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Insuasty, Edgar Alirio; Jaime Osorio, María Fernanda
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Transforming Pedagogical Practices Through Collaborative Work

Transformar las prácticas pedagógicas mediante el trabajo colaborativo

Edgar Alirio Insuasty

María Fernanda Jaime Osorio

Universidad Surcolombiana, Neiva, Colombia


This article reports on the first three phases (exploration, identification, and planning) of a collaborative action research study whose main objective was to transform the pedagogical practices of teachers of a Colombian school of foreign languages. A methodology of collaborative action research and techniques, such as direct observation, completion of a reflection journal, and surveys and interviews with teachers and students was employed. Findings showed that the participants managed to identify some of the major problems they faced within their pedagogical practices and to design and implement courses of action to overcome them. Upon completion, favorable perceptions about the impact of collaborative action research on the transformation of the participating English language teachers' pedagogical practices could be evidenced.

Keywords: classroom techniques, educational development, educational research, English language teaching, teaching methods, team teaching

Este artículo describe las tres primeras fases (exploración, identificación y planeación) de un estudio de investigación-acción colaborativa, cuyo principal objetivo fue transformar las prácticas pedagógicas de los docentes de un instituto colombiano de enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras. Junto con una metodología de investigación-acción colaborativa se emplearon técnicas como la observación directa, la escritura de un diario de reflexión, encuestas y entrevistas con profesores y estudiantes. Los resultados mostraron que los docentes participantes lograron identificar los principales problemas que afrontan en sus prácticas pedagógicas, así como diseñar e implementar algunas acciones para resolverlos. Al final se evidenciaron las percepciones favorables de los participantes acerca del impacto del modelo de investigación-acción colaborativa en la transformación de sus prácticas pedagógicas.

Palabras clave: desarrollo educativo, enseñanza en equipo, investigación en educación, métodos de enseñanza del inglés, técnicas didácticas

Edgar Alirio Insuasty • Email: edalin@usco.edu.co

María Fernanda Jaime Osorio  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8938-8248> • Email: mariafernanda.jaime@usco.edu.co

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Introduction

In a research report, Jaime Osorio and Insuasty (2015) give an account of a small-scale study which was carried out in the Institute of Foreign Languages of Universidad Surcolombiana (ILEUSCO for its acronym in Spanish) with the purpose of analyzing the pedagogical practices of the participating teachers and evaluating their effects on the development of communicative competence of students in the English language. Precommunicative practices were found to be more frequent than communicative ones. That is, although the curriculum and the materials adopted in the institute have a communicative orientation, the classes were primarily focused on the activities of a structural and quasi-communicative nature. Likewise, this report highlights certain aspects of the organizational and pragmatic skills that the students managed to acquire and demonstrate.

In an attempt to further look into this, the institute's faculty was administered a new survey which revealed the occurrence of the following aggravating circumstances: lack of interactive activities that are motivated by a real communicative need; the fact that most of the teachers do not use internet tools, online communication systems, or websites as a means of encouraging and engaging students in the formal or functional practice of the target language; the reluctance on the part of many students to use the foreign language as a means of communication among themselves, especially when they have to develop work in pairs or groups. As a consequence, a number of teachers showed interest in participating in academic and investigative actions that could lead to the strengthening of their pedagogical practices.

Faced with this state of affairs, and with the hope that the participating teachers would assume a more leading role in the exploration and transformation of their pedagogical practices, the research team organized three collaborative groups, each one having three members: a novice teacher researcher, a facilitator, and a research assistant. As a point of departure, these groups agreed

on following a collaborative methodology to answer the following research questions:

- What are the main problems that the teachers identify in their pedagogical practices?
- What intervention projects can be designed and implemented to solve these problems?
- What is the impact of the collaborative action research methodology in the exploration and transformation of the pedagogical practices of ILEUSCO teachers?

Theoretical Framework

In this section we will present the main theoretical principles underlying the development of this research study. First, we will define the concept of pedagogical practices from a general standpoint and from the specific perspective of communicative language teaching. Second, we will also describe reflective teaching as an inquiry approach to explore the conceptual and praxis dimensions of the pedagogical practices. Finally, the nature and implications of so-called collaborative groups will also be examined.

