EXCHANGING GLANCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A JOINT EDUCATION AND RESEARCH PROGRAMME CARRIED OUT AT A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN A SOCIOECONOMICALLY UNDERPRIVILEGED MILIEU

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Abstract

Planning and developing classroom research from the perspective of responsible research and innovation is a key action of the European Commission Horizon 2020 program. In the field of education this implies, very often, designing proposals for innovation at schools to be constructed and implemented by teams composed of researchers and in-service teachers committed to transform educational practices into opportunities for tackling both educational and social challenges. Within the teams, it is extremely important to clearly establish and negotiate the nature of the relationship of team members to ensure that they all work together from symmetrical but different positions to attain a common goal (Ballena, Masats & Unamuno, [1]). This research methodology is commonly referred to with the Spanish coined term 'co-labor' (Leyva & Speed, [2]) as opposed to 'collaboration', a term which, in education, traditionally evokes a context in which researchers enter schools as experts, from a power position, to help teachers, regarded as non-experts, improve their practices.

This paper presents a case study, conducted in a secondary school, sited in a socioeconomically underprivileged milieu, in which English language teachers and researchers work in 'co-labor' in the design, implementation and evaluation of innovative technology-based language teaching projects targeted only at a cohort of learners. The study, aimed at investigating how to improve teaching practices, is based on the premise that knowledge gained by teachers who reflect upon their practices has positive consequences in their students' learning success (Burnard, Apelgren & Cabaroglu, [3]). We analyse data from the discussion sessions held at the end of two academic years by team members and other language teachers at the same school to reflect upon the challenges of promoting change in the classrooms through a process of 'co-labor' and whether this process proves to be beneficial for the whole school community. This is why in this last session teachers of languages other than English are invited to participate in the discussions. Our study reveals that 'co-labor' creates the necessary conditions to transform learning, both in the classrooms of project team members and in those of other teachers. Parallel to this, the views of non-team members help participants confirm the type of challenges to be faced if the method is to be applied to in all classrooms.

Keywords: classroom research, teachers as researchers, co-labor, language teaching, case study, reflective teaching.

1 INTRODUCTION

Innovating teaching proposals are needed to transform learning at schools. Therefore teachers need to engage in a process of reflective teaching when they design, implement and evaluate their class projects. This reflection does not need to be an introspective individual practice, since, as Masats & Guerrero [4] argue, "reflection about teaching action and reflection in teaching action triggers innovation, especially when teachers work together to create the necessary conditions to transform learning". In addition research designed and implemented collaboratively by heterogeneous teams composed of in-service teachers and researchers is more likely to meet the requirements of responsible research and innovation (RRI). The European Commission Horizon 2020 program establishes that RRI should always be aligned with the needs of our current society and carried out by social actors with different profiles (teachers, students, researchers, NGOs, public administrations, etc.) who are willing to work together to co-create knowledge, take actions and respond to social challenges, both in formal and non-formal educational environments. At schools, therefore, this should necessarily imply that innovation and research should benefit each other and that researchers and teachers should work together to innovate and to do research on that innovation, while they provide students with the necessary tools to deal with both educational and social challenges. The nature of the relationship between the researchers and the

members of the school community needs to be established clearly from the very beginning in order to avoid acting from asymmetrical positions. Traditionally, researchers have entered schools as experts and have regarded teachers as non-experts. Research has benefitted academics more than teachers and have not had much impact on students. Ballena, Masats & Unamuno [1] suggest that the word 'collaboration' recalls these traditional research practices and argue in favour of the use of the Spanish term 'co-labor' (Leyva & Speed, [2]) to refer to a type of research methodology that get teachers and researchers work together, from symmetrical positions, to promote change at schools. Yet, teachers and researchers do not only work in 'colabor' in class-related activities but also when they embark on "other actions such as co- collecting, and co-interpreting data obtained during the processes of planning, implementing and evaluating change; and when co-authoring texts to disseminate the results of their intervention" (Masats & Guerrero, [4]), as it is the case here.

