

Chapter 24

The Professional Development of EFL Teachers: How to incorporate a gender perspective into the practices of Colombian teachers.³⁸

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My journey

Before talking about the subject of my doctoral research, I would like to mention my professional background, so that my readers will have a better understanding of my ideas about foreign language teaching. I have taught English for more than 15 years at schools and public and private universities in Bogotá. In 2003, I graduated from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, where I was enrolled in the Philology and Languages program, with a major in English. In 2007, I obtained a Master's in Applied Linguistics in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas. Finally, in 2017, I obtained a Ph.D. in Education from Los Andes University.

These working and academic experiences were useful for my doctoral research into methods of teaching English to students and trainee teachers. However, within my doctoral research work on gender and teachers' methods, I found out that the curriculum for training pre-service teachers focused on models for effectively teaching a foreign language (Pennycook, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 2001, Castañeda, 2009) this has led to the idea that it is only a technical education and such teachers are instructors rather educators (Cárdenas et al., 2010; Viera & Moreira 2008 cited in Fandiño Parra *et al.*,

³⁸ This chapter draws on my thesis for the Ph.D. in Education at the Universidad de Los Andes (Colombia) in 2017, "How to Make Room for Gendered Practices in Contexts of Teaching English as a Foreign Language: a Multiple case study".

2016; Zafra & Borbón, 2006). This poses a difficulty for future English teachers who regard themselves as playing a key role in securing peace in Colombia and instilling democratic principles found in The Law of Education 115 [article 2].

Following on this and knowing that education should guarantee processes based on respect for individual differences and the democratic principles; there is a need to create Teachers' Professional Development (TPD) proposals that help teachers reflect upon their teaching practices beyond the subject they teach (Pennycook 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Giroux 2010). In other words, a proposal that meets the challenges of guaranteeing peace and equity in Colombia.

Consequently, my doctoral research addresses a pedagogical experience, in which in-service English teachers, students of a Master's Program of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) took an optional course in which they were aware of gender issues in their teaching scenarios. The course was based on the idea that education can promote gender equality (Connell, 2011) and that teachers can collaborate with their students in the construction and validation of their gender subjectivities (García Suárez, 2003).

In that regard, it is worth questioning the assumption that gender has no influence on the teaching of English, or any other subject, as I learned from my own experience. Hence, I want to describe briefly how I discovered that gender and teaching English were related to one another. The starting point for this study occurred when I was teaching in a school in Bogotá and noticed that the boys participated much more in oral exercises than the girls, who were usually much quieter, a fact I noted in my final research report in the Master Program. Nonetheless, I did not pay much attention to this until I began my doctoral dissertation, when I began to wonder the following questions: 1) what would have happened if I had been more sensitive to gender issues; 2) would some knowledge of gender matters have enhanced my teaching? If so, how? And 3) How could a teacher become aware of these issues or identify the effects these have on students' learning? These questions led me to pose the initial questions for my study.

In the early stages of my doctoral research, people often asked me to explain the relationship between gender and learning English. It took me a long time to discover that I had limited myself to discovering ways in which sensitivity to gender might improve or hinder one's method of teaching English

and ignored the broader social and cultural aspects of what happens in the classroom. In other words, due to the didactic standpoint I had, I was not able to understand that what happens in the classroom is connected to macro social and cultural structures in the society (Kumaravadivelu, 1999; Alonzso-Geta & Sánchez, 2011). As Nava & López (2010) note, “in the routines of the school, multiple gender codes, which favor sexist cultural practices, are hidden in the curriculum; and there is an urgent need to change them”³⁹ (p. 50). Thus, teachers wind up with a narrow view of their profession, as something that is only connected to whether the teaching method they use is effective in the subject they teach.

Likewise, other experts on the field of language education (Pennycook, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 1999; 2001; Giroux, 2006; 2010) have also stated that language teachers’ training is distant from theories of education and social and cultural practices that are important for the life in society. Therefore, to achieve a more educational perspective, it is pivotal to resort to these epistemological views as they can inform teacher’ practices with respect to larger objectives in the society. Therefore, it is crucial to make teachers more aware of the role in education of broader social forces, so that they abandon the superficial idea that their classrooms are neutral places where students simply go to become proficient in English. On the contrary, by embracing these epistemological approaches, teachers can find ways to encourage their students to fight against inequality and the oppression exercised by dominant groups. As a social category, gender is rarely mentioned as a factor in teaching English, although it has begun to be a concern and a a category of study in in the field of EFL/ELT during the past decade.

In general terms, my doctoral research focused on the need for a gender perspective in the teaching of English, but this issue should be included in the education of all teachers.

Meaningful insights of the study

The information that the reader will find in this section is divided into two parts: how English teachers learn to incorporate their gender awareness to their teaching practices and what these teachers learn about the meaning of a gendered practice in their own teaching contexts.