Some General Notions of Pedagogical Practices

Pedagogic practices are defined by Fierro et al. (1999) as follows:

A social, objective and intentional praxis in which the meanings, perceptions and actions undertaken by the stakeholders (teachers, students, school authorities and parents) as well as the political, institutional, management and regulatory aspects shaping the teacher's role are involved, according to the educational project of each country. (p. 21)

Moreover, Huberman (1999) conceptualizes the pedagogic practice with these words:

A conscious, deliberate and participatory process implemented by an educational system or an organization in an attempt to enhance performances and results,

encourage the development for the renewal in academic, professional and labor fields and to cultivate the spirit of commitment of each person with society, especially with the community in which he or she is immersed. (p. 25)

Thus, for the purposes of this study, pedagogical practices can be conceptualized as a dialectic interaction between the English language teacher and the socio-cultural and educational setting which permeates the role he or she is expected to play in the language classroom.

Pedagogical Practices That Promote the Development of Communicative Competence

Based on the prior considerations, the importance of *pedagogical practices* can be enhanced in the English teaching and learning process since they serve as a source of information or inspiration to define the type of goals and objectives, and the type of procedures used to achieve them. In general terms, those goals can be form-oriented or meaning-oriented, which can be seen as a continuum from the so-called precommunicative activities to proper communication activities. According to Littlewood (1998, as cited in Jaime Osorio & Insuasty, 2015), “the first are based on accuracy and present structures, functions, and vocabulary; the latter focus on fluency and involve information sharing and exchange” (p. 50).

Jaime Osorio and Insuasty (2015) contend that “the precommunicative activities are classified into structural activities and quasi-communicative activities” (p. 50). Whereas the structural ones are described as matching and practicing structures, the quasi-communicative ones are based on practicing communication and the structure of the language. Jaime Osorio and Insuasty also point out that “communicative activities are subdivided into functional activities and social interaction activities” (p. 51). In the functional communication tasks, learners’ interaction turns out to be less controlled and predictable. Social interaction activities, such as simulation and role play, go beyond the functional ones by adding

a more clearly defined social context. Within these activities, the classroom itself is presented as another social context where learners and teachers engage in authentic discussions about different issues.

Reflective Teaching

Becoming a reflective teacher is a must for educators who want to improve the quality of the education they promote; it is also a challenge since teachers usually fall short in organizing their agenda to respond to the multiple tasks they face every day. Murphy (2001) points out that teachers may grow professionally in different ways which let them “look inward, both within themselves and within the courses they offer, to access information about what happens in their language classrooms” (p. 334). Moreover, Gebhard and Oprandy (1999) assert that one of the central reasons for being interested in reflective teaching is to “gain awareness of our teaching beliefs and practices” and to learn “to see teaching differently” (p. 4); in doing so, teachers would learn to take actions that allow them to enhance the quality of learning opportunities teachers promote in their classrooms. Murphy also claims that we should spend time and energy to develop understandings if we consider our continuing needs as teachers and the needs of the language learners we serve. Murphy poses three main purposes of reflective teaching: “(1) to expand one’s understanding of the teaching learning process, (2) to expand one’s repertoire of strategic options as a language teacher, and (3) to enhance the quality of learning opportunities one is able to provide in language classrooms” (p. 335).

There are several benefits a teacher can obtain when becoming a reflective practitioner. Farrell (2003), for example, mentions four:

- (1) Reflective teaching helps free the teachers from impulse and routine behavior.
- (2) Reflective teaching allows teachers to act in a deliberate, intentional manner and avoid the “I don’t know what I will do today” syndrome.
- (3) Reflective teaching distinguishes teachers as educated

human beings since it is one of the signs of intelligent action. (4) As teachers gain experience in a community of professional educators, they feel the need to grow beyond the initial stages of survival in the classroom to reconstructing their own particular theory from their practice. (p. 20)

In the same sense, Richards (2018) suggests that for teacher development to take place throughout the critical reflection process, which is what actually happens when teaching reflectively, the teachers should rely not only on their experience but on the powerful mixture that is experience plus reflection. However, it is our understanding that the teacher's reflection should not be seen as an isolated and individualistic adventure, but as a collaborative and professional commitment.

