

Inquiry as an opportunity to make things differently in the language classroom*

La indagación como una oportunidad de cambiar la enseñanza en la clase de lenguaje

Jenny Alexandra Mendieta Aguilar

Docente de Inglés, Universidad de La Sabana

E-mail: jennymendieta@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article presents a pedagogical experience in a female private school in Bogotá with a group of seventh graders, where the English classes became an excuse to start posing questions about issues that affect young girls and women around the world, as it is women discrimination. The study was developed as an innovative pedagogical proposal and used literature as a means to foster students' inquiry process. This process was made evident through data collection sources such as students' artifacts, field notes and video-taped sessions. The data analysis revealed that the target language is not a barrier but a resource for students to wonder about the reality that surrounds them.

Key words: Problem-based learning, curriculum as Inquiry, language learning, women discrimination.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una experiencia pedagógica en un colegio femenino privado de Bogotá, con un grupo de estudiantes de séptimo grado; en donde las clases de inglés se convierten en una excusa para generar preguntas acerca de temas y hechos que afectan a niñas y mujeres en el mundo, tal como lo es la discriminación de género. Este estudio se desarrolló como parte de una propuesta de innovación pedagógica la cual hizo uso de la literatura como medio para promover procesos de indagación en las estudiantes. Tales procesos, se hicieron evidentes a través de instrumentos de colección de datos, como los son los trabajos hechos por los estudiantes, diarios de campo y grabaciones de clases. Todos y cada uno de estos instrumentos revelaron que una segunda lengua no es una barrera sino un recurso para que los estudiantes se pregunten acerca de la realidad que los rodea.

Palabras Claves: Aprendizaje basado en la solución de problemas, currículo como indagación, aprendizaje de una lengua, discriminación de la mujer.

Introduction

As EFL teachers we might constantly face classrooms where we meet students with a varied range of learning experiences as well as different awareness, expectations and beliefs about the

foreign language. Many times the need to help and guide them in their process of learning and mastering the language skills and structures makes us place all our energy and efforts into this complex task; and so we forget that we can have classes where English is used as a means

* Received 30-01-09 /Approved 31-07-09



to learn about different issues, and that there are many things that could be done and discovered if we allow our students to bring into the classroom their queries about what happens around them and about what affects them in diverse ways. As an English teacher I found there were many things that needed to be done at school: to cover the units of the book; to work with the literature book; to have students use the laboratory efficiently; to prepare them for the exams and make-up exams; to organize tutoring sessions, etc. Even if I knew there was something missing in my classes; with all this workload, when was I supposed to do something else with the language?

Though I constantly reflected about my classes, it was only when the school directors decided to change the pedagogical approach of the institution, that I realized I could find that something that was missing in my classes by conceptualizing the learning of English in a different way. Problem-based learning (PBL) became the new direction we teachers needed to take in order to work with the students in the classroom; consequently, classes ought to be focused upon problems or puzzles that need to be solved by the students together with the teacher. So, I asked myself: how can I deal with problems or puzzling issues in a class that has students who are in the process of learning a foreign language? That is how the pedagogical experience I am presenting in this article started.

Context and Participants

This small scale pedagogical project was carried out at a private, catholic girls' institution located in Casa Blanca, Suba. The school's philosophy is aimed at educating girls within human and Christian principles, and at guiding them in the process of becoming leaders and active agents in the construction of a new society.

Subsequently, the school committed itself to the task of implementing a pedagogical approach

that would combine the two objectives established in the philosophy. In this approach, (PBL), teaching and learning center on problem-based situations where the learners need to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to interact and solve puzzling phenomena. This means that the participation of the students and the dialogic communication among teachers, learners and community are necessary conditions to succeed in the resolution of the problems that are posed.

