

Factors Influencing Professional Development of In-Service EFL Teachers at a Public University in Mexico

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In this paper, the authors present their quest for some possible factors that either promote or inhibit professional development in in-service teachers in a public university setting. The results of oral interviews and the collaboration of the authors revealed four main themes associated with the topic: 1. career stages or cycles, 2. a sense of helplessness indicated by some teachers, 3. the perception of the profession being interpreted through a lens relative to the individual's position in the career stage/cycle, 4. the effects of a community of practice on professional development.

Background

This study is the product of talk. From working together in an in-service teacher education program, we frequently got together to talk about various aspects of the program and about the participants. This talk led from the wondering about the eventual overall effectiveness of the program on the professional lives of the participants to the question of why some people progress and mature in the profession while others seem to, as Myers says get embalmed at a particular developmental level that is almost the same as their first months in the classroom (1993).

We wanted to understand what factors inspire professional development or impede it. Obviously, this is a multidimensional issue with many contributing factors. One of the main ideas that emerged from the talk is the concept of career cycles or stages. We observed in our own practice and our lives that as we grow, we also enter different cycles. We began to wonder: is there a time in people's lives when they are more receptive to or are seeking change? And, conversely, a time when expecting change is unrealistic? We looked to the literature for answers.

Research on Teacher Development and Career Cycles

In the last 30 years, the focus of teacher research has been shifting from teaching processes and their outcomes to teachers' perceptions and knowledge (Freeman, 1996). In other words, it has shifted from an external "objective" perspective to a more internal personal perspective. This interest in the teacher as a person has led to increasingly popular research on teachers' narratives, stories and teachers' lives. These studies approach

the personal, concentrating on various aspects such as: professional lives (Fessler, 1995; Goodson, 1994; Huberman, 1989; 1993; 1995), professionalization and learning processes (Freeman, 1993; Guskey, 1995), decision making processes (Wood, 1996); teaching practice and institutions (Clandini & Connely, 1987) and how teachers cope with innovation in their teaching environment (Guskey & Huberman, 1995; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992).

An important dimension of this teacher development research is that of life cycles. The literature on teacher career cycle research demonstrates that there are differences in the way teachers perceive their work at different stages of their professional development. Their perceptions and beliefs about their work as well as commitments change throughout their careers.

The causes of these changes are difficult to establish. The earlier research on this issue viewed teachers' careers as a relatively linear three or four stage process (Burden, 1982) where age played a significant role.

This assumption of lineal age related life cycles has been questioned (Fessler, 1995; Huberman, 1993). Development is viewed as a process that is multidimensional, dynamic and flexible and "sometimes downright random" rather than linear (Huberman, 1995, p. 195). Huberman in his study of female middle school teachers with 11-19 years of teaching experience at the *Cycle d'Orientation* (a middle school) paints a very complicated picture of development and stages. He identified five "phases" that these particular teachers experienced.

Phase One is the beginning or entry point which can be from anywhere to one to seven years long. Huberman identified three points of entry for this group of people: the "classic stream," directly from the university or teacher certification programs, the "progressive stream," entering the profession from substitute teaching positions and teaching pool positions, and "entry from exterior," which is entry from neither of the two previous entry points. He states that these beginnings can be either "easy" or "painful."

Phase Two, lasting from four to 16 years long, is a phase where the teachers experienced difficulties and problems. Some even left the profession temporarily. The overall theme of "demands of private life" are strong in this phase.

Phases Three and Four, lasting from four to 14 years in service, is a period characterized by "stabilization" or "self-doubt." The stabilization involves "making a commitment," becoming part of a group of peers, having a good relationship with students, perhaps a "resolution of previous problems," or the beginning of "routine" action. Huberman notes that some may not experience the stabilization period but may go directly into an area of self-doubt which involves feelings of "dissatisfaction" and "weariness"

(1993, p. 40-1). It is visible that the years in the profession are not exactly linear but rather overlap.