³⁹ My own translation.

How do teachers learn to incorporate their gender awareness into their teaching environments?

To address this question, we need to discuss two assumptions about how teachers learnt to be gender aware. There have been no studies of this subject in Colombia so far, thus, we as teachers of this course faced a major challenge when it came to its methodology. Consequently, our assumptions about how a teacher learnt had an important role in the course methodology. We decided to formulate reflective activities for the student-teachers (STs), with exercises to be done in their own teaching scenarios, that is, an in-situ approach that would allow them to understand the role of gender in their own English classes. Hence, the first assumption we had, as teachers of this course, was that our students-teachers' learning would be facilitated if they analyzed gender their own teaching scenarios.

This assumption was in line with the socio-cultural view of teachers' education (Johnson, 2009) and the idea of "Communities of Practice" (Wenger, 1998; Maggioli, 2012). That is, they would learn in their current teaching context, taking its social and cultural features into account (Johnson, 2009; Kumaravadivelu, 2001). At this respect, Wenger (1998) points out that what counts as teachers' learning is derived from their personal experiences when they are in the exercise of their teaching practice.

The second assumption, and a key component of this instruction, is what Johnson (2009) calls dialogic mediation.

"Teaching as a dialogic mediation involves contributions and discoveries by learners, as well as the assistance of an "expert" collaborator, or teacher. Instruction in such collaborative activity is contingent on the teachers' and learners' activity and related to what they are trying to do. The assisting teacher provides information and guidance relevant to furthering the learners' current goal-directed activity." (Johnson, 2009, p. 63)

This means that the methodology of this course rested on a collaborative interaction between the student and a more experienced teacher whom we designated the "teacher of teachers (TOT⁴⁰)".

Each students-teachers who participated in this study worked with the ToT to broaden their awareness of gender issues: personal tutoring sessions were

40 This term was coined by Maggioli, 2012.

crucial for their advancement. In addition, the student-teacher acted as a researcher who observed, analyzed and interpreted what happened during the exercise of his/her class, and later used the data to formulate his or her own theory about how an English class can challenge inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Thus, the analysis of the data collected in this study yield the following characteristics of the students-teachers' learning:

Figure 1 *trajectory of learning*

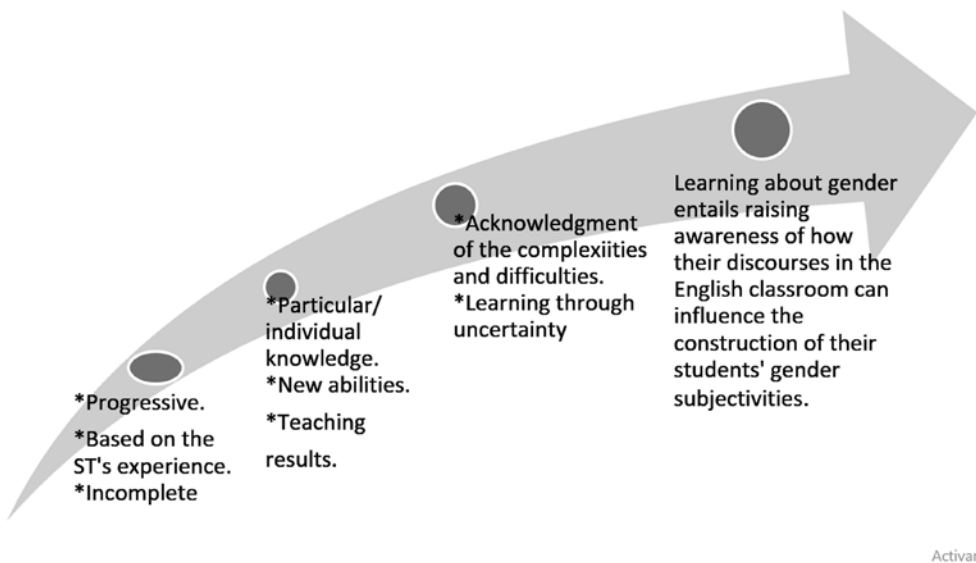


Figure 1 shows that these students-teachers, who also acted as researchers and collaborated with a more expert teacher, gradually discovered the scope of their concerns, questions, and objectives about gender as a category of study in their classroom.