As an agent in the development of this pedagogical proposal, I decided to explore how problem-based learning would connect to the teaching and learning of English. And so, I started working and experimenting with this approach in depth with a group of 37 seventh graders who were considered as advanced learners, with whom I had worked for one year previous to the beginning of the curricular change adopted by the school. After having initiated the project, I decided to pose the following question: How does an inquiry-based approach unfold in the EFL classroom?

As mentioned before, teachers were asked to follow the PBL approach in the classes, which required them to think of problem areas that could be discussed and researched in class. The aim of this approach is to teach students to solve real and meaningful problems that are related to the realities being constantly faced by human beings in their communities and in society as a whole. (Hernández, 2004) However, in my personal case, I did not have much knowledge about how to implement this approach properly and how to relate it to language teaching, since we were not given much information about it and were only told about the guidelines that needed to be followed when planning our classes. Initially, I was worried about the fact that students did not conceive of the English class as a space to study issues other than the language itself and that they were not used to asking and answering puzzling



questions, or using information sources wisely. Therefore, I started to think of the best way to implement a problem-based approach that would enhance their language learning process as well as foster the construction of knowledge in relation to diverse topics and issues that are related with other subject areas.

Owing to this fact, I started to carry out a small scale project which was aimed at experimenting with and interpreting the different practices that are involved within a problem-based approach and how they relate to language learning and social awareness, under the assumption that posing and solving problems help students not only to gain knowledge about language but also about the situations that puzzle them. Nevertheless, as I started to do some reading about problem-based approaches I realized that what I was doing in the classroom was connected to Curriculum as Inquiry instead of PBL, given that these two educational approaches clearly differ in nature, learning goals, the role of the teacher and the role of the learner, as will be better explained in the following literature review.

Theoretical Considerations

The Post- Method Era

..... At all levels of the system what people think they are doing, what they say they are doing, what they appear to others to be doing and what in fact they are doing, may be sources of considerable discrepancy.

(MacDonald & Walker 1957:7-8)

My concern about implementing a pedagogical proposal that would approach language learning and teaching differently and that could also enrich the curriculum of the English department was not only related to the new approach the school had decided to implement, but also to one of the concerns researchers have had when thinking of the teaching of English and

of curriculum throughout the most recent decades. Specifically, it is the existing gap between what teachers believe students are learning and what they actually learn. Nunan (1988, p.1), who has written about language curriculum, argues that the notion that planning equals teaching and that teaching equals learning is naïve, adding that teachers do not slavishly follow a pre-specified plan and learners do not necessarily always learn what teachers teach.

Nunan's words got my attention since I saw that happening in the classroom; therefore, I decided to do some inquiring about curriculum and language teaching and found myself with some interesting questions that Wiggings and McTighe (2005) ask teachers, so that we reflect about the way we understand and perceive curriculum, teaching and learning.

- What is worthy understanding?
- To what extent are we really covering/ attending student's needs, performance levels, and interests?
- How will we distinguish merely interesting learning from effective learning?
- What should students walk out the door able to understand regardless of the activities used?
- What texts, activities and methods best enable such results?
- How does what they learn and what they do impact their view of the world?

All these questions mentioned above helped me understand that there are many things we take for granted when teaching a language, and therefore the approach, methodology and different sources we teachers use do not always guarantee the achievement of the learning goals we establish. From the moment I found myself with Wiggings and McTighe's questions, I knew



I wanted be prepared to answer them or at least to have a clearer idea of what they meant in my classes. Kumaravadivelu (2006) and some of the authors he cites like Allwright (2000) have helped me to do so, and their ideas and beliefs about language teaching have enlightened somehow my constant struggle in trying to refine my own teaching and learning practices. Kumaravadivelu interestingly portrays the changes that language learning and teaching trends and methods have had from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to Critical Discourse. He discusses how CLT became a new alternative to the teaching of English, where negotiation, interpretation, language use, and accuracy emerged as key concepts. However, as with all the previous methods, CLT was questioned by researchers who identified its weaknesses and who concluded that it often failed to be authentic, acceptable and applicable to various contexts, for as stated by Kumaravadivelu “It claims its distinctiveness based on communicative activities rather than on conceptual underpinnings”. (p.63)