The final phase, which encompasses anywhere from 8 to eleven years in service, is characterized by "new challenges" and "new worries." These teachers may be given new positions which involve more responsibility. They may be involved in more experimentation in their practice; they may experience "overload." The characteristics of this phase are similar to the previous with the exception of something Huberman calls a "second wind." The teachers in this phase experience this second wind which involves "real accomplishment of the requisite conditions for professional satisfaction" or as he says, "a rebirth of energy and perspective" (1993, p. 41). He also notes that in some individuals this might be a "search for new challenges" that emerges from "a [growing] fear of tedium" with the profession (1993, p. 8).

The above description is a gross over-simplification of the findings of Huberman's study. We include it only to give the reader a glimpse of the complexity of the issue. It is also worth noting that these experiences are only valid for this group of teachers at that particular time (1961-1971). However, Huberman acknowledges that although his sample is small and cannot be regarded as "representative," he does say that some of his findings "show clear trends" that can be used to make general inferences into this process (1993, p. 26).

Corroborating Huberman's picture of development, Fessler (1995) proposes that teachers move in and out of periods of development and frustration depending on their personal and organizational environments. He depicts these periods as three areas each interacting with each other in various ways. The first area is the individual's personal environment. This includes elements such as life stage, personal crises, family, and personality, among other things. The second area is related to organizational factors that influence a teacher's career: school regulations, management style, public trust, societal expectations, professional organizations and unions among others. The final area has to do with career cycle, whether just entering the career, building competency, feeling frustration, or ending the career. These areas do not function independently. Rather they all influence each other at different times in different ways. It makes a complicated picture of development, both personal and professional.

Thus, current life-cycle literature shows that both personal and organizational environmental factors influence teachers' professional development. The picture that emerges from this research is much more complex than it was once considered to be. Both external factors such as the historical period, educational system and institutional context as well as internal ones, commitment, experience, gender, and age among other factors have an impact on how teachers develop and view their profession.

In English language teaching (ELT), teacher research that is focused either on professional development or education is relatively new. It was mainly developed during the nineties (Edge & Richards, 1993; Freeman, 1991; 1996; Johnson, 1992; Nunan, 1992; Richards, 1997; Wood, 1996) and there has been both a growing number of publications as well as activity at conferences and meetings.

Significance of the Study

Most of this trend in research on teacher development in ELT, however, has been focused on native English speaking teachers (Richards, 1993; Wood, 1996). There is significantly less published on non-native English teachers and even less on ELT higher education teachers in Mexico. Thus, in this study we will focus on 16 Mexican English teachers' perceptions of their professional development and career life cycles. Four of the subjects hold master's degrees in fields related to language teaching. The rest hold *licenciaturas* (bachelor's degrees) in several different fields. Only one of the subjects did not have a degree. The years in service ranged from 27 years to 3 years (see Appendix One).

Methodology

As mentioned above, through this work, we discovered the meaning and significance of a community of practice. Through voluntarily working together on a shared project of mutual interest, we found this experience an invaluable vehicle for personal and professional development. The opportunity to work with someone towards a shared goal has brought us to a new understanding of *relationship* and *collegiality*. It also confirmed our next stage of this work, which is the importance of *collaboration* for the development of the person and the professional.

Another of the multitude of things that sprouted from this work was our introduction to the research methodology referred to as *grounded theory*. This methodology seemed to resemble the particular research methods of this study.

Grounded theory has been defined as "an emergent research process with some similarities to action research" (Dick, 2002, Abstract section, para. 2). It has to do with the way participants see, view, and construct their social realities. Grounded theory tries to discover theories or propositions from the collected and analyzed data (Rodriguez, Gil, & García, 1999). Richards (2003, p. 13) identifies grounded theory as one of the "seven core traditions" in qualitative research that are used in language research. In this tradition, data is gathered by means of observations, interviews, recordings and documents. Rather than starting with a theory, researchers discover a theory through analysis of the collected data (Richards, 2003, p. 16-17).

