this:

> This is a brief summary of what you read. As such, it does not tell me much of HOW YOU CONNECTED WHAT YOU READ WITH WHAT YOU DO/ARE DOING or what you found strange/surprising, difficult to understand or unbelievable. I need to know WHAT YOU ALL THINK. I already know what Altrichter et al. and Nunan think. Besides, there seems to be a misunderstanding of Altrichter et al. They talk about different relationships between knowledge and action, not about three stages of action research. In fact, teachers may be involved with tacit knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action, and are involved in reflection-on-action, i.e. take distance for some time from what they do to reflect (write a diary, invite somebody to observe, ask students how they view their teaching), are teachers AND RESEARCHERS because by analyzing this information they are creating knowledge, which they later disseminate. (Cristina's e-mail, October 20, 2000)

For this first year we kept on meeting every week for about two hours, reading and sharing our reflections based on our experiences, and also contrasting them with theory, and receiving comments from Cristina:

> I think that reflection is the first part that has something related to research. That is to say, the teacher observes what she does, what happens in her classroom, and analyzes what she observes. (There are still some things missing, but I would like you to discover them by yourselves through reading or in the practice itself.) (Cristina's e-mail, September 28, 2000)

In July 2001, when Cristina came back from her sabbatical leave, we became a more formal collaborative action research group that now had the responsibility of carrying out a project developing our own investigations in four different settings under Cristina's guidance. By that time I had already been teaching in a private language institute in Medellín which was moving from working with a textbook designed for teaching English in second language contexts, to implementing a theme-based approach based on Halliday's (1984) principles for children's language development, further elaborated by Short (1997, p. 31); namely, that children learn language through language, and about language.

> (Children) learn language through the "doing" of language — talking, listening, reading, and writing. They learn about language as they explore how language functions and the conventions that support communication. They also learn through language as they focus on what it is they are learning. In this case, language just happens to be the tool they are using about topics and questions that are important to them.

This approach, which was originally meant for children learning their mother tongue, was adopted by the institution and further developed in in-service training sessions. Teachers were encouraged to divide classes into three sessions in order to tap these three principles: theme

exploration to learn through language, literacy development to learn the language, and language awareness to learn about the language. However, although each session focuses on one principle, they sometimes overlap, as can be seen in the following diagram.

Research Question and Procedures

As a starting point to my inquiry I stated the following question: How does collegiate dialogue, reading, observation and reflection on classroom events allow me to develop the skills needed to implement the theme-based approach and become a more autonomous teacher?

At the beginning of the course I asked my students if they wanted to participate in this research project and they agreed. I took notes in class, and right after class in my lesson plan notebook in order to keep track of my pedagogical practice and research process in the classroom. I also kept a journal where I expanded and reflected on what I was experiencing. In the three-hour meetings our research group held every week, other members commented on the diary entries we read; we discussed the experiences and difficulties we were having carrying out research; and we discussed articles related to research procedures, language learning and teaching, and the development of teacher and learner autonomy. After I carried out a short-cut analysis of the memos and of my journal in order to present my experience in a conference in Bogotá, I realized that I needed to know how students were viewing this experience. Therefore, I asked a member of the research group to interview

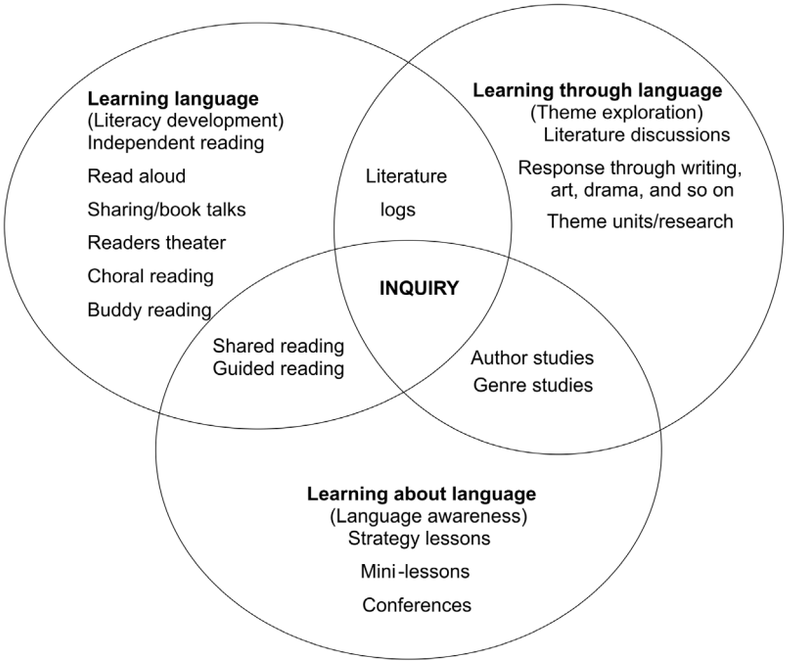

Figure 1. Literacy circles (Adapted from Short, 1997, p. 32).

my students in order to triangulate the information. I also shared the preliminary findings of this experience in a meeting with the students' parents.

