Involving Students in Evaluation of Course Aims through their Perception of Material Filed in Portfolios

ALEIDA ARIZA ARIZA
Universidad Nacional de Colombia
aleariza71@yahoo.es

JOHN JAIRO VIÁFARA
Universidad Nacional de Colombia
jviafara@yahoo.com

Portfolios have emerged as one of the most useful tools to become informed about assessment processes in our courses. The following article describes the experience of two university teachers as they involved their students attending a Basic English I and ELT methodology class in the evaluation of course aims. Collecting data through material portfolio and interviews, the teachers sought to explore students' perceptions of course goals in relation to the ones set for their courses at a public university. This study revealed students' beliefs regarding materials as a means of developing language competence, a view of language and a critical position. Furthermore, students' perceptions accounted for awareness raising processes and the possibility to transform theory into practice.

Key words: Evaluation, Assessment, Portfolio, Materials, Course Goals, Students' Perceptions.

Los portafolios se han convertido en una de las herramientas más útiles para obtener información respecto a procesos de valoración en nuestros cursos. El siguiente artículo describe la experiencia de dos profesores universitarios en un curso de Inglés Básico I y de Metodología de la Enseñanza del inglés. Los estudiantes en dichos cursos participaron en los procesos evaluativos mediante la revisión de los objetivos. A través de los datos recolectados por medio de portafolios de material y entrevistas, los profesores exploraron las percepciones de los estudiantes en relación con los objetivos que se habían establecido para sus cursos en una universidad pública. Este estudio muestra las creencias de los estudiantes respecto al material del curso como un medio para desarrollar la competencia en el idioma, una visión del lenguaje y una actitud crítica. Además, las percepciones dieron cuenta de procesos de auto conciencia y la posibilidad de transformar la teoría en práctica.

Palabras claves: Evaluación, Valoración, Portafolio, Materiales, Objetivos de Cursos, Percepciones de los Estudiantes.

Introduction

Many times we continue our teaching practice without really wondering about students' reflections and perceptions on the decision making process for curricula planning and implementation. Based on our experiences and the work of other professionals on the field of education, we have learnt that asking students about various materials and their objectives constitutes one of the most important sources of feedback for course evaluation. Assessing various aspects of our classes implies, as mentioned by Rodgers (2002), more than "...being satisfied with the appearance of learning (engagement), being satisfied with knowing through a process of inquiry, what students are learning and how they are learning it" (p.326).

Our concern for listening to our students' voices to inform sound decisions in our context inspired our conducting this small scale study with a Basic English I and ELT Methodology courses in the Licenciatura Program at Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Our specific interest was focused on revealing students' perceptions of different kinds of learning materials which were part of the ones collected in their portfolio during the term which were used to meet course aims. Then we formulated two objectives; the first was to identify students' perceptions of materials filed in their portfolios. Concerning the second one, we wanted to explore how materials used met course aims based on students' perceptions.

Literature review

This section will discuss the main constructs which constitute the core of our investigation. Therefore it will deal firstly with material selection, secondly with goal – based evaluation and finally, with portfolios.

Based on our experiences as EFL teachers and teacher educators, materials adaptation, selection and design processes have proved to be a core issue in curriculum implementation. Many times, as in our cases, the programs that we are expected to lead include recommended materials to be used which have already been selected. However, there is usually some flexibility to complement such selection according to different criteria. A core issue, as stated by Tomlinson (1998), has to do with decision making processes when we choose teaching aids. It is necessary to have a clear idea of the reasons for selecting materials. We should probably avoid options which might not be the most suitable for our teaching purposes and could also cause low motivation in our classes along with unreasonable investments in money and time. The route teachers follow to select materials should be guided by two main aspects. First, it would be appropriate that teachers consider some key stages for material selection. On the other hand, that selection must be based on