Interplay Between Reflection and Collaboration

In this respect, Loughran (2010) cites the contributions of several scholars such as Barnett and O'Mahony (2006), Baird (1992), Passman (2002), and Wallace (1998), among others, whose studies place a great deal of emphasis on reflection as a collaborative task which initially enables teachers to recognize, frame, and reframe the sort of problems they have in their particular professional setting and which also implies the use of an inquiry approach to building a learning community, strengthening their professional growth, and enhancing their practice.

Moreover, Gore (1987, as cited in Insuasty & Zambrano Castillo, 2010) refers to "*collegiality* as one of the outcomes of reflective teaching, since working in small groups to question and examine teaching behavior and provide honest feedback, student teachers may develop trust and respect for each other as teachers and professionals" (p. 89). Richards and Farrell (2005) propose the organization of teacher support groups as one of the ways to enhance teacher professional development, and they add that:

A teacher support group can be defined as two or more teachers collaborating to achieve either their individual or shared goals or both, on the assumption that working with a group is usually more effective than working on one's own. Typically, a support group will involve a group of teachers who get together to discuss goals, concerns, problems, and experience . . . or to carry out more inquiring activities such as peer coaching, team teaching, action research, and classroom observation. (p. 51)

Richards and Farrell (2005) also claim that in "a support group, teachers get to know their colleagues better and begin to function as a community of professionals rather than as individuals working in isolation from each other" (p. 51).

Method

The present study has a qualitative nature seeking to evaluate the impact of collaborative action research in the exploration and transformation of the pedagogical practices of teachers at ILEUSCO. The investigative action was developed through two complementary processes: The first one involved an awareness-raising session of the participating teachers (novice researchers, from now on) in order for them to integrate reflection and research within their pedagogical work. This reflective practice took place by means of informal talks in which they were explained the collaborative action research methodology, the roles of the participants (facilitators, novice researchers, and research assistants), the research instruments to collect data and, most importantly, the nature of the reflective process to explore their own teaching practices. This was intended as a source of teachers' self-recognition and inspiration to transform their teaching practices and, consequently, the effect of such practices on their learners. The main outcome of the first process was a collaborative diagnosis of the recurrent pedagogical practices problems identified by the novice researchers themselves and the research team.

In the second process, novice researchers assumed a leading role as researchers of their own practices to solve particular problem situations in their classroom with the collaboration of professors (facilitators from now on) and students (research assistants from now on) of the foreign language teacher education program, following the parameters and procedures of the collaborative action research model.

The collection of information in the first process was done through the first three phases (exploration, identification, and planning) of the collaborative action research design. Burns (1999) addresses the teacher's vision as a researcher and mentions the following advantages when participating in a study under the methodology of collaborative action research:

- It strengthens opportunities to obtain research results that provide relevant feedback to education systems.
- It encourages teachers to share common problems and to work collaboratively with a research community to examine their beliefs and values within the sociopolitical culture of the institutions for which they work.
- It allows for changes in policies and practices in the organizations.
- It empowers more than action-research per se because it offers a solid framework for institutional change. (p. 13)

Participants

Each one of the three collaborative groups with which this research project was conducted was comprised of three members: a novice teacher researcher, a facilitator, and a research assistant. The novice researchers were three female and two male members of ILEUSCO faculty. One of them held an MA in translation, two of them held a BA in English language teaching and two were pursuing MA studies in English language teaching (ELT) methodology. As to the facilitators, they are active members of the research group "ILESEARCH"; three of them hold master's degrees in foreign language teaching

and the last one has a doctoral degree in education. The five research assistants are students of the foreign language program.

Instruments for Data Collection

This study required the implementation of the following instruments:

Semi-structured Interview. As part of the diagnosis process, the novice researchers were asked to answer questions in a semi-structured interview. The main purpose was to provide a self-reflection moment for novice researchers to describe their pedagogical practices and analyze their beliefs so as to find the recurrent problems they had to face. Moreover, novice researchers' impressions on collaborative work, project work, the development of communicative competence, and the transformation of their pedagogical practices were also inquired (see Appendix A).