The Setting

The institution where I carried out this research is a bi-national center which offers courses of English as a foreign language and promotes multiculturalism through a wide array of cultural activities. The Multimedia Learning Center, the library and the bookshop offer students and the general public opportunities to access information in English that is scarce elsewhere in the country. English courses are organized into two programs; one for adults, and another one for children and teenagers. Most students belong to the middle and upper-middle class. Because of the high number of students, the institution has rented additional space in two schools in neighborhoods far away from its premises.

The Children and Teenagers' Program, where I taught, was divided into three main levels: Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. The group I carried out the research with was an Intermediate II class which met once a week on Saturday morning for two hours and consisted of thirteen students: six boys and seven girls ages 11 and 12. This program was directed by the Academic Coordinator and the Professional Development Team (PDT), which was a group of senior teachers in charge of training Development Assistants (DAs) and organizing pre- and in-service courses for the rest of the teachers. A DA was assigned to each teacher in order to support her/him in their pedagogical practice. In pre-service courses the PDT presented the philosophy and methodology of the institution to the new teachers, as well as offered some practical hints on how to work with thematic teaching. In the in-service courses, teachers shared and discussed their experiences and the PDT tried to solve doubts that might arise in the implementation of the approach. Teachers had to keep a diary where they wrote general information about students: one initial observation that served as a diagnosis of the students, and two follow-up observations. Teachers met DAs at least four times during the semester to share the information written in the diaries, and to discuss students' learning processes before handing in mid-term and final pedagogical reports to parents.

The Problems I Encountered and How I Tackled Them

The main problems I encountered when I started teaching with this new approach were classroom management related to the implementation of social skills and the negotiation of the theme with the whole class. Having control of the class is one of the concerns that characterizes novice teachers; as we become more experienced, observe, and reflect on our actions with the collaboration of peers, this issue is overcome. In order to work successfully using theme-based teaching, I felt I needed to learn how to develop students' social skills and how to negotiate the theme for students' projects.

Classroom Management and Social Skills: Listening, Dialogue

Even though I had understood theme-based teaching, I had difficulties implementing it in my classes. I wondered if these were due to particular students' characteristics or because of my limited teaching experience. Since this was not a regular school, I presumed that students were intrinsically motivated towards learning English. However, to my surprise, some of them were there because they were doing poorly in English at school, because their parents considered it important for their children to learn English, or simply because they needed to keep them busy. When students failed to do their homework, I attributed it to their low motivation. I thought this was probably the reason they were not taking charge of their learning.

Due to all this, I could not apply the teaching approach as I expected. Since they had not done the homework, they could not share information as I asked them. They did not propose ideas when choosing a text holder to present the project. I thought this was because they lacked the social skills needed to negotiate and reach a consensus on a topic they wanted to work on, i.e. make decisions in small groups and in the whole class. I also thought I needed to help them to be more critical persons; for example, help them to analyze their classmates' ideas, to ask and answer clarification questions, and to follow appropriate steps to solve a problem (Ennis, 2000).

When working in groups or as a whole class, students rarely listened to each other. They gave simplistic answers to my questions, and when they gave their opinions, they did not support their points of view. Instead of discussing in order to reach a consensus, they wanted to vote immediately.

> It is necessary to develop social skills such as listening to each other when someone is speaking, when one wants people to grow; even more so when we are dealing with children or adolescents. This is learnt by teaching them, correcting them and making them aware of the instances when errors occur. (Diary, July 29, 2002, p. 37)

One strategy I used to develop their social skills and improve my classroom management was to implement small group work.

> I had observed that this group had difficulties paying attention to an activity that I was leading, and I had reflected that I had them paying more attention to what I was doing instead of what they were doing. So I thought I should promote more group or pair work. (Diary, April 22, 2002)

It was easier for them to listen to each other when they worked in small groups. They worked more quietly, and I could monitor their work better.