With this research methodology, the researcher has a "research situation" (Dick, 2002, Overview section, para. 1). Our situation involved a

group of in-service EFL teachers from public (government) institutions. As mentioned above, there were sixteen subjects, eight women and eight men. Eight of the sixteen were English language teachers from *Preparatorias* (*Prepas*-high schools) associated with a state university, and eight were English language teachers from the various language schools at university level (see Appendix One).

This research situation emerged from two other sources. One, as mentioned in the first paragraph, was a group of in-service teachers studying their BA in English language teaching. The other was a study which used questionnaires to collect information from university English language teachers about their professional development (Brenes & Encinas, 2003). From these two sources, we began to wonder about the relationship between training and professional development of these teachers in relation to our observation that some teachers seem to move into active participation in the profession and others don't.

Dick (2002) says that in grounded theory the data collected would illuminate a theory. Garcia et. al. (1999) identify four stages to grounded theory: 1) comparison of data, 2) placing data in categories, 3) identification of the theory that emerges, and 4) producing the theory. The data collected from the Brenes and Encinas study coupled with our ideas and questions associated with the in-service teachers, brought up the idea of career cycles.

Interestingly, some of the results of the questionnaires led to two further research issues. Seventy EFL teachers in the Brenes and Encinas study were sent questionnaires. Approximately 25% of the teachers responded, and surprisingly 70% of the respondents were men, while about 70% of the faculty are women.

The low percentage of respondents and the responses to the initial questionnaire led to oral interviews with some of the teachers from the study, teachers from various high schools associated with a university, and teachers from other language schools within the university system. We did the interviews together alternating between being the interviewer and the observer. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed by 8th semester English language pre-service teacher trainees.

The interviews consisted of four open-ended questions:

- 1) What do you need to do to become a better teacher?
- 2) What kind of support for your professional development do you have at the university?
- 3) What effect has training had in your life?
- 4) Can you detect stages or cycles in your professional development? Describe.

"Constant comparison is the heart of the process" of grounded theory data analysis (Dick, 2002, Overview section, para. 2). The comparison of

questionnaires and observations of the BA teachers led to the formulation of the above questions. We listened to the interviews over and over, and compared them to the questionnaires. As we listened, we identified emergent themes or categories related to the "research situation." This process of categorizing is also a feature of grounded theory. This process allows the researcher to decide "what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop [the] theory as it emerges" (Glaser and Strauss, in Richards, 2003, p. 277). So the collection of the data is controlled by the emerging theory.

Results

What was noticed at the end of our data collection were three main areas associated with the situation:

1. Career stages/cycles
2. Helplessness which builds a kind of *ceiling* beyond which people cannot or think they cannot move for the following reasons:
 - a. A lack of confidence in their English language ability
 - b. Political reasons
 - c. Organizational/institutional reasons
 - d. Economic reasons
 - e. Family obligations
3. The construction of reality being based on the individual's development stage/cycle.

Each one of these areas needs more study to form it into a theory.

1. Career Stages/Cycles

Eight of the sixteen teachers interviewed identified some kind of stages/cycles in their professions:

1. Less flexible – more flexible (one respondent)
2. Before COTE – after COTE (*Certificate for Overseas Teachers of English*) (two respondents)
3. More tolerant – less tolerant (two respondents)
4. Working at the ANGLO (*Anglo-Mexicano de Cultura*) – working at the CELE (*Centro de Lenguas Extranjeras*) (one respondent)

Two teachers articulated their distinct stages/cycles in detail. One (No. 3 see Appendix One) of the teachers identified the following stages:

1. I taught how I was taught
2. Small changes
3. More security and confidence in teaching
4. Exposure to other teaching situations
5. Period of working as the director of the university language school

One teacher (No. 9, see Appendix One) identified four developmental stages (see Appendix Two for full transcript):

