

Then and Now, Inglés en Primarias

Ruth Ban, Barry University / Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes

Abstract

This autoethnographic narrative seeks to reflect on how pedagogic experiences mediate professional development in the area of English language teaching at the primary school level. Based on the teacher participants' contributions as well as the author's personal memories, a socio-historical reflection of how the English in public primary schools project came about in one state is recounted, and how this project provided academic opportunities for teacher development as well as student learning of English.

Esta narrativa autoetnográfica busca reflexionar en como las experiencias pedagógicas influyen en el desarrollo profesional dentro del área de la enseñanza del idioma inglés a nivel primaria. Basándose en las contribuciones de los profesores participantes así como la remembranzas del autor, se llega una reflexión socio-histórico de como surgió el proyecto de ingles en primarias y como este mismo proyecto proporcionó oportunidades académicas para el desarrollo profesional de los maestros(as) así como para el aprendizaje del idioma por parte de los estudiantes.

Then and Now

It has been fifteen years since I first heard those words, *Inglés en Primarias*. For a decade and a half, that term has been part of my life and part of my professional history. It seems impossible that it was that long ago, but it is true. They were first spoken to me regarding another place, another state initiative, when English language teaching in Mexico was quite different; at least that is what we tell each other when we gather at our International Conventions and Academic Meetings. And now, finally, there are murmurs about the Mexican Education Ministry initiating a change the national elementary school curriculum for the teaching of English in *Educación Básica* (grades 1-6). This curricular change causes me not to look forward, but to look back. In addition, it provokes many questions for me as a professional in the English language teaching field. How did we get here, and how can what we know about our sociohistorical development in the area of language teaching inform this exciting new development in the lives of Mexican schoolchildren?

I write in an historical autoethnographical genre. Over the years, "the ethnographic genre has been blurred, enlarged, and altered to include autoethnography..." (Richardson, 1999). These autoethnographical writings allow the author to represent their understanding of life through individual social inquiries (Richardson, 1999). This autoethnographical piece is written as a reflective exercise. But, it is also a public task, in other words, although it is written to help the author understand and reflect on a piece of her life that she wants to understand more deeply, it is also for public consumption. This narrative recount of my experiences in *Inglés en Primarias* is based on memories of the participants, but primarily on the recollections of the author, supported by teachers and collaborators who were a part of this professional development piece of my life.

As we write, it is inevitable that our own worldviews and ways of viewing truth form the words we put on the page. The author writes from an epistemological position that learning is a social process, be it language learning or any other kind of learning. In addition, she believes we are mediated by social signs, tools and cultural artifacts as we learn, leading to development (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, when a person, or teacher carries out her professional role, be it instruction in a classroom or program development and implementation, there is social learning taking place through the mediation of the objects and others involved in this process.

I still have contact with colleagues that were with me on that remarkable journey 15 years ago. When we were young professionals involved in impacting ELT as it existed in Mexico at that time. It all began when two events took place at almost the same time. First, in 1994, the Mexican Education Ministry began the process of restructuring responsibility for the first ten years of education (*Educación Básica*) to the individual state governments. It coincided with a review of the national ELT curriculum at the secondary school level. At that time, the national curriculum was re-written to include a more communicative approach to language teaching (SEP, 1994). In our state, there had just been a gubernatorial election; we had a brand new governor. He promised to make changes in education, and suddenly there was talk of innovation in the area of computer laboratories and ELT. I heard it on the news, and read about it in the newspaper, that was as far as it went at that point.

I began my professional career in Mexico as an English teacher like any native speaker; I was hired because I had good pronunciation. No one ever asked me if I had a university degree, which I did. No one ever inquired if I was certified to teach in my home city of Chicago, which I was. I would like to believe that things have changed. By that time, I had gotten the hang of my new profession, *English language teacher*, and had dedicated myself to learning the linguistic aspects of my language that had escaped me as a native speaker. I taught at the local state university.