> I think that I needed to do more personalized work with the students. I thought I could work with all of them at a time, but their unruliness made me reflect; it was like a signal. (With group work) the class environment is less tense. Students needed to be listened to, and individualization helps them to feel more self-confident. (Lesson plan notes and observations, April 13, 2002)

> On Saturday I decided to make them work in groups… I could monitor almost all the students' work, how they were dealing with the planning and implementation of their project, and how they were reading. Miriam[2] said: Hm, it's a miracle that the group is working in silence! I felt very pleased; I felt that group work was

> working and we had created a positive learning environment. (Diary, April 22, 2002)

In whole class activities, however, students still had more difficulty listening to the teacher and to each other.

As another strategy to improve their responsibility and social skills, I asked my students to reflect on their behavior:

> (I must improve) my listening because sometimes I don't pay attention. (Information collected from students on April 20, 2002)

On four occasions, after a very difficult class, I collected students' written reflections to obtain their perceptions on it. Writing their names on the sheets of paper was optional. With this action I intended to promote reflection in my students and, at the same time, obtain valuable information to validate my perceptions. I thought that if they became aware of the factors affecting their learning, then they could pose solutions and change. For example, in order to avoid the problem of students being lost because they had missed a class, I asked them to write down their classmates' telephone numbers so that they could get in touch and make up for their absences. Since some of them were not taking notes, either because they were not paying attention or because they did not understand the numbers, I asked them to review numbers and programmed a test for the following week. After they had peer-corrected their quizzes, I asked them to reflect on how they had done and why.

> If I had done the homework I would have done better in the test. (Student's reflection, April 6, 2002)

In trying to solve discipline problems, at the beginning I paid a great deal of attention to interpersonal factors and neglected the task-related factors that make up the teachers and learners' roles (Wright, 1987 as cited in Voller, 1997). I was showing a rational-procedural pattern to authority which is related to impersonal authority (Stevick 1976, as cited in Voller, 1997). I followed the institutional guidelines that stated that we had to use a book which was designed for an ESL context and chose topics from there. Trying to be more democratic, I had students decide the punishments for not following the rules of the institution, but I never questioned the rules or asked students to set up their own.

According to Aebli (1991, p. 217), there are three conditions that are necessary to maintain discipline in the classroom: an appropriate learning offer to the student, a capacity to present and guide an activity not only with one single student but also with the whole class, and a repertoire of simple actions that triggers students who do not participate. Learning may not take place because the activities are over- or underestimating students' capacity, so they become distracted in other things that might be considered indiscipline. I could improve my classes in these three aspects when I realized that advanced students needed to have extra work to practice their strengths and work on their weaknesses, as well as how the low proficiency level students needed to work more on their own and fulfill certain goals. Besides, with experience, I had also learned to discover what students' real interests were.

Negotiating the Topic: Reaching Consensus to Reduce Teacher's Work

In theme exploration students negotiate one theme at the beginning of the course, pose questions about it, investigate throughout the semester, and at the end of it decide on a project to show what they have learned about the theme to an audience, usually their parents. Students engage in activities such as writing down what they already know about a certain theme, bringing sources of information on the topic to class, or sometimes reading information in advance either in English or in Spanish.

I noticed that students had troubles choosing the theme for the course. They did not propose their own ideas and did not ask for clarification when they did not understand their classmates' points of view, and they were especially shy to defend their preferences when we were negotiating a theme. Between July 2001 and July 2002, since students had already bought their books, the institution decided to use the textbook and the theme-based approach. The instructions they gave us were to select the topic for the project from the ones included in the units of the book, but sometimes they didn't match students' reality since these books were developed for second language learning contexts and differed from students' realities and interests.

I always followed the instructions given in the pre- and in-service courses. I tried every strategy the PDT and DA suggested because I believe in learning by doing. When they did not work, I felt frustrated as evidenced by the following diary entry:

> I'm worried about how students are working on the project. I question myself if I have provided them with enough elements to work on it and if I'm guiding them in a right way. It seems to me that they feel pleased with the fact that they came to an agreement to work on rock music, but I'm still questioning myself about how I'm guiding their learning and their success in their project, since I don't see the project focused on a question. (Memo, August 27, 2001)