As a result of these discussions, Task based learning and teaching (TBLT) emerges as an alternative to CLT, and the concepts of language and learning-centered tasks become relevant in the attempt to facilitate language learning. Kumaravadivelu understands TBLT as a new shift that does not necessarily tie to a specific approach, given that a task can be carried out by means of different methods as long as it ensures effective learning. That is how the idea that there is no single best method became applied to the field of language teaching and learning, and different perspectives started to be analyzed at the outset of a post-method era. From the multiple perspectives of this era, I tend to identify myself and what I try to do in the classroom with Allwright’s ideas. He strongly believes that the human being and the quality of the classroom should be valued more than the teaching method

itself when making decisions about learning and teaching while further stating that it is important to find something puzzling in every teaching and learning situation.

I agree with the principles and practices Allwright proposes since I believe that a textbook and a structural syllabus and curriculum do not allow teachers to understand what is going on in the classroom, not only in terms of the students’ language learning process but also in terms of the re-construction and co-construction of their systems of beliefs and multiple identities. What happens outside the classroom should not be overlooked in the classes, and even if the students’ command of the foreign language is not good, they do have many things to say and can contribute to the co-construction of the classes, their learning processes and themselves in unexpected ways. That is why, as a result of my constant reflection and my experience in the classroom, I realized I needed to revise and re-define my classroom practices in order to guide my students towards more successful learning experiences. I started thinking about the importance of reviewing my beliefs about teaching and learning rather than disguising my misconceptions by trying to make the classes look fun and interesting, but probably not effective. So, when trying to have students inquire about problematic situations, I noticed that my students and I could conceptualize learning differently. I understood that language learning and teaching are more than learning and teaching a language, and that due to this fact there needs to be a connection among the word and the world. For me this idea, which relates to the emancipatory ideology stated by Freire, implies that the experience of schooling should not be disconnected from the reality and the issues students face outside the classroom, together with students’ opinions, beliefs and interpretations of that reality; on the contrary, schools should equip students with the knowledge, strategies and skills



to guide them in the process of deciphering and surviving in the complexity of our societies.

PBL or Curriculum as Inquiry?

Having reflected a little bit about curriculum and language teaching and learning, I started to look through the literature for more insights about PBL (the approach the school was implementing), in order to analyze how it could answer my desire to do something different in the English classes, and I found myself with Hernandez (2004) who states that PBL or ABP (in Spanish) is a contemporary pedagogical approach that dates back to the 70's, when the medical schools in the universities wanted to help learners acquire strategies and knowledge to cope with the real problems they faced when they started their practicum and their role as in-service professionals. Due to the need of helping students solve puzzling issues, the teachers in PBL are the ones, by virtue of their experience and training, who should choose the problems that will make students face the issues they need to resolve. In that sense, they have the responsibility for selecting the problem, determining the stages that should be followed to solve the problem as well as the timetable and outcomes expected; teachers should also suggest the strategies that students can use and then guide them during the problem-solving process.

Taking into account this information, PBL seemed to me a bit rigid and did not quite fit with some of things I was doing in the classroom, such as negotiating with my students upon the tasks to be carried out in class and providing them with the necessary time to come up with interesting ideas, since I did not intend to be the leader and expert at all times. Thus, I kept looking in the literature and found Short and Burke (2001) and their pedagogical proposal of Curriculum as Inquiry. They state that Curriculum as Inquiry involves theoretical and practical shifts in how educators view teaching and learning within school and

university contexts, since learners are provided with the time to ask questions that are significant in their lives instead of completing assignments on pre-established topics.