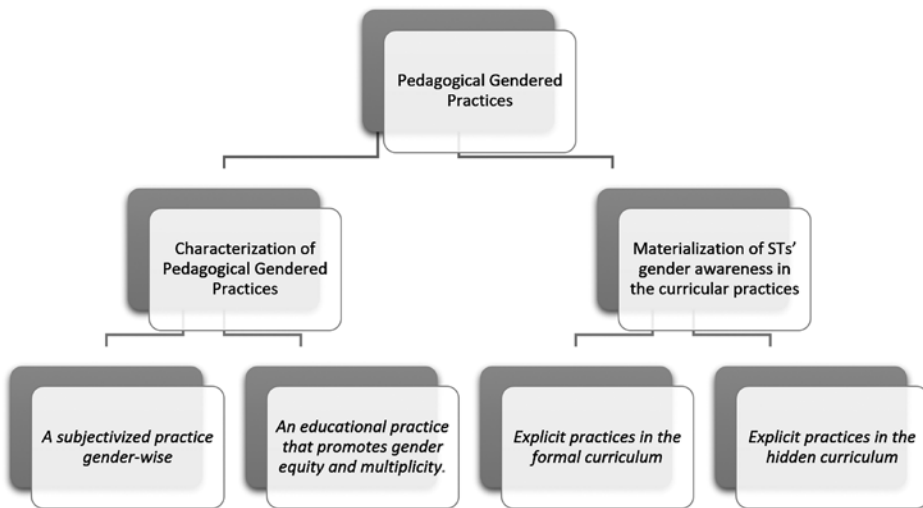
Each of the STs learnt different things since they worked in different places and their studies asked different questions about gender and were influenced by the dynamics of their schools. From this, we concluded that learning is not static, nor taught by a pre-existing model of transmission, given that gender is a novel subject in the education of teachers. Nevertheless, their learning about gender had a common feature: it helped them to strengthen their social responsibilities as teachers, and better understand the implications of their

discourses for the subjectivation of their students. The data collected in this study suggests that the STs adhered to the principles of equity, justice, and respect for gender differences.

What did teachers learn about the meaning of a gendered practice to their teaching?

In this study, each of the participants had the opportunity to find different meanings in their gendered practices. However, a cross-comparison (Stake, 2006) of three case studies allowed for a characterization of their respective methods of teaching gender issues in their classrooms, as shown is Figure 2.

Figure 2. *Pedagogical Gendered Practices*



For me, as a researcher and ToT, one of the most interesting categories is the subjectivized practice gender-wise. In my tutorials, the teachers tended to become aware and reflect about their own gender imaginaries (Muñoz, 2004). The analysis suggests that there were two types of subjectivities these student-teachers presented: hegemonic and resisting subjectivities (García-Muñoz, 2014).

The resisting subjectivities intended to break normative discourses of gender practices in educational contexts or in the local culture. Nevertheless, both types played an important role in the learning of the student-teachers, since

they resorted to both to think about gender imaginaries and uphold the value of equity, justice and respect for differences in the classroom.

Some important conclusions can be drawn from this second category. First, subjectivity can become a source of knowledge that helps students-teachers to promote gender equality in their classes and reflect on their imaginaries of gender. Second, when a teacher adopts a gender perspective in the classroom, it is incorporated into his or her teaching methodology. Hence, these gender imaginaries not only pertain to the teacher's work in the classroom, they also influence the teacher as a member of our local culture whose subjectivities spill over into the teacher's daily life. A pedagogical gendered practice is thus a way to raise awareness of the power relationships which are responsible for inequalities that come about in our classrooms. When the teacher acknowledges these subjectivities, the teacher can be willing to transform his or her teaching practices so that these reach gender equity, justice, and respect for the difference (Mojica, 2017).

Finally, in the second category, materialization of ST's gender awareness in their curricular practices, it can be identified some of the most outstanding insights generated in the dialogic mediation between the student-teacher and the ToT. Here I present some of the abilities that these students-teachers managed to learn:

- ✓ Recognize their English classroom as a place where gender meanings are reproduced by the dynamics of hidden and formal curriculum.
- ✓ Challenge those meanings of gender which do not promote equity, justice and the tolerance of or respect for gender differences.
- ✓ Find discourses and methods to fight against oppression, domination and discrimination.
- ✓ Revitalize the role of language teachers as educators, so they regard themselves as professionals who are able to promote gender equality, justice and a respect for differences.

Having acquired these skills, one of the objectives of the students-teachers should be to use his or her gendered teaching practices, whether in the formal or hidden curriculum, to a promote a respect for gender variety and especially, non-hegemonic gender identities.

Conclusion

Based on the results of these innovations in the field of teaching English, the education of teachers should be more oriented to the acquisition of reflective skills that will enable them to broaden their roles beyond the discipline they teach.

The gender perspective needs to be incorporated into the education of teachers and applied to their teaching methods, hidden and formal curriculum, and the materials/contents they use in their classes (Verma, 1993; UNESCO, 2015; Fuentes & Holguin, 2006; Connell, 2011; Eyen, 2013). This study represents a first step towards developing a teacher's awareness of the role of gender in education. Nevertheless, further research is required if we are to guarantee that gender equality becomes a reality in our schools.

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