> I think I have to devise some strategies to be able to manage the class better, that is to say, to control it, especially children's classes, because I think that when one has to read everything there is to be as informed about the topic as the students, teaching conditions change. One has to take into account that as a teacher one has no control of the material, both what the students are reading and what is available for the teacher. That is to say, with thematic exploration both teacher and students tend to look for information in the institution's library and to fight for the material, or they go to different sources of information to which they will not have access simultaneously. The fact that students choose different topics for their projects also makes one feel a loss of power, because one cannot control everything at the same time, and if one tries to work with everybody at the same time, it is very difficult, because the ones who are not interested in that topic tend to do other things. I think that students' attention is focused on the topic they have chosen and not on the transversal functions that this topic could accomplish. (Diary, Nov 15, 2002, p. 44)

By the second semester of 2002, we were not working with the textbook anymore, so I felt freer to engage students in negotiation of topics according to their real interests by asking them to bring a reading they liked and write why they did so. Since I felt that our projects lacked a guiding question,

maybe because students needed to improve their critical thinking skills, I discovered that I could trigger these young learners' inquiry through asking them what they would like to ask a wise person if there were one in the classroom. So they started to pose very interesting questions. Then I grouped the questions that had a relationship and presented them to students in order to make a decision together. When they saw the topics organized in question groups they could make a decision more easily. I explained to pupils very clearly that we needed to come up with one topic for the project and that was the reason we were doing those activities. Then, as homework, I asked them to investigate in English about the topic they had chosen: extreme sports. The first task consisted of listing what extreme sports they could recall, what they knew about them, and investigating other extreme sports that existed. They were expected to bring their ideas written in their notebooks in English or in Spanish and, if they were going to bring printed information, it had to be preferably in English. This change in the activities I used to negotiate the theme came to my mind through reflecting on what didn't work and trying out new things.

As I started focusing more on task-related factors, I also changed my approach to authority. I provided psychological support by being patient and non-judgmental, and encouraging them to be committed, helping them to overcome obstacles and engaging in dialogue with them instead of manipulating them.

> Now I realize the importance of reflecting on my teaching and of guiding students in order for them to reflect too, instead of just imposing things. (Diary, April 27, 2002, p. 18)

In literacy development, students work on their cognitive and linguistic skills through reading and writing. Typical activities to promote literacy are storytelling and Language Experience Approach (LEA). Storytelling can be developed in different ways: the teacher reads aloud from a big book while tracking and asking questions that help students to anticipate what is going to happen in the story; other times, students read in silence, individually or in pairs, either from the same book or from different books. LEA involves students sharing their comprehension and impressions from the reading with the whole class, and the teacher writing the ideas they expressed on the board or on a poster.

When I asked students to look for information for the theme they had chosen, I found that they had difficulties working independently. Some didn't have access to the internet, and they did not use the library either because they attended classes in sites far away from it, or just because they were not used to visiting it. When they found some information, they did not read it in advance because they had trouble extracting the information they needed to share in class. This was because they could not read authentic texts so they read in Spanish and then translated the information literally into English.

I began engaging the whole class in reading, sharing and extracting key and simple information to present to the class. I also modeled the building of mind maps, which helped them to understand the texts

better and provided a scaffold in order to speak about the topic later on.

I promoted work on metacognitive strategies such as planning and self-assessing (Oxford, 1990). For example, I showed them samples of project work of students from previous courses, so that they could have an idea of what they were expected to do. They worked in groups examining them and writing down the steps they thought the other students might have followed. We shared the results of the activity and came up with detailed steps to do their projects. Then I asked them to write a plan of action using a format with six columns: Objective, Activity, Person in charge, Evidence, Date, and Difficulties.

Another strategy I introduced to improve metacognition was self-assessment. Students carried out interviews in pairs, I transcribed them, and they self-corrected their mistakes. I also provided technical support when I helped them to plan and carry out their plans, to select materials, to organize interactions and also when I encouraged them to self- and peer-assess. In this way, I was acting more as a facilitator (Holec, 1985 in Voller, 1997) and helping to develop their autonomy.

By 2003, I had gained more expertise: classroom routines became easier; it was clear then that my class had its own momentum established by me with the negotiation and participation of students based on what I had to do and what they had to accomplish. At the beginning of each class we played short games. I oriented them to reviewing the previous class topics or structures worked, or introducing vocabulary related to an upcoming theme. I also developed a planning guide of the tasks to be done every class that reminded my students of their responsibilities. I encouraged them to do pleasurable activities at home as part of their English practice, such as watching a movie in English, reading something of their interest or listening to music. Then we would share those experiences and keep them in a poster that helped each student to self-monitor what they were doing.