2   METHODOLOGY

From a theoretical point of view, our research is grounded on the belief that "significant teaching innovation necessary to improve the students' results in English is only possible through initiatives that empower in-service teachers and helps them become true agents of transformative language education practices" (Masats & Guerrero, [4]). Therefore, we believe teachers must take an active role in the process of designing and implementing change and also in the task of doing research on that change. This particular paper is based on a case study, framed within a research project which aims to investigate how teachers and researcher can develop innovative teaching practices in 'co-labor' in the English classrooms of a secondary school in the province of Barcelona. The school decided to adopt the project-based approach to learning to see if student's command of English could improve. This methodological proposal allows teachers to integrate the development of a wide range of 21st century competences and abilities and contextualises learning, as the projects are structured through objective-oriented tasks that help learners work together to obtain a final product (Dooly [5]; Mont & Masats, [6]; Dooly & Masats, [7]). Teachers and researchers work together to explore significant contexts in which learners, adolescents living in a socioeconomically underprivileged milieu, may feel the need to use English as a language to communicate with real interlocutor(s). The project focuses on a cohort of students that started year 1 of their secondary education in 2015 and will complete their compulsory secondary education (year 4) in 2019. This is, therefore, a work in progress and relevant data is still being collected.

In these last 3 years, qualitative data has been collected during the meetings organised to design the classroom projects or through interviews and focus groups to reflect upon the implementation of those projects and on students' learning. Such data is important because innovation and change must rely on the process of reflecting on one's teaching practice and on the value of teaching as a transformative action (Engeström, [8]; Engeström & Sannino, [9]. Therefore, the participants of our research project are the secondary students, the language teachers who work together with the research group members, and a group of university students who voluntarily support teachers and researchers in their shared goal of transforming classroom practices. Here we present a qualitative and ethnomethodological study and analyse what teachers and the school principle say, during an informal conversation with a researcher in the team at the beginning of year 4. Those conversations were recorded and then transcribed, about the new teaching approach adopted in the English classrooms. To analyse our data, we apply the principles of CA (conversation analysis) as we are interested in observing what other team members (the English teachers and the school principal) say and do while they reflect upon the shared teaching actions and how they perceive what we all do. We will particularly focus on their views on the adoption of a project-based learning approach as a teaching proposal and on the process of conducting research and innovation in *co-labor*. It is important to mention that the two researchers and one of the teachers co-author this paper. Yet, in the data all names have been anonymised.

3   RESULTS

Innovation starts when teachers point out a problem that needs to be solved. As Smith [10] suggests, 'this clarity alone is an important accomplishment, as it steers energy and curiosity towards a specific goal and helps to define clear metrics against which to measure potential solutions.' However, for innovation to be a success, a wide variety of stakeholders (policy makers, in-service teachers, researchers, classroom assistants, students, etc.) 'need to play a role and be effectively inter-connected in an innovation ecosystem or cycle' (Smith, [10]). In the case of the participants in our study, two interests merged. On the one hand, the school community felt that they should modify their teaching approach to help students learn English. On the other hand, the research team was interested in investigating how innovation can be enhanced in socioeconomically underprivileged

settings. Particularly, they were interested in reducing the achievement gap in educational outcomes research has proved it exists between affluent and low-income students (see, for example, Reardon, [11]). As a result, both groups decided to work together in a project they named 'Let's go', whose objective was to develop in and out of school proposals to help students improve their command of English. The adoption of project-based learning as a teaching approach was one of the actions taken at school. In extract 1, we can observe how the school principle envisages this initiative.

Principal: O_sigui _el programa let's_go va ser com la porta d'entrada de: nem a treballar d'una altra manera\ eh_ sobretot a llengües\ una cosa que sempre: eh: bueno que encara no havíem intentat fer res diguem com_per proje:tes\ amb grups cooperatius\ es feia molt poquet\ llavores sí que va començar a: primer_d'ESO amb molt força i es va donar molt d'impuls i pels alumnes va ser com_ bueno\ es possible\ o sigui va ser veure que sí es podia treballar diferent_\ suposo que els altre professors de llengua també ens vem animar\ va tenir aquest efecte de: de: bueno\ de impuls i de:	Principal: I mean _the let's_go programme was like the gateway of: we are going to work in a different way\ eh_ especially in languages\ one thing we had always: eh: well we hadn't yet tried to do anything like let's_say like_with projects\ with cooperative groups\ we did it very little\ then it did start at: 1st of ESO first with a lot of impulse and it was given a lot of impetus and for the students it was like\ well\ it is possible\ I mean it was like seeing that\ yes it was possible to work differently_ I suppose the other language teachers were also encouraged, and it had the effect of: well\ impulse and:
Researcher 2: com de contagi\	Researcher 2: like a contagious effect\
Principal: sí de contagi\	Principal: yes contagious \

Extract 1. Conversation between the school principal and one of the researchers (year 3)

As we can observe, in extract 1 the school principal states that the joint initiative carried out with researchers served as a springboard for change and that since it started it has moved teachers of other language to introduce project-based learning in their lessons as they realised that the students involved were reacting positive to the change. This view is also shared by teachers of English who did not take part in the process of implementing project-based learning because they were not teaching the target cohort of students. We can observe this in extract 2.