According to Short and Burke, inquiry goes beyond integrating a topic or a subject area within the language classes; it involves using different sign systems as tools for exploring and researching the questions. It also involves personal and social knowledge as well as knowledge of systems and sign systems. Personal and social knowledge implies relying on learners' own experiences, beliefs, feelings and concerns about the world and what is around them; knowledge of systems refers to other school content areas, such as science, geography, etc; and sign systems relate to alternative ways of creating and communicating meaning with others, such as music, art and languages. All these factors, according to Short, make Curriculum as inquiry: "not just a better way to enhance student learning but an attempt to construct learning contexts that are collaborative and life-long." (p.33)

From my personal opinion, the inquiry-based approach offers multiple advantages to a context like the school where I carried out the project, given that it connects to the school's philosophy where women are called to reflect upon the different complex situations the world is facing now, as well as to take action in order to come up with possible solutions that would construct a better and fairer society. It also links to the pedagogical proposal the school was establishing at that time, since all the different classes should be aimed at working around problematic phenomena. Nonetheless, it also offers a different perspective that questions the way these problems have been addressed in the class from the PBL, given that, they are always teacher-centered and do not allow time for negotiation with the students; and they also tend to be content-oriented (topic-oriented) rather than inquiry-oriented.



Consequently, I decided to expand my knowledge about inquiry and how it relates to the awareness of the various sociocultural issues that affect us. Inquiry is a term that has not been coined recently; John Dewey (1938) and Paulo Freire (1970), cited in Clavijo (2005) are two important authors who from a sociological and political perspective have emphasized the importance of education in the transformation of society. According to Clavijo, Dewey was concerned with students' passiveness in response to their learning process in traditional education, and thus emphasized the importance of placing learners at the core of the curriculum, providing them with the opportunities to ask questions related to their concerns so that they would find a motive for learning. He acknowledged that children are curious and active by nature, and asked educators to be aware of this issue to integrate learners' concerns, experiences, beliefs and context into the school's practices.

Clavijo (2005) also states that Freire was concerned about education in Latin America, and therefore agreed with Dewey on the need to have a shift in education. Freire urged educators to recognize the importance of schooling in the liberation of systems of oppression and subordination, and to recognize the effect of power relationships in the construction of knowledge and identity. For him, knowledge emerges through invention and re-invention as a result of the constant inquiry of humans; therefore, the implementation of a problem-posing methodology at school is needed to encourage students to connect with and question the context they live in.

These two important authors have influenced many educators and researchers with their insights and have been a point of reference when talking about the history of education. However, it is interesting to see that those theories have not thoroughly permeated all the practices that

are still being carried out in our country, both in the private and public sectors, since we are still fragmenting knowledge into content areas and inquiry is not part of our daily teaching and learning practices. English is a very good example in many non-bilingual schools since it is still taught as a separate subject area, and even our standards aim at learning the language and not learning through the language. Sometimes, we think we are including culture when we talk about celebrations and knowledge systems when we talk about animals or food, but we are just making superficial connections that make our lessons interesting but not necessarily critical. It would be worthy, then, to analyze how inquiry can be placed at the center of our practices instead of language structures and thematic units.

Wells (2002) and Comber (2001) are also important authors who talk about the role of inquiry in education. Wells point out the importance of collaboration and meaning-making practices in the process of promoting students' learning in all areas of the curriculum. He relies on Vygotsky's social constructivist theory and Dewey's dialogic inquiry perspective connecting these theoretical constructs to teaching and learning and curriculum. He emphasizes the need to understand learning as the process of appropriation and personal transformation of knowledge and skills, and teaching as the process of assisting learners in this endeavor. He also establishes a taxonomy of activities that promote knowledge construction within the framework of inquiry and the constructivist theory; the key steps to follow in the classes are experience, information, knowledge construction and understanding. In this taxonomy teachers should wisely use learners' previous knowledge, experiences, and concerns as possible sources of questions, then guide them in the process of gathering, selecting and evaluating information as well as in the process of establishing connections



collaboratively; finally, the students and teacher must reflect upon the findings and decide about possible future actions to take. He encourages teachers to adopt an inquiry-based approach as a means to help students construct lifelong knowledge.