Students became more motivated towards choosing one single topic of their real interest. I observed how through negotiation, encouraging students to support their points of view and listening to each other, thus avoiding the easy way, students could come up with an agreement. I learned that I needed to know how to elicit students' real interests and help them focus on the work done in class.

We applied self- and peer- assessment, compared these with my evaluation of students' performance and showed their parents the process. Parents appreciated the results since they saw progress in their children's learning. One parent once mentioned that his son liked my classes very much because from the beginning he knew where he was heading. That was very satisfactory. I realized that changes take time and that teachers need to develop to be good observers of what is around them and also of themselves. Getting involved in collaborative networks helps one to gain confidence in order to try out things and to face the challenging world of teaching today's generations.

Findings

Three members of the research group contributed towards the analysis of the information. After comparing and contrasting the information I had gathered in my journal with the minutes and the students' perceptions, one member of the research group compared my analysis with hers, and the other one looked again at the information and helped me to realize that the categories needed to be grouped in broader ones. Then, I worked with my research advisor on the interpretation of the data and on the statement of the hypotheses which has been grouped into the themes that constitute the findings of this research: collaborating with peers, developing as critical thinkers, and reflecting on my teaching.

Collaborating with Peers

Novice teachers usually feel that their problems are unique and tend to try to solve problems on their own. Teacher isolation, which has been linked to formal teacher preparation programs (Goodlad et al. 1990a, as cited in Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1997), makes beginning teachers' first years of experience the most difficult ones in their careers and lives (McDonald & Elías (1980, as cited in Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1997). Stanulis, Campbell &Hicks (2002) write about a novice teacher's uncomfortable feelings making the transition from student to teacher, as she felt isolated from her previous teachers, and found no support from her mentor at school. Perhaps because of this, Fullan & Stiegelbauer (1997) emphasize the importance for novice teachers to work collaboratively in order to guarantee their stay and success in the profession.

> Something positive is that through the work of the group I have had the opportunity to obtain valuable support that has helped me grow as a professional and as a person; for example, when I have had to listen to constructive criticism or when they question my pedagogical and professional practice. This has allowed me to have a wider vision of my context, where I include my students and colleagues as well as the society I take part in (Diary, February 18, 2002, p.4).

Since I started teaching, I shared the difficulties I had regarding classroom management and students' irresponsibility with the research group. I tried to find action strategies to solve these problems in books on teaching and learning English as a second language (ESL), because in our context it is difficult to find literature on English as a foreign language (EFL). Reflecting on what I normally did in my classroom in my diary, and sharing those reflections with my peers who were more experienced, was more productive. As we worked in similar contexts, they had had similar experiences and could provide advice and support; but above all, their comments helped me question what I was doing and to restructure my way of thinking.

> The idea of asking Gloria to interview my students was a good one; we killed two birds with one stone. On the one hand, she practiced her interviewing skills, helped me collect information because I had no way of doing it, and also provided her perception of what was happening. The fact the she did the interviews with my students was good because the students said things that they might not have told me.

> After the interviews, although we did not manage to do all the ones we had planned, we listened to them and commented on them (Diary, May 12, 2002, p. 22).

> As external interviewer, because she did not know the class, but as an internal one because she knew about the research and about my way of thinking and acting, she had a very important role in the collection of information, since I had tried to obtain written responses from my students. For example, specific information about their attitude in class with no success. I don't know if it was because Gloria was an external agent or because of the technique we used, but we obtained very valuable information both about my students and my own pedagogical practice (Diary, May 12, 2002, p. 22).

Ginns, Heirdsfield, Atweh, & Watters (2001), in their participatory action research project with novice teachers, found that having teachers work collaboratively with others prompted a critical reflection on their practice. This is similar to what happened to me. In the research group, when we shared our experiences through reading our diaries and having conversations, we asked questions that prompted reflection, supported our points of view, and learned to be open to giving and receiving feedback.

> The other interesting thing was to get Gloria's critical vision about my teaching practice and what could be going on in my class. Also, about the members of the group's level of English and about what we should and could do in order to improve it, because being so involved with the critical intellectual and the reflective practitioner, as presented by Contreras (1997), we cannot and should not neglect the technical expert (Diary, May 12, 2002, p. 23).

As Aebli (1991) mentions, a group of teachers becomes a social support system that accompanies novice teachers while they have difficulties. Ginns, Heirdsfield, Atweh, & Watters (2001) reported how collaboration was fostered when novice teachers worked in small groups. These teachers stated that working with others gave them an opportunity to talk freely about what was successful or not in their classrooms, to be more reflective, analytical and critical, emphasizing the importance of the social dimension in their transition as new professionals.