Researcher 1: i tu estàs a 4t_ no/ com has viscut això de:_ d'estar a dintre com fora/ (riu)	Researcher 1: and you are in year 4_ right/ how did you live this:_ being in and out/ (laughs)
Teacher 3: e:h_ pues això\ estic dintre però estic fora\ (riuen) bueno\ n:o\ bé bé\ perquè vull dir_ el recolzament que he tingut de vosaltre:s i: en concret de tu:_ es-vamos\ vull dir ha sigut_ encara que fos a la cantina:_ parlant de: no sé què:_ vull dir_ l: l'assessorament i: la formació_ abans no sé amb qui ho comentava_ n'hi ha hagut una de formal_ però també n'hi ha una d'informal\ perquè:_ m: parlem molt i_ intercanviem moltes coses\ vull di:r_ sí\ n: no he estat a 1r de la ESO però_ bueno_ he pogut aplicar coses a: 4t\ sí:\ sí sí\ que sí que sí que m'ha servit\ i moltíssim\ a més la disposició que heu tingut vosaltres és que:_	Teacher 3: e:h_ well that's it\ I am in but I am out\ (laughs) well\ n:o\ well well\ because I mean_ the suport I got from you all and: specially from you:_ is- wow\ I mean it's been_ even that it was in the canteen:_ talking about: don't know what:_ I mean_ the advice and: the training_ I can't remember who I was saying this earlier_ there's been formal training_ but also informal\ because:_ m: we talk a lot and_ exchange many things\ I mean:_ yes\ I have n: not been in year 1 but_ well_ I have been able to apply things in year 4\ yes:\ yes yes\ sure yes yes they were useful for me\ very much so\ and then your eagerness was wow:_

Extract 2. Conversation between one of the researchers and an English teacher not involved in the project (year 1)

The voice of teacher 3 is interesting because she stresses the fact that even in casual situations, such as sharing conversations in the canteen with the researchers, enabled teachers who did not participate in the joint initiative to try to innovate in their classrooms and ask for advice/support from those who did or from the researchers themselves. When asked about the advantages of forming teams with researchers, and also with teacher assistants brought to the school by the research team, teachers involved in 'Let's go' tend to value the advantages of increasing the number of teachers in the classrooms. Let's observe this in extract 3.

Researcher 2: i quins_quins són els beneficis que hi hagi aquest equip/ em: que hi hagin els profes/ que hi hagi gent pues_algú que vingui de la universitat/ i_ els voluntaris\ tots junts treballant\ eh: l'impacte quin és/ el benefici\ quin és/ creieu/	Researcher 2: and what are the benefits of this team: that there are teachers/ that there are people who come from the university/ volunteers\ all al them working together\ eh: the impact/ benefit\ which is the benefit/ do you think/
Teacher 2: bueno_doncs_que: les activitats que tu tens planejades com a profe\ potser ells li donen una altra volta\ o: o: t'ajuden a	Teacher 2: well_then_that: the activities you have planned as a teacher\ maybe they give them another turn\ or: or: they help you to_
Teacher 4: o: aporten de noves\ no/ també/ fins i tot/	Teacher 4: they even provide new ones\ right/ also/
Teacher 1: sí/	Teacher 1: yes/
Researcher 2: és una altra visió\ no/	Researcher 2: it is another vision\ right/
Teacher 2: sí\ i també\ et permeten doncs\ monitoritzar molt millor activitats en grups\ fins_i_ tot permetent-te tenir el luxe de assignar: un responsable a cada grup\ si tens quatre grups a l'aula\ doncs mira\ un adult per grup\ o sigui: et dona molta_més_ llibertat per gestionar activitats d'aula	Teacher 2: yes\ and also\ it allows you to monitor much better some activities in groups\ even_ allowing you the luxury of assigning: one responsible person to every group\ if you have four groups in the classroom\ then well\ you can have one adult per group\ which is: it gives you a lot more freedom to manage classroom activities

Extract 3. Conversation between one of the researchers and in-service teacher that has been an active member of the project in the last two years (year 3).