Class Observation. It was used to collect information about the pedagogical practices applied by ILEUSCO teachers in their English classes. Four classes were observed so as to diagnose the possible issues related to their pedagogical practices and then, six more classes were observed while implementing the pedagogical interventions proposed by the novice researchers. Each session was videotaped and analyzed by a research assistant. To this effect, a log of the most important activities of each videotaped lesson was kept and used as a corpus for the identification of recurrent patterns in their teaching practices.

Teacher's Diary. Novice researchers were asked to fill out a diary where they recorded their reflections about their pedagogical practices before and while carrying out the intervention process. Each one of them wrote or recorded five journal entries in response to prompts (see Figure 1). The analysis of the novice researchers' journal entries helped the collaborative team identify the novice teacher researchers' views on what happened before and during the implementation of the courses of action.

Figure 1. Sample of a Prompt for a Journal Entry

Please record a personal reflection about the lesson you planned, the lesson you taught, and the actions you would do differently if you were to teach the same lesson one more time. Justify/elaborate on your answer by providing examples and vivid/relevant descriptions of the events that took place on today's lesson.

Online Forum. The novice researchers, facilitators, and research assistants were invited to participate in an online forum whose main purpose was to exchange information, perceptions, questions, and answers about the problems identified during the diagnosis phase and the possible action or intervention plans that could be designed, implemented, and evaluated to tackle them. To this effect, the following protocol was followed: Initially the participants (novice researchers, facilitators, and research assistants) of the three groups were invited to hold an online forum by means of Facebook. They were asked to use the previously assigned codes to identify their roles, for example, T1, F1, and A1 standing for novice researcher, facilitator, and research assistant, respectively. During the forum itself, the following key questions were posed: Based on the information gathered via the interview, lesson observation and diaries, what seems to be the most frequent problem of the novice researcher's teaching practices? What possible courses of action can be proposed to try to solve the identified problem? And once again, a question about the collaborative methodology implementation was included to reflect on its impact on teachers' pedagogical reflections and decision-making processes.

Survey. It was used as the last instrument to gather information on the perceptions of the facilitators, novice teachers, and research assistants regarding the impact of the action-collaborative research methodology in the exploration and transformation of the pedagogical practices of the ILEUSCO teachers (see Appendix B).

Procedure

The procedure of the research process was carried out through the implementation of the 11 steps of collaborative action research proposed by Burns (1999): exploration, identification, planning, data collection, analysis/reflection, formulation of hypothesis/speculation, intervention, observation, report, writing, and presentation. Nevertheless, we hereby report what was achieved in the first three steps, in keeping with the three research questions this particular study is concerned with. According to Burns, in the exploration step "a general problem is identified and the teachers agree on a general procedure" (p. 36). Thus, based on the previous research by Jaime Osorio and Insuasty (2015), a group of 20 teachers was given a survey aimed at identifying some of the factors which would explain, in general terms, Jaime Osorio and Insuasty's finding of the "the prevalence of the precommunicative teaching practices in comparison to the communicative or autonomous learning based ones" (p. 59). The survey confirmed the problem and provided some reasoning as to its causes. After having checked with the teachers as to their willingness to participate in investigative initiatives which would eventually help them explore their teaching practices, the researchers formed three collaborative groups. A first meeting allowed the group members to agree on the methodology and steps to be followed.

In order to carry out the identification stage which "involves a fact finding process which enables the researchers to refine their ideas about the general focus area and to prepare for systematic investigation" (Burns, 1999, p. 37), the group participants undertook the task of identifying the precise area to work on in each English language class. To this effect, they designed some data gathering instruments such as lesson observation, journal keeping, field notes, students' surveys or questionnaires, and semistructured interviews. The main problematic areas identified in

this stage were as follows: prevalence of structural or quasi-communicative exercises over the functional or social ones, lack of anticipating a backup plan to cope with unexpected results in the planned activities, and shortage of students' motivation and participation.

Finally, the planning stage which, according to Burns (1999), is "aimed at trialing a particular course of action and collecting data on the outcomes of this action" (p. 37) was satisfactorily completed by three groups. The concrete and viable courses of action undertaken by the "enduring" groups were concerned with the exploration the textbook's communicative activities, the implementation of communicative strategies such as improvisations, oral presentations, and discussions, and the exploration of a differentiated instruction proposal based on the students' visual kinesthetic learning styles.