One day, I received a phone call from one of my university colleagues. She told me that someone in the state Education Ministry wanted to speak to me. I agreed, not really knowing what I had gotten myself into. My big thrill at that moment in my professional life was that I had been accepted into a Masters program at a university in the UK, and was soon to begin my studies that would finally give me a degree that showed I was an ELT professional.

English as a foreign language teaching in Mexico at that time was beginning a professionalization process. There were multiple things happening that allow me to make this statement. More and more teachers were getting university degrees, either graduate or undergraduate, that provided the theoretical underpinnings for our beliefs as language teachers. In addition, people started to talk about a globalized world, one where the lingua franca was English, where one needed English to do business and consequently make money. In all of this talk of making money, NAFTA was being developed. Technological developments were beginning to offer means of sharing and communicating ideas about teaching and learning. Local state universities were developing BA in ELT programs

that began to educate young people to be our future English teachers. Our national professional organization was growing and developing and offering more professional development meetings and conferences for English teachers in Mexico. As an English teacher, it was an exciting place to be.

By the time the interview came with the Secretary of Education of my state, I had been living in Mexico for a little over ten years; I had lived in my adopted Mexican state for a decade. He asked me if I wanted to be part of an exciting project that would change English language teaching; he had many questions that seemed too political, too irrelevant, and too unimportant to me at the time. I was an English teacher. My vision of language teaching was limited to the classroom and meeting the needs of my students. In spite of my limitations, I felt I was doing a decent job of teaching the language and was about to get better at it through my Masters degree studies.

In short, I agreed to be the academic coordinator of this new, state-wide project for innovation of English language teaching at the secondary school level. We worked day and night, and when I was not working for the Secretary of Education, I was teaching my class at the university. When I was not working, I was trying to complete my Masters studies. Oh, yes, life was busy. I rarely had time to question the aspects of professional development that were becoming part of my everyday life. I had little time to contemplate Richards' (2000) domains of language teaching or Freeman & Johnson's, (1998) ideas about foreign language teacher education or Bartlett's (2000) reflective cycle of teaching and how they should be integrated into the professional development courses for my secondary school teachers who were also participating in ongoing courses and diplomas. We were going full steam ahead – courses, presentations, degrees, all in the name of professional development.

We had been working for two or two and a half years when another call came from the Minister of Education. He would call and ask us – our team – to come and talk to him about how the *Proyecto de Inglés en Secundarias* was going. He was interested in our progress; he was a politician, both he and the governor asked for reports and information regarding where the money was going. By then, we had installed English learning centers in more than 35 secondary schools in the state, and had completed two generations of our Diploma course for secondary school teachers. This time he had something different on his mind.

As I said, I had heard about *Inglés en Primarias* from one of my colleagues from another state. By the time this call came from the Minister of Education, I fully understood the SEP system and how curricula were designed and carried out in *Educación Básica*. I had visited the state that was the pioneer at that time in teaching English in primary schools in Mexico and had wondered if this would ever be possible in my own state.

His first words to me were, "There are some parents teaching English at a primary school here in our state. I want you to find out what is going on." By now I understood that this was his leadership style, it did not put me off, and actually I found it interesting. He was in a particular position, he was not an educator, but he was responsible for education in our state. He needed people who knew about teaching and learning of different areas of content to provide innovative ideas

about curriculum and its application. By now, I understood that I was not just an English teacher, I also had curricular responsibilities. Did I feel prepared to meet all of these responsibilities? Not always. Did I realize that I had grown and developed professionally? For sure!

So we met with the above-mentioned 'parents' who were teaching English in their children's primary schools. We asked them all kinds of questions and we realized that just like many novice teachers, their ideas about ELT were based on the education they had been provided as secondary school students years before. Their language proficiency was less than desirable, and they had basically no teaching material for themselves or for their young learners.

So, after our meeting with the parent-teachers, another meeting with the Secretary of Education was in order. I asked if there was money to support this endeavor. He explained that the existing budget was destined to the Secondary School project. ELT in primary schools was years away, and perhaps would never happen. So, suddenly I realized that if we were to provide support for these people who had the best interests of their children in mind, we needed to be very innovative.