Professional communities are formed because they have interests in common and work voluntarily together to achieve individual and group objectives. Sharing with the research group, I realized that my colleagues had had similar problems. Knowing how they overcame them contributed to my understanding and helped me make appropriate decisions. As Short and Burke state, "individual knowledge, experience, and understanding become a pooled resource as members confer on any question" (1991, p. 26). In this way, collaboration in the research group contributed to developing my identity as a teacher and taught me that I can also learn from my peers, not just from my own experience and from theory in books.

Developing as Critical Thinkers

Collegial dialogue with the research group also contributed to the development of my critical thinking. According to Ennis (2000), being a critical thinker involves, among other things, discovering and listening to others' views and reasons, considering seriously other points of view, supporting arguments, seeking

for alternative explanations, plans and sources, analyzing and devising solutions for problems and issues, and taking into account the total situation. Interaction in the research group meetings was rich and lively, as can be seen in this excerpt from the minutes:

> Jorge says that emancipation involves taking distance from imposed educational ideologies and making our own decisions according to our context. Diana says it means to liberate oneself from slavery, from the oppression from those above. Then Gloria says that in order to become a critical intellectual, you have to acquire conscience. Cristina asks: How does a person become critical? Mauricio answers: By asking themselves questions. Another question is posed: Does a person become critical naturally? (Minutes, Feb 11, 2002).

Discussions in the collaborative action research group helped me to develop and expand my way of thinking as I was immersed in an environment where I could take advantage of what others had to offer and interact and learn from them (Short & Burke, 1991). When I started in the group my concerns were quite limited to what went on in the classroom; later on, I started connecting issues of power in the classroom with the wider world:

> Diana says that no matter how autonomous we are, we must work and I cannot just start in a new institution and change its norms at once. Diana says there are three types of rules: (1) those imposed by the system, (2) those imposed by the school, and (3) those imposed by the teacher. Different processes are required to debate a teacher's rule or a rule of the system (Minutes, April 8, 2002).

According to Beas, Santa Cruz, Thomsen & Utreras (2000), critical thinking is a process from which conclusions are drawn based on evidence. For Cromwell (1986) it is "a critical consciousness of the thinking process itself and of its products". Critical thinkers are willing to be informed, are inclined to be reflective, are curious to look for evidence and are eager to establish relationships among information that appears to be isolated. They have an open attitude, respect others' opinions, want to know various perspectives of the same phenomenon, and tend to be reserved with judgments. Working collaboratively in the research group, I learned the importance of members listening to each other and discussing points of view before making a decision. We tried to reach a consensus and to avoid imposition.

Reflecting on my Teaching

I became analytic through observing my own performance in the classroom and reflecting in my diary. Keeping memos after class, writing ideas about what I should have done in my journal, I kept them in mind and tried them out later. I listened to teaching strategies suggested in pre- and in-service sessions, tested those procedures one by one, registered how I used them, and also tested my own ideas regarding my teaching practice. By doing this, I realized how they were working. I could also realize my strengths and weaknesses, and establish my own objectives for professional growth in line with Stallings (1989; quoted in Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1997), who emphasizes learning by doing, linking previous knowledge with new knowledge, learning through reflection and solving problems, and learning within a collaborative

environment. Had I not been engaged in this collaborative action research, I could not have been able to carry out such a systematic process. The importance of working with others is that they help us to have another perspective of what we have already observed. There are certain events that could not take place if we did not have the critical and supportive view of others that share similar experiences as ours.

Our ability to empathize with others provides our only opportunity to stand outside ourselves and observe who we are and what we are doing. These socially provided observation points lend flexibility to our personal worlds. They create choices that would not be available to us if we were isolated from others. We have potential for learning that would never be realized without these social relationships (Short & Burke, 1991, p. 14).

According to Elliot (1990), academics do not translate their theories into a practical form that can help teachers solve the problems encountered in their classrooms. This is why Stenhouse (1991) stressed teachers' role as curriculum researchers and the development of teachers' reflection. Altrichter, Posch & Somekh (1993) discuss professional knowledge and professional action based on Schön's models of reflection: tacit knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

Tacit knowing-in-action deals mainly with routines and has its value because it gives organization to teachers' work and allows them to do more than one thing at a time. It has three characteristics: (1) thinking and acting are not separate; (2) the teacher is unaware of her/his practical knowledge or how it is learnt, and (3) the practitioner is not able to give a straightforward verbal description of her/his practical knowledge.