Results

A Look Into Novice Researchers' Own Problems

From the implementation of the strategies, techniques, and instruments for data collection, it was determined that the problems that occurred most frequently in the pedagogical practices of participant teachers were as follows:

Prevalence of precommunicative pedagogical practices. (Both in the basic activities proposed by the guide book and in the complementary activities brought by the teachers). So, it is evidenced in the following excerpt of T1's journal entry:

For today, February 27th, I had planned Unit 5c. Actually, this unit was planned for two days, for today and for tomorrow. This unit, ehmm...As to grammar, with this unit we see the simple past tense with irregular verbs. Concerning vocabulary, we study three very important verbs such as go, have, and get. Likewise, we focused on learning the pronunciation of...or the accent in some sentences. (Translated from Spanish)

Absence of planning (backup plan) and/or anticipation of undesired results before the implementation of the planned activities. This is an issue which is revealed by T1's second diary entry:

After tonight's lesson I've realized that what I have planned didn't work that very much cause [sic] I was thinking about making students realized [sic] how a topic like reported speech was about. But as soon as I started checking their knowledge about this, I could notice that they were kind of confused, especially in the reported questions, so I started to explain it but as I didn't plan like a plan B hmm it was kind of confusing when I started making the sentences [sic] and trying to explain to them using daily life examples because the idea was to do something, I would say better organized. That is why I think the lesson didn't go as well as I was expecting.

Time limitation for the development of other activities different from the textbook. In one of T1's journal entries, it is possible to notice this aspect:

For the reading, the first paragraph was read to the whole class and then the students read the rest of the article alone themselves [sic]. The highlighted vocabulary was discussed as a class but there wasn't enough time to complete the final task as proposed in the plan. One of the main reasons was the lack of time and the fact that more time was required to complete the previous exercises.

Students who interrupt the development of the classes either by their late arrivals or by their constant use of the LI. In one of T1's lessons, this could be perceived:

8:10 The class starts
8:10 students arrive to the classroom
8:14 students gave the meaning in Spanish
8:16 another student arrives
8:48 Another student arrives, quietly takes sit. [sic] (Taken from the research assistant's log)

Unmotivated students who do not participate in the classes. In the interview, T3 admitted that:

The main problems that I have faced during my professional experience have been the lack of interest and motivation from the students.

Use of L1 by the teachers and students to make themselves understood. In one of her journal entries, T3 states that:

The presentation of the new topic took place as planned and it was necessary to explain [*sic*] in Spanish to make sure they understood the different ways of telling the time.

Based on the observation of five lessons, a major emphasis is perceived on quasi-communicative and structural activities, rather than on functional ones. Most of these activities are book-centered since ILEUSCO instructors have to cover a fixed number of units and lessons throughout the academic term.

Due to the large number of issues and activities demanded by the curriculum of the School of Foreign Languages, novice researchers think that there is a shortage of time to fully cover them adequately. In the interview, T2 implied this when she contends that:

One of the problems that I have faced is the lack of time to sometimes finalize the topics to be studied. It is like I sometimes spend too much time on certain activities and then I have to rush to complete the units that have to be taught.

This kind of routinized dynamic is perceived as boring by students. It is also believed that these reported problems have a transversal nature; that is, they occur at different levels. The current prevalence of precommunicative pedagogical practices corroborated the findings of a previous study conducted by Jaime Osorio and Insuasty (2015).

Courses of Action

In response to the previously identified problem situations, three small-scale research projects were designed with individual pedagogical proposals. This

was done through the collaboration of the members of the ILESEARCH research group and novice researchers. These proposals were presented at the poster session of the XII Symposium on Research and the Second Encounter of the Language and Pedagogy Network that was held at Universidad Surcolombiana on November 2 and 3, 2017.

The first proposal was an investigative experience in a sixth-level English course at ILEUSCO whose syllabus was based on the textbook *American English File 2*. This research proposal was aimed at exploring the communicative activities of this book, particularly those found in units seven, eight, and nine of the sixth level. The major achievements of this study were as follows: the identification of the main features of those communicative activities, the assessment of their effectiveness from the perceptions of the novice researcher and the students of this course, as well as the pedagogical perceptions derived from the novice researcher's reflection.