Comber (2001) discusses the possibilities and limitations of inquiry at school and how the school limits the students' opportunities to engage in critical literacies, replacing inquiry with productivity. The author states that most of the school activities do not go beyond the search for facts and information, leading students only to worry about getting the tasks done, instead of exploring issues critically and from different perspectives. She interestingly adds that the type of questions students ask depend on the discourse they have access to; that is why inquiry plays a key role at school and needs to be examined in terms of what it offers to different groups of students. She also describes the different sites where critical inquiry can happen, like school life (students' experiences), communities, children's literature (creations), and community texts, asking educators to go beyond the content that is required by national standards and examine the knowledge that has not been addressed at school. Comber claims that this unexplored knowledge might leave unattended part of the social, political and cultural reality of students.

From my personal stance, what these two authors claim positions education and learning from a different perspective, where schools do not play safe but instead take risks when allowing students to participate in decision-making processes. Part of the practices done at school do not question knowledge nor look for various alternatives; and coverage is valued over understanding and questioning. Standards tell teachers what they are supposed to teach and how they are supposed to teach it and do not provide a space to examine different issues and to negotiate curriculum. Even language

projects, like the Colombian Bilingual Project, are highly directed at testing teachers and students, instead of increasing reflection and cultural understanding. This fact made me think that we probably worry sometimes about covering the content of the book, in disregard of the multiple things that can be done and learned through the language, and which might be more thought provoking and challenging for our students.

In a nutshell, I would say that the different ideas mentioned by researchers like Short, Wells and Comber are indications of the positive impact inquiry can have on learning, motivation, and on the development of thinking skills and curriculum design. Inquiry is present in the different stages of our life, like childhood, adolescence and adulthood; and therefore should not be avoided in school settings. It also re-shapes teachers' beliefs about education and learning, and even their own knowledge systems. However, it is important to acknowledge that the inquiry-based approach or curriculum is more than a set of principles or methodologies to follow, but rather an educational shift that causes tension between the different members of the educational community, due to the impact it can have on the set of beliefs and theoretical constructs held by the different members. So, if we add the concept of Inquiry as a more powerful way to learn to Kumaravadivelu (2006) and Allwright's (1991) discussion about language teaching and learning, we could say then that it is immersed in the post-method era. That is, where there is not such a best method to teach and where the human being is valued over the method.

Inquiry and Women Discrimination: A pedagogical experience

Phases of the Project

Design

As I already stated, this small-scale project started with the initiative of the school to change



the way teaching and learning were set up in and outside the classroom. When asked to come up with a problematic situation for foreign language learning, I started to wonder how to do it, since it is not an easy task to have students learn and talk about different issues in the L2 they are just learning. Nevertheless, I saw that I could use literature as a means to language acquisition and to explore issues that were connected to other knowledge systems, such as history, technology and science. For the students of high school age with whom I was working, I decided to implement some diverse projects like discrimination against women (with the seventh graders), animals in danger of extinction (with the sixth graders), and mysteries of humanity (with the eighth graders). All these issues emerged from the literature books we had planned to read for the academic year, and in that way, using the language to think about and discuss the varied phenomena did not turn out to be as difficult as I had thought at the beginning. From the different courses I had, I selected the seventh graders to carry out a longer and more ambitious project related to gender discrimination, based on the fact that I had been working with this group for a longer time and I knew more about their lives, attitude, interests and work pace.

Implementation

To implement the project I followed Wells' taxonomy (2002). That is to say, I made use of the learners' previous knowledge, experiences, and opinions about the different ways they thought women are discriminated against nowadays around the world, and then I guided them in the process of gathering, selecting and sharing information about this issue. Subsequently, the learners and I evaluated the information we found in the literature and established connections among different pieces of information we had collected like statistics, human rights web pages, newspaper articles, the literature book, etc.