the aims set for courses. Tomlinson recommends some phases for material writing, selection and adaptation pictured in the following diagram.
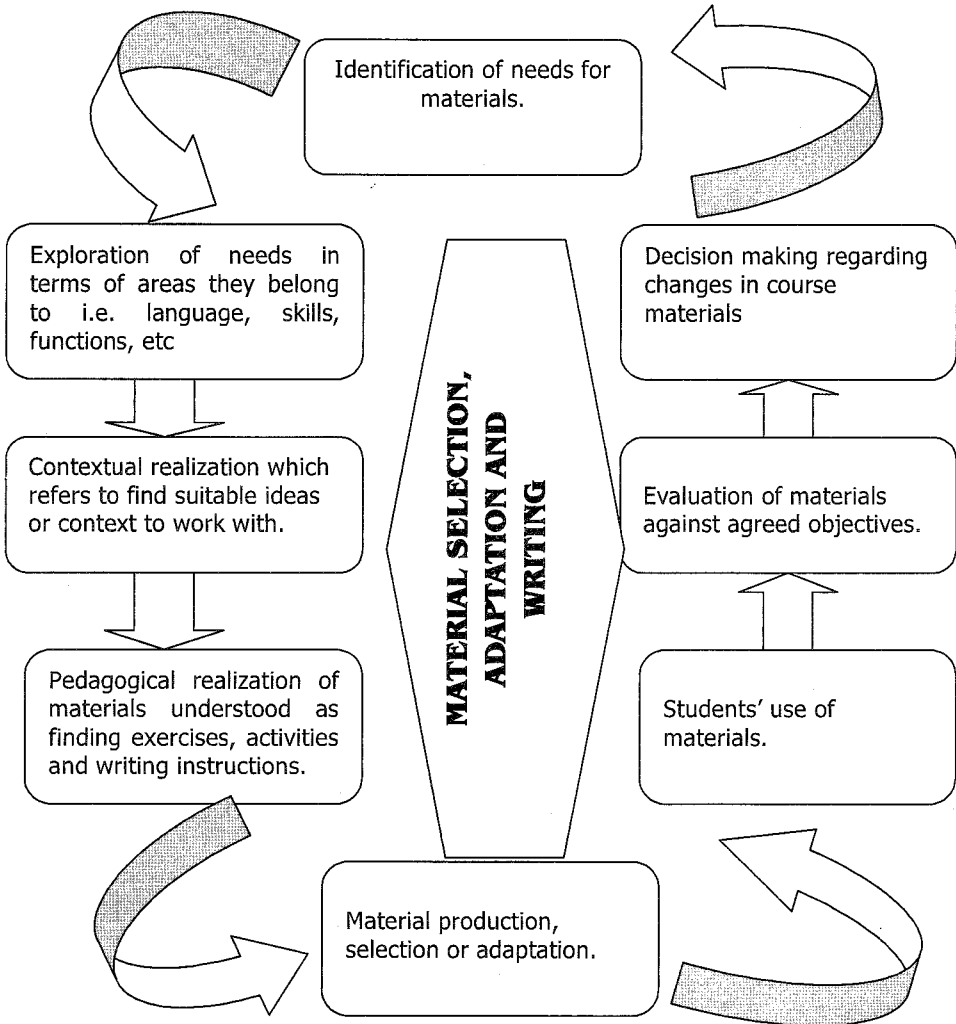

Diagram 1. *Phases for material selection, adaptation and writing. (Tomlinson, 1998).*

Although not explicit in the above schemata, the evaluation phase should lead us to make decisions about going back and revising any of the previous stages maintaining a continuous dynamic cycle. This ongoing process should inform the teacher if materials are coherent in relation to the previously set aims of the course.

Bearing in mind that students should also take part in the decisions made in courses, including those being discussed here (material selection) it is important to consider that their evaluation of those aids will necessarily relate to the revision of goals set for a course.

Moving into the second topic, let us address goal-based evaluation. As has been experienced by the education community, the traditional perception of objectives, conceived as an evaluation criterion for student progress, is being reshaped. The framework of this project was built on the conception that goals should stand as way marks along the routes of courses. Students as well as teachers are called to participate actively in the constant cycle of stating goals, monitoring their implementation, and revising their relevance. Bailey, K. et al (2001) carried out a project which illustrates how convenient goal-based evaluation can be. Through their research they explored how students perceived what teachers intended, which was also part of our main concern in this study. Bailey, K. et al. proposed a ten step procedure starting with articulation of goals followed by socializing those aims with students so that their voices were included in a second goals proposal. In the third step students received the goals of the course and were asked to think of activities teachers used to address those goals. Students developed the task and compared their ideas about the relationship between the process of instruction and the course goals. The author suggests a follow up activity develop as a plenary session. An optional step may include providing students with a list of the activities that were used as reinforcement. The last stage to be considered focuses on the collection and further analysis of students' written comments on the goals –based evaluation form.

The authors regard this proposal as a powerful tool to be used by teachers to adapt activities and to acknowledge goals that may be missing or that are not clearly articulated to the course's aims. The previously described proposal can be regarded as part of what alternative assessment implies. Alternative methods of assessment are usually based on students' performance and their reflection on their learning process. These techniques might be implemented through diverse tools such us observation, conferences, students' journals, narrative records, checklists and portfolios. Portfolios as defined by Oonchitti (1993) are collections of samples of students' work throughout a specific period of time. There are key elements which nourish and become the nature of portfolios such as samples of students' work systematically collected, student self-assessment and clearly stated criteria for the evaluation of multiple aspects concerning curriculum.

There are different types of portfolios depending on what they are used for or the focus they have. O'Malley, J. M. and Valdez, L. (1996) identified three different

types of portfolios. Showcase portfolios are used for displaying students' best work and illustrate students' achievements in the classroom; collection portfolios which contain all students' work and show the way students deal with daily class assignments. Finally, assessment portfolios focus on reflections of specific learning goals that contain collections of students work, along with students' self-assessment and teacher assessment. In our project, portfolios contained not only a collection of most materials students used and produced during the term, but also students' assessment on the materials and their aims along with their perceptions on how those materials helped them to learn.