In reflection-in-action, knowledge is implicit in what we do. Confronted with a problem, the teacher reflects on what is happening and makes decisions on the spot. The teacher acts at the moment the events occur and, based on that action, constructs knowledge for that specific situation; therefore, making decisions and reflecting go hand in hand.

Reflection-on-action allows the teacher to think back on what has happened to formulate and express explicitly the knowledge obtained from the event. This viewing on previous action permits teachers to be more analytic and to organize the knowledge obtained from the reflective practice. Reflection-on-action enhances professional competency because actions are no so mechanical, but converted into an objectified point of reference. This process allows us to see a complex situation from various perspectives, and in that way, we can see it better. Reflection-on-action is the basis of action research.

Working on this research project enabled me to experience reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Because of my lack of teaching experience, I had not developed much knowledge-in-action, but my natural capability to reflect helped me make proper decisions in class. Later, through systematic observation, diary writing and discussions with the research group, I could reflect back on what I had done. This allowed me to gain more knowledge and a better understanding of the theme-based approach. Besides,

working with the research group helped me to realize the importance of theorizing on my experiences in order to share them with my colleagues, which is also a characteristic of reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983, in Altrichter et al., 1993). When I attended the in-service courses in the institution, I could observe that some teachers were still having similar difficulties as the ones I had already overcome, so I had the opportunity to share the ways in which I had dealt with them. I realized that reflection is an important skill that can be developed. Another thing I realized in the research group was the advantages of working collaboratively, so I promoted those advantages among my students.

> Diana is reading articles about learner autonomy. She found out that autonomy is not an end but a means. One is in the process of learning. As a teacher one is constantly learning, thanks to reflecting on one's practice. Learner autonomy has been understood as students working on their own. Being part of this group has helped Diana see her progress; she has acquired criteria to decide the role of the student and the teacher. There are environments that favor the development of autonomous learners, and her institution has worked in that direction (Minutes, March 11, 2003, p. 36).

Discussion

I think that through thematic teaching students can learn about the world in a meaningful way when the teacher is not the only person who manages the information, and authority is shared between teacher and students. Thematic teaching prepares students to become good citizens because negotiating different alternatives, listening to others' points of view, and expressing opinions and supporting them can be a basis to tackle real life issues later. Another asset of this approach is that the teacher can exercise autonomy regarding the curriculum because decisions on what to teach are open to negotiation between the teacher and the students. It may be argued that by giving such freedom to the teacher, the institution may lose direction and control of what students learn in each level; however, in the institution I worked in, teachers who belonged to the PDT or who had fluent dialogue with their DAs could exchange ideas and, thus, could maintain some curricular unity, showing the benefits of collaborative work.

Thematic teaching requires that the teacher establish good rapport with students in order to discover their real interests, and to guide a project that motivates them. In this regard, beginner teachers, who tend to adopt a strict stance in order to manage discipline problems, may find difficulties starting to teach with this approach. On the other hand, thematic teaching can become very time consuming for teachers since it requires them to devote a great deal of time to investigate and read about different topics in order to manage the information brought by the students. Whereas a textbook provides support to the teacher, especially a beginner teacher; in a theme-based approach, with no textbook, the support should be provided by a community of teachers. In my case, besides the DAs, I had the research group to support me. Exercising autonomy did not mean isolating myself, but entailed interdependence, mutual support, and commitment with the educational community (Usma 2006).

The professional growth I achieved working in a collaborative action research group had an effect on my role as a teacher. Collaborative dialogue helped me to examine my beliefs regarding teaching, to reflect on the teaching strategies that were not being effective, and moved me to teach differently, focusing more on the children than on myself. I realized that I had a group of students who were all different, and that I had to work with them in different ways. According to Maruny (1989, as cited in Díaz & Hernández, 1998), teaching is not only administering information, but also helping students to learn. Cromwell (1986) also points to the fact that teachers who want to develop critical thinking in their students should not see themselves merely as transmitters of information, but as developers of abilities. Doing this implies that teachers know their students very well. According to Gil et al. (1991, as cited in Díaz & Hernández, 1998), going through processes of collaborative research contributes to transcending the original role of transmission of knowledge and becoming a facilitator of students' learning.

According to Berliner (1988, as cited in Kagan, 1992), teachers pass through five stages in their professional development: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient and expert. Novice teachers need to concentrate on their performance and plan their teaching through making rational decisions, which are rather inflexible because they are based on context-free rules. Teachers take two to three years to move from the novice stage to the advanced beginner, a stage characterized by teachers making decisions based on their prior experiences and the recognition of similarities across contexts. In the third stage, competent teachers know what is important and what is not, and can make conscious decisions about their teaching; however, their teaching still lacks fluidity and flexibility.