Finally, we reflected upon the findings of our research and expressed our personal opinions about the role and position of women in this century.

The first step I followed in the process was to explore the literature book we were assigned for the first semester, which was *Anne of Green Gables* (a very interesting book that shows the problems a young girl faces because of the fact of being born a girl and not a boy). As the students were reading the book, they started to comment about their impressions on the reading, and they also carried out several written tasks (such as stories, poems, ect.) where they used their language knowledge and imagination to discuss the different social issues that were portrayed in the book, such as the image people held of girls and women in the 19th century and the difficulties of being a girl as well as an orphan.

As the PBL implies, I was in charge of selecting the problem to be researched. I could perceive that the role of women and women discrimination were key components in the text, so I asked students to explore them in depth through group work by researching about the concept of discrimination and by identifying how women have being discriminated in different parts of the world. However, I could not anticipate the direction the project was taking, due to the fact that I invited students to come up with ideas and suggestions to carry out the project, which meant that students were actively involved in the decisions that were needed throughout the research process. In this process they needed to decide upon the means (or sign systems) they could use to share the information they were to find and the tasks that seemed more interesting to carry out. It was at that moment, when I negotiated with the students the tasks they were going to develop in groups. At this stage of the process I started to deviate from PBL, and began to consider Inquiry without knowing much about it.



The first task was brought up to the class by some students; one of them said that it would be interesting to take a look at the role and position of women around the world, while another added that the research project would have more value if the class were to go beyond the classroom walls and reach out the community; and that is how the students decided to have as a final product (a museum) that would give them the possibility to raise money and help out a community of unprotected girls. The idea was to design a museum which would be an artistic space at school where they could share with their partners and teachers what they had learned; they also decided to establish a fee so that they could raise some money to buy presents for a group of girls who live in a non-profitable institution.

Students then got together in small groups and started to research the social and economical situations of women in different parts of the world, using primary sources in both the first and second language. By looking closely at laws, decrees, statistics, real cases, important women's biographies, women's organization web pages, articles and experts' opinions, they started to obtain some insights about this issue. They developed written (a brochure and a research paper) and oral reports that were shared with their classmates and teacher in order to get feedback and improve not only their language usage, but also the quality of the analysis they were doing on the issue that we were studying. Accordingly, drafting and revising not only language but the conceptualization of ideas became key components of the research process that lasted for a period of 8 months.

As a final step in the process, the students developed a Power Point presentation to share what they had learned from their inquiry process and also presented the final draft of the brochure which they were going to hand in for their final presentation. With these two tasks being

completed, the students started the creation of the museum through which they intended to share their knowledge with the school community. In this museum, the students presented to the community in a very creative way the things they had learned from the research project; they wore costumes, handed their brochures to the public, and designed handicrafts to represent the different ethnic and cultural backgrounds of women from the different continents.

They also decided to inform their classmates, teachers and school chairs about gender discrimination around the world by performing short sketches, in which they showed both the good and the unfair things women are still exposed to. In that way, they shared their knowledge on this social issue with the community and showed people they were able to do so by using the target language.

Evaluation

The culmination of the project started with a videotaped evaluation session that was held with the students in order to answer the following questions: What did you learn from your research project? And What did you get from this class? Some of their responses are presented below.

"The most important thing that I learned is that we do not need to wait until the government creates laws or that the people or organizations defend our rights or take care of us. We need to stand up for ourselves"

"I learned that we have rights and that we have to defend them and we can't be humiliated because we are important and we have emotions and feelings".

"I think about this research and I know it is not only as you said to pass the subject, but it helps us for our life, for our future".

In these responses one can notice how the research project gave students insights about



issues that are part of their reality (as it is women discrimination) and which can prepare them not only for the development of second language related tasks but for life. This was so, for the inquiry project required them to establish connections and find causes of this social phenomenon, as well as to think critically upon what it implies in their society and those of other women around the world.