The second proposal consisted of the implementation of three communicative strategies (improvisation, oral presentation, and discussion) to improve the pedagogical practices of the novice researcher and the oral competence of the students. The activities were implemented in third-level and sixth-level English courses at ILEUSCO, the third level with three interventions, and the sixth level with six interventions. These activities were designed according to the themes that were handled in the book of each level, where speaking activities were replaced by the proposed activities. Data collection instruments such as class observation, general reflection of the interventions by the teacher, and a survey of students were used to obtain their perception of the activities, their oral competence, and the teacher's performance.

Finally, the third proposal was framed in group pedagogical strategies based on differentiated instruction, taking into account the learning styles of the second level students of ILEUSCO. The implemented

activities were designed according to the characteristics of the most dominant learning styles within the classroom (visual, kinesthetic). Accordingly, the students were grouped for the development of the same. The purpose of the mentioned pedagogical interventions was to contribute to the improvement of the pedagogical practices of the novice researcher and to motivate the students in their foreign language learning process. The instruments used for the collection of the information were the observations, an interview, a survey, the teacher's diary, and questionnaires of learning styles directed to the students.

The Impact of Collaborative Action-Research on the Transformation of ILEUSCO Faculty's Pedagogical Practices

According to the proceedings of the forum held by participants of the three groups as well as the final survey they were administered, favorable perceptions about the impact of collaborative action-research on the transformation of ILEUSCO faculty's pedagogical practices could be perceived. It was argued, for example, that this methodology "is an ideal way to discuss and deal with situations that are sometimes not visible to us teachers" (T3). However, it is a methodology that needs to be complemented with a good interaction between the members of the team to discuss some things that are not totally visible in the process.

Based on the application of the final survey of perceptions about the collaborative action research methodology, it was found that both the facilitators and the research assistants offered the novice teacher-researcher support in making, executing, and evaluating the pedagogical decisions through which the problems identified in each group were overcome. Now, regarding the scope and impact of such accompaniment, the group members argued that the fact of working in a collaborative group was an enriching and

fruitful experience for all the members of the team, especially for the novice teacher researchers, since they gained greater degree of awareness about the characteristics of their pedagogical practices, their strengths, and their weaknesses. Similarly, they contend that in a collaborative group the novice teacher researcher can find the contribution of an external perspective or point of view and feedback that allow him/her to carry out the identification of the problems, the design, and the implementation of intervention activities and the reflection on the effectiveness of their decisions.

Discussion

Based on the gathered results, we will present the discussion under the following findings:

Raising Awareness About Existing Problems

One of the first outcomes in this study is the identification of the most frequent critical incidents or difficulties the participating teachers were facing in their English lessons, one of them being the prevalence of precommunicative tasks. Littlewood (1998) characterizes these activities as those which are more focused on the knowledge and practice of grammatical structures and on a kind of quasi-communicative practice of the target language. The precommunicative activities constitute one of the sides of the continuum towards more communicative ones with a functional or social scope.

The fact that the English teachers have been willing enough to focus their initial attention on what was not working very well in their pedagogical practices can be taken as evidence of their reflectivity. It is in this respect that Murphy (2001) states that one of the purposes of reflective teaching is "to take steps to deepen awareness of teaching and learning behaviors" (p. 500). And this self-examination makes it possible to transcend the common teacher's inconsistencies between what

they preach and what they do, and to search for better alternatives of making their teaching more meaningful.

Informed Decision Making

Once the participating teachers became better acquainted with the complexities of their own pedagogical practices, they decided to discuss, adopt, and explore some courses of action to solve some particular problems in each one of their English classes. It is not enough just to reflect on the occurrence of teaching and learning problems as long as some intervention plans are further decided and explored. What there should be is an interplay between teacher's reflection and teacher's action. Otherwise, Freire's assertion (as cited in Bartlett, 1994) that "reflection without action is verbalism and action without reflection is activism" (p. 213) would become true.

As Murphy (2001) suggests, it is through reflective teaching that teachers "can learn to see teaching differently, and to learn to take action in order to enhance the quality of learning opportunities we are able to provide in our classroom" (p. 500). He also says that reflective teaching enables language teachers to expand their repertoire of strategic options. And the ones who can benefit the most from the exploration of new teaching learner-centered strategies in the classroom are the students.