1. The first stage was survival...you are worried about the lessons... you are so focused into teaching.
2. ...you attend congresses just to find some little formula, some kind of recipe to bring into your classroom on Monday morning....You share ideas, you go together to the congresses and you start to get a real feel and a good love for the profession.
3. Then there is the third stage when you decide that whatever you are doing doesn't seem to be enough and then you attend the congresses and then you see that this is the same thing, like I've been there before....you start presenting at national congresses....
4. The fourth stage is when you become much more "famous" and much more professional and you start publishing things...because publishing is a big thing.

2. Helplessness

Twelve of the sixteen teachers expressed some kind of helplessness and frustration in their professional development. They were related to the five stages above. One typical response was (No. 8, see Appendix One):

I feel that this is a profession is badly paid (has a low salary compared with the amount of work) ... We work very hard to make the students acquire the language...for us it's difficult to make activities that make the students use the language.

First of all, I have a lot of work and long work hours. This doesn't allow me to study a master's or to take other courses. I would like to participate in an exchange program. I'm always looking for opportunities for this.

In the first place it's necessary to improve our language ability [*in English*]. I feel like we lack in that area. In addition to this, I've ever had the chance to go abroad (even though I've worked hard and made sacrifices at studying English, I still feel that I lack ability in this area).

3. The Construction of Reality

We believe, based on our interviews, that the way teachers talk about their professional lives reflects where they are in their development (what stage/cycle). Their reality or conception of the profession is seen through a special *stage/cycle lens*. For example, two of the teachers had three years experience teaching (Nos. 15 and 16). Their major concern was their own proficiency in the target language, getting through a lesson, and managing

their classes, to name a few things. Professional development wasn't an immediate issue or concern to them.

Two other teachers (Nos. 2 and 3) had very similar work histories, social/economic backgrounds, and personal lives. However their perceptions of the profession were very different. Number 3, as cited above in the "career stages/cycles" section, was able to identify stages/cycles where there was growth and change. The respondent was able to project into the future, predicting that a move into research and publishing. The overall attitude was more reflective and positive than teacher Number 2.

Teacher Number 2 spent a lot of time talking about immediate concerns. This included certain immediate elements of the profession like the textbook selection. This teacher wasn't able to identify any stages although it was noted that there was a difference between teaching practice now and teaching practice at the beginning of the career, the differences mainly having to do with the increase of knowledge. The teacher didn't articulate anything about the future as a teacher or a professional.

While these two teachers' comments and attitudes are not statistically significant, we think that the differences between them have to do with the stage/cycle that they are in. For a variety of reasons, teacher Number 2 has not moved past an earlier developmental stage/cycle.

Early accounts of career stages/cycles were regarded as products of years in service. However, we believe the results may indicate that actual years are only roughly associated with developmental stages/cycles. The interviews of the present study, while limited, seem to indicate that teachers do not progress beyond a certain stage/cycle because of the internal and external, personal and professional influences identified in item No. 2 above (Helplessness). This is also corroborated in the research done by Goodson and Cole (1994) among others.

Conclusions

In summary, the data seem to show a very complex picture in which teachers personal development cycles are influenced by their personal and organizational environments even more than by their age and years of experience (Fessler, 1995). It also might show that a possibly significant number of these teachers have or have had feelings of helplessness and frustration. The data in this study seem to indicate that teachers construct their conception of the profession and their professional development depending on their development cycle (Freeman, 1993).

We feel that we have come to a better understanding which leads to better practice. This also leads to the following emergent themes for further research.