I remember the looks, the amazement, and the doubt when I began to discuss a voluntary project for teaching English in Primary schools. In my mind, the initiative was to support the existing classes and the people who were teaching them. I put forth the idea of a project of volunteer teachers, mostly made up of my university students who needed more opportunities for developing their teaching skills. Other volunteers included elementary school teachers who knew English and wanted to provide English language learning for their students. This group of volunteer teachers would include the parent-teachers who I met with when they came to the attention of the Minister of Education. But volunteer teachers would not be enough. I got in touch with the people I knew who published ELT materials at that time. I explained and requested they come to a meeting. They came and I asked them to adopt a school. This would mean providing ELT materials for that primary school and being part of this volunteer *Inglés en Primarias* project. They agreed. So, we began our first year of teaching English in primary schools with a group of volunteer teachers, and donated ELT materials provided by publishers who agreed to support our efforts. The students received instruction after their normal classes had finished. They paid one peso a week for their English class. The teachers used the 'pesos' to provide paper, crayons, copies and other teaching material. The teachers were invited to use our English Learning Center for secondary school teachers. There, they could avail themselves of any materials the secondary school project created or used. The teachers took the courses on ELT that the secondary school English teachers took at the *Centro de Maestros*. The volunteer teachers from the BA in ELT were teaching primary school learners; they also took the courses the secondary school teachers took.

By the second school year, the project had grown to fifty teachers, all working voluntarily as English teachers in primary school. Primary school principals were calling the office to find out how to sign up for this project; we had more requests than we could deal with. It was obvious that the parents of students in primary schools in our state were interested in their children learning English.

In 2000, our state was honored to host the International MEXTESOL Convention. At the inauguration of that academic event, the new Secretary of Education announced the launching of a new, *Inglés en Primarias* program. These English classes would be integrated into the school day, offered three times a week on a regular basis, taught by professional English teachers. It was the end of the volunteer project; with this state-wide program one of the first seeds of *Inglés en Primarias* that is about to become part of the national curriculum was planted.

I think about those years frequently, the opportunity to write about my experiences led me to contact some of the people who taught in that volunteer project years ago. I am certain that my experiences in the *Inglés en Primarias* project mediated my professional development, but what about the others involved in this effort? I conducted a survey of the English teachers via SurveyMonkey who were part of the volunteer project. They too, reflected on how their work in the *Inglés en Primarias* project mediated their teaching practice.

They described their teaching activities as the place where they began to define their professional lives. One teacher described her work by saying,

As an English teacher, I was responsible to do lesson plans for every grade as well as the design of the material. It was really hard work to do. It took me an entire day to plan for three grades and design the specific material for the lesson.

In class, I was responsible to do the lesson but also, I remember that I had to check the English books and homeworks [sic] of the students. A 50 minute class was not enough to do the evaluation, so I had to take all the books and notebooks to my house to check them.

When there was the exam period, we took a page of the English book to do it as an exam. The page was very [sic] related to what we have been taught, so students did not have difficulties to do the page. As a teacher, I just had to check it and most of the time the page just contained 10 items to solve. So, it was not a hard work to check exams.

Dealing with a classroom of 40-50 students was not an easy task. The lesson had to be well planned and the material ready to keep students' attention. It was quite a challenge, but I enjoyed it (Roberto, Personal communication, March, 2009).

When asked if this volunteer project had been 'real' or a true teaching experience one of the participants responded like this, "When I was in the project, a long time ago, I think it was a real job. I had to do the same things I did in my other jobs. I did not find any difference.(Maria, personal communication, March 2009)"

Yet, there was something that was not real about the volunteer project. One teacher wrote,

We did not get paid for the job, it was a volunteer fee of 1 peso each children, and if they did not want to pay it was no problem, I believe we did it for the love of teaching and for the reward of looking at children expressing at least something in other language (Cristina, personal communication, March 2009).