I feel that when one has the opportunity to participate in an action research group, one passes from the first to the second stage faster. For example, in 2001, I took all the responsibility for establishing course goals and assessing students' achievement, but in 2002, I also asked my students to self- and peer-assess with those same goals. I cared about what my students could do to realize what they had learned so that they would start to take charge of their learning.

Having the opportunity to participate in a collaborative action research project provided me with the chance to learn how to carry out research by doing it, and become what Schön (1992) calls a reflective professional, a teacher able to test theories through practical action, to solve problems in their own context and to develop their own theory based on practice. My experience also supports Liston and Zeichner's (1989; as cited in Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1997) view that by carrying out action research, beginning teachers become more aware of their own practices, of the gap between their beliefs and their practices, and of the way their students learn and think.

Collaborative dialogue in the weekly meetings with the action research group is perhaps the activity that impacted most on the development of my autonomy. According to Woodcock, Lassonde, & Rutten (2004), collaborative reflection is rooted in trusting relationships. Such

relationships allowed me to learn that I was not alone in this new field of teaching, to open my mind to other perspectives, and to receive criticism without being offended because the critics were my colleagues and friends and wanted me to strengthen my qualities and overcome my weaknesses. Collaborative groups need to foster characteristics such as values, goals, vision of teaching, trust, care, mutual respect, comfortable sharing of doubts, celebration of success, constructive feedback, serious commitment and free decisions (Lee & Anthony, 2001). Working collaboratively with the research group, I became more aware of my own thoughts, developed new routines in order to implement theme-based teaching, and learned to solve teaching problems as I encountered them, which are features that according to Kagan (1992) pertain to professional development experiences. Above all, this collaborative research experience became a motivation for me to learn and try out things that helped me to have more control of my classes and my learning process as a teacher, acting on the social-motivational dimension of autonomy mentioned by Huang (2005). This is extremely important since it has been found that novice teachers' attitudes towards teaching and learning play a crucial role in their staying in or leaving the profession. To summarize, this experience included the features Usma (2006) mentions in order to enhance teachers' professional autonomy, professional competence and attitudes towards teaching and learning: collaboration, experiential learning, shared decision making, risk taking, and reflection.

Conclusion

When I started this research project, I wanted to explore how collegiate dialogue, reading, observation and reflection on classroom events would help me to develop the skills I needed to implement the theme-based approach in the institution where I was working and to become a more autonomous teacher. However, as I started observing and reflecting on my teaching I discovered new issues that were impinging on my performance as a teacher and took action on them, which led to improvement in the implementation of the approach. I found that my concern moved from the troubles I had with the approach to the relationship I had with my pupils and their learning. I realized that thematic teaching can be beneficial for students, teachers and the administration. It is an approach that engages students as part of the learning experience; moreover, it is a tool that can be used not just to instruct learners but to educate them integrally in order to become democratic citizens. On the other hand, teachers exercise their autonomy making their own decisions, negotiating contents, preparing materials and selecting appropriate teaching and assessment procedures. Finally, thematic teaching represents a challenge for the administration since in-service training sessions have to be transformed from a more traditional model where teachers are given guidelines and instructions to a more socio-cognitive constructivist model where their shared reflection on their practices is as important as the information provided by experts or books.

Making part of a collaborative action research project transformed me from a thoughtful person into a reflective professional. I was involved in continuous cycles where I planned systematically, carried out actions and evaluated them. Collaborative dialogue with my colleagues and the research group was a major influence on my professional development since it helped me to enhance my critical thinking, to take into account the multiple contextual factors that a teacher needs to consider when making decisions, and it reminded me of the social responsibility we have to improve our educational contexts. I learned the importance of doing action research as a means to be prepared better for the challenges we encounter in our profession. But perhaps most important of all is the awareness I gained of a teacher's role and my renewed engagement with the profession. Becoming a reflective teacher is a long path –as is learning for students– where action research can make an immense contribution.

Notes

1. When we use the first person singular we refer to Diana Pineda, who was the teacher directly involved with the English class. Cristina Frodden was the research advisor and, as such ,gave constant support and feedback to Diana in all the phases of the research, including the writing of this article.
2. Proper names have been substituted by pseudonyms in order to preserve anonymity.

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