Two Heads Are Better Than One

The quintessential worth of the collaborative work in each of three groups can be summarized with T1's comment in the forum:

The collaborative methodology is excellent since it is a useful way of learning. As the saying goes, "two heads are better than one." One can achieve a more enriching result when exploring diverse opinions, thoughts, and experiences, rather than working on an individual basis.

This finding is conceptually supported by what some scholars have contended about the usefulness of peer observation and formative feedback. As a matter of

fact, observing a peer provides an opportunity to obtain information about how another teacher deals with common problems, reflects on their own pedagogical practices, and shares ideas and experiences about similar situations or issues that take place in the classroom. In Richards and Farrell's (2005) words: "In teaching, observation provides an opportunity for novice teachers to see what more experienced teachers do when they teach a lesson and how they do it" (p. 86). On the other hand, peer observation can be a valuable source of formative feedback in order for teachers to "gain deeper understanding and awareness of the teaching-learning process" (Murphy, 2001, p. 506).

It was through observations, diary keeping, and peer discussions based on the data collected that the participating novice teacher-researchers started the cycle of reflective teaching suggested by Bartlett (1994), and that will provide them with a framework to critical reflection and teacher development.

Conclusions

Despite the education and experience many English language teachers have accumulated in their professional lives, it seems that their primary pedagogical practices are continually precommunicative without assuring more functional or social learning experiences for their students. It is a very common problem worth being dealt with in different educational settings, and this implies the decided and decisive commitment of a reflective practitioner who is very willing to work with others in the search of alternative solutions.

As a matter of fact, it is much easier for the English language teachers to first identify the problems affecting their pedagogical practices and the learning process of their students if they receive feedback from their students and other colleagues. Once they are clear about the problem to be resolved, an intervention or a course of action needs to be planned, explored, and assessed with the help of someone else.

The particular courses of action which were explored at ILEUSCO in this project were concerned with the assessment of the textbook's communicative activities, three communicative strategies (improvisation, oral presentation, and discussion) to enhance the oral competence of the students, and differentiated instruction taking into account the learning styles of the second-level students. In general terms, all of these three experiences brought about some positive effects in the novice researchers' pedagogical practices. By means of the data collection instruments administered in each collaborative group, it was possible to establish that they became more aware of the main problems they were faced with. But they also proved to be capable of going beyond the worthy reflections as far as making informed decisions to overcome those problems. All of this by virtue of weaving three key strands for the professional development of English teachers: reflection, collaboration, and action.

Finally, it is hoped that an increasing number of teachers become interested in the transformation of their pedagogical practices for the sake of their students' learning process. One of the ways to make these efforts more systematic and accountable is through the exploration of a collaborative action research methodology.

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About the Authors

Edgar Alirio Insuasty currently works as an associate professor for the Foreign Language Program at Universidad Surcolombiana. He is a co-researcher in two groups of the same program: Comuniqémonos and ILESEARCH. He has co-authored several books and articles in the EFL professional field.

María Fernanda Jaime Osorio is a full-time professor of the EFL program at Universidad Surcolombiana. She holds a master's degree in teaching English as a foreign language from Universidad Internacional Iberoamericana. She is the director of the research group ILESEARCH.

Appendix A: Semistructured Interview Sample

1. What characteristics do you recognize in your pedagogical practices at ILEUSCO?
2. Do you systematize reflections related to your pedagogical practices?
3. Based on the self-assessment of your professional experience, what recurrent problems have you faced during your teaching performance?
4. What are your main concerns regarding the effectiveness of your pedagogical practices in students' motivation and communicative learning of a foreign language?
5. What are the most effective strategies or action plans to tackle the problems or concerns you have identified?
6. Have you ever been part of a collaborative research project?
7. How would you assess your background knowledge about collaborative action research methodology?

Appendix B: Survey

1. Which research project did you participate in?
2. What role did you play in this project?
3. Describe briefly how you contributed to the development of the research project conducted by your collaborative group.
4. To what extent do you think that the accompaniment of a collaborative group enables the ILEUSCO teacher to explore and transform his or her teaching practices?
5. What is the impact of a collaborative action research methodology on the exploration and transformation of ILEUSCO faculty's teaching practices?