One of the most surprising things that has emerged from this small work is the number of areas of further study. Rather than answer questions, the work has raised more. Below are the areas that we consider as emerging from the initial questions of teacher development:

- The differences in career cycles between women and men
- Written versus oral data collection in Mexican contexts
- The effects of *mentoring* people to develop themselves
- What happens to people who are left out of development opportunities
- The personal effects on development, reflection or self-awareness from participating in *teachers' lives* interviews
- Collaborative research
- The impact that teachers feeling helplessness has on their institution's development and vice versa

Most importantly through the literature research, we came across the concept of communities of practice. What is happening in teacher development now is this concept of working together, voluntarily, on a project that has some kind of product, but also that builds collaboration and community between people and fosters talk and communal reflection on one's practice (Freeman, 1996). This concept is one that will be at the center of our future work.

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Appendix One – Interview Participants

	Sex	Years in teaching	School	Initial training	Professional degree
1.	F	27	University	Teaching	Licenciatura (BA/S)
2.	M	27	University	Unknown	--
3.	M	23	University	Psychology/teaching	Masters-edu mgmt*
4.	M	23	University	Teaching	Masters EYL
5.	M	20	Prepa	Biology	Masters in Education*
6.	M	16	University	Teaching	Licenciatura (BA/S) *
7.	F	15	University	Medicine	Licenciatura (BA/S)
8.	F	15	Prepa	Teaching	Licenciatura (BA/S)
9.	M	10	University	Teaching	Masters TESOL
10.	F	10	Prepa	Teaching	Licenciatura (BA/S)
11.	M	9	Prepa	Political science	Licenciatura (BA/S)
12.	F	7	Prepa	Teaching	Licenciatura (BA/S)
13.	M	7	Prepa	Teaching	Licenciatura (BA/S)
14.	F	6	Prepa	Teaching	Licenciatura (BA/S)
15.	F	3	University	Teaching	Licenciatura (BA/S)
16.	F	3	Prepa	Physics	Licenciatura (BA/S)

BA/S = Bachelor's in Arts or Sciences

EYL= English for Young Learners

* In progress

Appendix Two – Four stages full transcript

[The following is a response given in English to the question: Can you detect stages or cycles in your professional development?]

1. When I just graduated and I had a lot of theory ...My main concern was to survive...to get students in my classes and if they came they didn't care...there was a very difficult time when I just wanted to quit and become a translator or something. But then at the end I found ways to get along with the students and attract them to my lessons. The first stage was survival...you are worried about the lessons... you are so focused into teaching...
2. ...and you attend congresses just to find some little formula, some kind of recipe to bring into your classroom on Monday morning. So you get into that and then you start knowing other teachers like you and talking with them, you share ideas you go together to the congresses and you start to get a real feel and a good love for the profession.
3. Then there is the third stage when you decide that whatever you are doing doesn't seem to be enough and then you attend the congresses and then you see that this is the same thing, like I've been there before. This is nothing new, oh no, again vocabulary, oh no, again learning styles. And then you decide its time to move on, and I think a lot of teachers remain in this second stage for a long time, but if you don't stay there you will look for ways to move up in the profession, the time when you enter a graduate program a masters or something else. And you start worrying about not only going to the congresses to listen to the speakers but you actually want to say something. So this is the stage when you achieve...you actually, ahhh, and you become a more professional teacher with theory behind you are not only worried about how am I going to do this little activity but you're worried about what are the theoretical implications behind this activity... you know the foundations and things and you start producing.. you start presenting at national congresses..
4. The fourth stage is when you become much more "famous" and much more professional and you start publishing things. Because publishing is a big thing ... you can be presenting a thousand things but there is something I realised just this time when I had to present for my PROMEP thing that I had directed 32 theses and 2 MA theses and I had presented in 18 congresses international and national but they didn't care about that all they asked is How many books have you published? And they looking at academic production and they were looking at academic production and they had yes, you know, presentations at congresses, developing material but the moment you entered that into the online application they didn't count at all. It was as if you were entering nothing... so, what really counts is what

they called a quality product, book, a chapter in a book and a referred article. If it's just an article it doesn't count. So I entered a thousand things and I had a zero. So, right now I'm publishing things. I'm ready to move on.