Findings

After the evaluation session, I started to analyze the responses they had given to the two questions I had asked them as well as the ideas they had expressed in previous written and oral activities, all this with the aim of identifying their voices, perceptions and beliefs about women's discrimination and about the research project. By doing so, I discovered interesting things such as the type of relationships students established from what they had read and shared collaboratively, their own reality as girls and members of a society, and their opinions about the many good and difficult situations women face nowadays, as it could be seen in the following excerpts:

".....Now we can do everything we have in mind, we have a lot of opportunities; we don't need now to be hidden by the shadow of a man". (Paper excerpt)

"We think that being rejected and underestimated by other people is really a frustrating and sad thing..... Maybe you're not living a situation like this, but let us tell you that this tends to be the daily situation of some African women". (Paper excerpt)

"Doing this investigation we discovered that more than a measure is an attitude, an attitude of change.....". (Paper excerpt)

"The skin, age, religion, social status, or politic ideologies of a person don't matter at the moment to mistreat someone". (PPP excerpt)

It is interesting to notice all the various perspectives and ideas the students revealed in the different tasks they carried out. I could identify their beliefs and the knowledge they acquired in regards to the relationship among issues like justice, violence, religion, education, human rights and women's discrimination in different places in the world.

Through their discourse I could also perceive the impact of the information they gathered and the stance they took in relation to the position of women in contemporary societies. Some of them realized they do not share the same reality as some women at risk in poor environments, and therefore showed their rejection towards the injustice and inequality that is lived in different countries. Some others acknowledged that political, societal and educational factors are the basis of this social and cultural problem, understanding that fighting against discrimination goes beyond fighting against men or chauvinism. They also recognized that these factors play an important role in the kind of solutions that can be enacted in order to challenge the actual panorama of many women. And what is more, many of them expressed that the possibility of change remains within themselves, and that due to this fact they need to start by respecting and valuing themselves as capable human beings in order to come up with and achieve possible changes.

In short, through the research process they had the opportunity to go beyond the knowledge they held in regards to discrimination against women and explored this reality not only in their local context but in worldwide contexts. They achieved all this by being exposed to primary sources in the L1 and L2 and by reflecting upon the information they found in order to come up with their own interpretation of what would give support to their opinions and of what would be important to share with the community. Socializing their work was a key element in the



research process since they had the opportunity to compare and contrast the knowledge they had gained with their partners, as well as to share the opinions and beliefs they hold about the different issues that were being presented. By asking questions about their concerns and by giving their opinions and narrating experiences, they had an opportunity to co-construct knowledge. Knowledge that was not only related to the learning of the foreign language, but also to the process of inquiring about real social and cultural issues that affect our world, and that are worth studying and discussing in the classroom.

For me it is fascinating to read and hear their comments and opinions, given that this project was developed and negotiated throughout the eight months it lasted. That means that many things went unplanned, giving students some time to become inspired and be creative. However, I think the students felt a need to receive more guidance from me as a teacher at the moment of manipulating and interpreting the sources they had found, since they were not used to carrying out research in general, and even less in English. I believe that if I had had a greater opportunity to scrutinize the texts more with them in the classroom, the kinds of insights they had gained would have been more critical and thoughtful, since some groups tended to be less reflective than others. Nonetheless, this being the first experience the seventh graders and I had together, I consider we did a good job given that it is not easy to cope with the content to be taught, the language skills to be developed and the research project all at the same time; trying to be equally successful at all of them.