Yet another teacher was more specific in comparing a 'real' job to the volunteer project. He stated,

I would like to compare this volunteer project to a "real job" in this form:

- 1. The volunteer project was more fantastic than a "real job" because I had the opportunity to do many things with kids; we danced, we sang, we jumped, we played, etc. In a "real job", I can't do it, because teenagers [sic] are a little bit difficult.*
- 2. A "real job" is more satisfied [sic], I mean, talking about 'salary'. A "real job" is well paid than a volunteer project.*
- 3. You work more in the volunteer project than in a real job.*
- 4. You get diplomas in the volunteer project, while in a real job you don't get anything (Pamela, personal communication, March 2009).*

Yet another teacher spoke strongly about the volunteer aspects of this project as compared to a program that has other obligations.

[...] Siendo voluntario, haces las cosas con más alegría con más entusiasmo, todo lo que se hace se hace por el puro placer de disfrutar y aprender los niños asistían a las clases con mucho gusto porque además era fuera de su horario de clases lo que implicaba un esfuerzo extra para ellos pero esto nos les importaba porque sabían que iban a algo diferente. De de otra manera, el trabajo que se hace es más estresante sabiendo que tienes observadores que te van a detectar algún error y tienes que obtener resultados y tienes que cumplir con diversas exigencias (Valeria, personal communication, March 2009).

Translation: Being a teacher-volunteer, you do things in a happier, more enthusiastic manner; all that you do is for the purpose of having fun and learning. The children are glad to come to class because although it was outside of normal class hours, and it implied more work for them, they did not care because they knew it was something different for them. Otherwise, the work we do is more stressful knowing that someone will observe you and try to detect your errors and you have to obtain certain results and meet certain demands. (Author's translation)

In a face to face interview with one of the teachers, in my preparation for the development of this article, she reminded me of the 'utopian' manner in which we viewed the project ten years ago. We were blessed to be free of observers who visited the classes to ensure quality, we did not have a fixed curriculum, in short, perhaps we did meet the stringent requirements of quality English teaching that we ascribe to today. We lived in an academic bubble. I will leave the evaluation of this kind of English language teaching to the reader. I make no value judgments on what we should have done, and what should be done now.

Last year, I was asked to give an academic talk to the English teachers in the *Inglés en Primarias* program. They have monthly academic meetings that involve both administrative and teaching information. I agreed, but was shocked when I was informed that one meeting was actually three meetings, because there are now so many English teachers in primary schools that they do not all fit in the auditorium at one time. I did the talk and was richly rewarded by the opportunity to see some of the teachers who began ten years before as volunteers in that

small *Inglés en Primarias* project. I was honored as I was introduced as the one who had begun the program with my work years ago. It was then I knew I had to write about my professional development experiences. It was then that I realized how those years and that project had made me a more professional educator. As I became aware of the social needs of teachers in my academic community, I was forced to try to help them professionally, provide practical experiences for them as teachers, but I was also given the social responsibility of providing English language learning for children in my state. I had to find a way to do it – in a professional, ethical manner that met the needs of all of my academic community. So, now as the Federal Minister of Education plans to provide English language teaching at the primary school level throughout Mexico, I invite them to contemplate how these curricular innovations will mediate the professional development of English language teaching and teachers throughout the country. I remind them that no one curricular change can be made without causing a riptide-like effect on all players in this social learning context.

References

- Bartlett, L. (1997). Teacher Development through Reflective Teaching. In J. C. Richards, & D. Nunan, *Second Language Teacher Education* (pp. 202-214). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. E. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32 (3), 397-416.
- Richards, J.C. (2000). *Beyond Training*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Richardson, L. (1999). Feathers in our Cap: CAP. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 28 (6), 660-668.
- Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP). (1994). *Plan y programa de estudio 1993 Educación básica: Secundaria, México*. Mexico City, Mexico .
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

About the author

Ruth Ban is an Assistant Professor at Barry University. She is on leave from the Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes. Her research interests include foreign language teacher development and identity, applications of technology to foreign language teaching and bilingual education. Email: ruthban@gmail.com