In extract 3 we can observe that teacher 2 is very positive about the presence of other adults in the class as it enhances the possibility of organising group-work activities in the classroom and makes the task of managing the class easier. Another benefit highlighted by the teacher in this extract relates to the fact that the presence of other adults in the classroom is also positive because they can suggest alternative classroom tasks or alternative ways of implementing the tasks planned. Indirectly, his voice reveals that the relationship established between the teachers and the researchers is not based on an asymmetrical power positions, on the contrary. He describes a situation in which all team members work together and everybody's ideas are regarded as equally relevant. Working in co-labor is also important outside the classroom doors, as we can observe in extract 4. It is important to notice that when the conversation took place, teacher 2 and researcher 2 had been working together on a regular basis in designing, implementing and evaluating class projects, along with the rest of the team.

Teacher 2: pero bueno l'ajudant sí que va: va venir\ sí que ens va ens va ajudar molt en aquest sentit\ no només a nivell de: gestió d'aula sino de:\ poder preparar materials\ de: pensar-los conjuntament\	Teacher 2: but well\ the teacher assistant did come\ she helped us a lot in that sense\ not just at the level of classroom management but also with: \ the preparation of materials\ by: being able to plan them together\
Researcher 2: i tant\	Researcher 2: of course\
Teacher 2: i bueno/ la teacher 1_ i_ jo pensàvem coses\ materials i tal\ i ella també hi era\ molts cops i: ens donava un cop de mà\ així que en aquest sentit ens ha ens ha: anat bé\ i bueno\ l'any següent has estat tu\ aquest any has estat tu\ researcher 2\ fent aquesta figura\	Teacher 2: well, teacher 1_and_I thought of some ideas\ materials and so on\ and she was there plenty of times and: she gave us a hand, so in this sense it has been good:\ and well\ in the following year it has been you\ researcher 2\ who has been adopting this role \
Researcher 2: pots dir el que vulguis_ eh/ (riu)	Researcher 2: you can say whatever you want\ eh/ (laughs)
Teacher 2: No_i_bé\ o sigui: lo bo de tenir una figura amb continuïtat\ és que és una referència que he tingut jo\ i els alumnes també\ no/	Teacher 2: No_and_good\ I mean: the good thing about having a person with continuity \ is that it is a reference I have had myself\ and the students too\ right/
Researcher 2 : Mm\	Researcher 2: Mmh\
Teacher 2: el mateix\ com l'ajudant\ gestió d'aula però també preparació de materials\ ajut\ tot això\ o sigui que en aquest sentit per a mi\ com a profe\ ha estat una ajuda\ sí_sí\ indubtablement\	Teacher 2: the same\ like with the teacher assistant\ classroom management but also preparation of materials\ help\ all this\ so:\ in that sense\ for me\ as a teacher\ it has been a help\ yes\ yes\ undoubtedly \

Extract 4. Conversation between one of the researchers and in-service teacher that has been an active member of the project in the last two years (year 3).

This extract is a good example of the positive impact of doing research and innovation in 'co-labor'. As we can see, teacher 2 values the process of both co-designing and co-implementing the different class projects along with the support of the teachers and class assistants (university students that participate within the frame of a social volunteering programme) he has been working with for the last two years. At another level, he also emphasises the advantage of establishing lasting bonds with all the team members as 'continuity' (that is, working with the same team members for a long period of time) is not also positive for him but also for the students.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In educational research, hierarchical top-bottom practices to gain knowledge and promote change in the classrooms should be disregarded in benefit of innovation because they generate situations in which teachers become sceptical with regards to the researchers' intentions (Unamuno, [12]). Our study reveals that 'co-labor' creates the necessary conditions to transform learning, as both teachers and researchers are working together to attain a common goal, in this case, to help a cohort of secondary students improve their competence in English. In our study, a group of English teachers, with the support of the school principal, embarked on a process of adopting project-based learning as a methodology to promote significant learning experiences for learners. The implementation of this initiative is done hand-in-hand with a team of researchers who also act as teacher assistants. The experience is regarded as positive by all the stakeholders involved in it. Success seems to be guaranteed by the fact that teachers and researchers work together in the processes of designing, implementing and evaluating classroom projects. This undoubtedly means that they have time to meet and work together and that the number of adults in the classrooms increases. This situation is not replicated with other cohorts of students because there are not enough human resources to do so, yet the sole presence of a mixed team at the school triggers changes in the teaching practices of other teachers.

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