Discussion

Going back and trying to answer the question I posed, How does an inquiry-based approach unfold in the EFL classroom? I would then say that inquiry unfolded in various interesting ways

in my classroom, evidencing three interesting aspects. First, it is interesting to notice that, even though the project was initially aimed at following the PBL framework, it changed, since the beliefs I hold about the importance of listening to students' voices turned the project into an exploration of my abilities and those of my students to ponder social issues in order to find out issues that intrigue and somehow affect us as women. In addition, by being inquirers in our classroom, we acknowledged that both teacher and students share and exchange the role of teachers and learners. Thus, there were many times when I was positioned in the classroom as a learner and my students were the ones teaching and sharing interesting concepts and new information with the rest of us. As a result, the group of seventh graders recognized that I was not expected to be the expert at all times and that due to this fact, they needed to collaborate and take an active position in their own learning process, as well as in that of their peers. Lastly, this inquiry project questioned the language program which was aimed at learning language patterns and functions, instead of using them to learn and inquire about other issues; and it also casted a doubt on the fixed timetables or chronograms that tend to determine when the students are ready to stop learning and wondering about a specific concept.

To conclude, I could argue that this small scale project affected positively the learners, the teachers and the language program, by shedding a light on how language classrooms and different curricular practices and agents appear and interact by being involved in a process of constant questioning of the reality that surrounds them, where English more than a goal to achieved, is a means to discover and relate to knowledge.

Pedagogical Implications

I believe this project has implications at two levels; on the one hand, in the classroom



setting, and on the other for research purposes. As to the former, I can say that both the students and I had the opportunity to experience learning and teaching in a different way, where the most important thing was to wonder about real social issues and to co-construct knowledge. English did not become a barrier but a tool to obtain information, that students would not have had access to otherwise. Owing to this fact, an inquiry-based proposal like this one can prove useful in language classrooms contexts where there is a willingness to learn and use the language to research about real issues that connect to the reality of the students. For me, it was interesting to notice how pre-teenagers were engaged in finding out about a social issue like discrimination, despite the fact that you would think of them as learners that are not predisposed towards social phenomena. However, I discovered the opposite, and it was evident that they can really be drawn in by topics like the one of this project, as long as they feel touched and connected to what is being discussed.

In regards to research, I can say that inquiry is an interesting approach that has not been widely employed in the EFL classroom. Inquiry entails a shift of paradigm as Kathy Short stated (2001); it goes beyond the classroom and asks teachers, coordinators and administrators to reflect upon their beliefs as to what counts as knowledge, what is worth learning, the kind of practices that allow learners to reach that desired knowledge, and what the evidences of this learning should be. Furthermore, it acknowledges that human beings are natural thinkers and inquirers and advocates for this condition to be maintained and practiced at school. Consequently, this approach

to learning could probably be explored in depth with the objective of equipping students with new, enriching and probably long-lasting learning.

References

- Allwright, R. L. (1991). *The death of the method* (Working paper No. 10). Lancaster, England: The University of Lancaster. The exploratory Practice Centre.
- Clavijo, A. (2005). *Literacy defined by life events and life histories* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona, 2005), pp 2-63.
- Comber, B. Ed (2001). *Critical inquiry or safe literacies: Who is allowed to ask which questions?* In S. Boran & B. Comber (Eds), *Critiquing Whole Language and Classroom Inquiry*. (pp 81-102). National Council of Teachers of English: IL.
- Hernández, G. (2004). *Enfoques Pedagógicos y Didácticas Contemporáneas*. Bogotá: FIPC.
- Hutchinson, T. and Waters. A (1993) *English for specific purposes: A learning centered approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006) *TESOL Methods: Changing Tracks, Challenging Trends*. TESOL QUARTERLY, Vol 40 (1) 59-81.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006) *Understanding language teaching: Constituents and categories of methods*. London: LEA Publishers.
- Nunan, D. (1988). *The learner-centred curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Short, K and Burke, C (1991). *Creating Curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Short, K and Burke, C (2001). *Curriculum and inquiry*. In S. Boran & B. Comber (Ed), *Critiquing Whole Language and Classroom Inquiry*. IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Wells, G. (2002). *Learning and teaching for understanding: The key role of collaborative language teaching*. *Social Constructivist Teaching*, Vol 9. Elsevier Science, pp. 1-41.
- Wiggins, G and McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.