Portfolio implementation as an alternative assessment tool proves to have multiple advantages. Student portfolios are really valuable as they become records of students' progress over a specific period. At the same time, they provide students with input on both, the material kept and how the content will be evaluated. Additionally, the use of this assessment tool encourages students to analyze their progress and to set goals to improve in their learning process. Finally, portfolios might be a means to revise classroom performance with oneself and others (Ibid p.14).

Regarding research in this area, first year pre-service students attending a two year program in teacher education were the participants in a case study conducted by Klenowski, V. (2000) related to the use of portfolios for assessment and learning. The study which took place in Hong Kong Institute of Education shows the importance of providing pre-service teachers with opportunities to reflect about and finally make sense of formative and summative nature of evaluation, integrate curricular and pedagogical conceptions with particular choices in assessment and explore more recent evaluation possibilities in their future jobs.

This study validates previous research in which portfolios are means to promote the development of such skills as self-evaluation, organization, research, independence and metacognition. Then, Portfolios stand as a valuable instrument for the purpose of our study since when evaluating materials and curricular aims related to them, students' reflective and constructive attitude is needed.

Methodology

The participants involved in this project were students who belong to the undergraduate English Licenciatura Program at Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Two groups were considered for the study. Data from eight of them, four in each course, was collected. One of the courses was composed by twenty students registered in English Basic I course. This is the first of six levels students have to take in the English program. The main aim of the course is to provide students

with opportunities to have contact with the target language while developing their communicative competence. Generally the methodology suggested for these courses is a communicative one.

The second group taken into account for this project was composed by twenty seven students in an ELT methodology class. These future teachers are in their seventh semester in the program. At this point of their studies they are mainly involved in reading, analyzing, experiencing and reflecting about pedagogical principles which later might help them in their teaching practice.

As this project was carried out at Universidad Nacional de Colombia which is itself a very flexible context in which general guidelines are provided for the different courses. However teachers are expected to select, adapt and design various materials to support the program development. In the English Basic I course Liz & John Soars (2000) are the authors of the textbook that provided central guidance. Concerning the ELT methodology course, materials from different authors in the field have been incorporated, among them Harmer J, (1983); Nunan D. (1989); Nolasco, R. (1988) and Ur, Penny (1988).

The type of methodology used for this project is that of a case study since it provided us with the opportunity to observe and analyze a specific instance or situation in depth for a period of time. Case studies explore the processes and dynamics of the teaching-learning environment offering insight into our educational practices. Merriam (1988) conceives a case study as a research design used to systematically study a phenomenon approaching a problem from a holistic perspective. A case study both explores the meaning of a given phenomenon, and explains the reason for the situation to be studied. It takes into account the background of a situation, what actually happens and the possible reasons underlying it. It also implies the evaluation of multiple alternatives increasing its potentiality to be applied in a different context.

Due to the nature of the project, two kinds of instruments to collect data were used. First of all, students were asked to keep, in their portfolios, learning aids such as photocopies of activities, exercises and handouts of study items, quizzes, assignments and other type of relevant material used through the whole semester. The teachers invited students to select three samples of material which caught their attention most during the term. Additionally, students expressed their perceptions about materials and their aims providing answers to the following questions:

- Which objectives does the use of this material have?
- What does this material help you learn?

• How did you like the materials and activities implemented?

Comments were registered in handouts within the portfolios. After that, portfolios were collected and written feedback provided.

The second instrument was oral interviews with the students whose portfolios had previously been collected. Due to the nature of our research, these interviews can be defined as semi-structured. As researchers we determined the general questions which guided the information to be explored. However, space was provided for issues, related to our interests, which arose from the interviewees' responses.

The interviews were carried out as follows: we asked the interviewees for their consent to participate. Meetings took place and the purpose and procedure for the interview were explained. Participants were allowed to use Spanish and they agreed to have the interview audio recorded. They were also informed about confidentiality and privacy issues.

Data analysis and findings

In order to give answer to the question, we grouped data according to our participants' responses in relation to the previously posed objectives. Therefore, in the following lines we start by explaining students' perception of materials selected from their portfolios regarding two issues: participants' perceptions of materials used and students' reflections upon how course aims were met through materials.

1. Students' perceptions of materials filed in their portfolios

Through students' answers we could establish that the most outstanding material characteristics were how enjoyable, sharp, effective, practical and challenging they were. Going beyond these basic features, we found nuclear patterns highlighted by participants when asked for reasons behind their material selection process. Such patterns share commonalties as they refer to students' beliefs as follows:

1.1 Importance of material in connection to the development of language competence
Students in both courses expressed that their reasons behind the material selection was the way they fostered their competence in the language as evident in the following excerpts.

> *"I chose this activity because I think that listening and speaking are very important skills that should be worked."* (A. from English Basic I).
> *"I could realize the different techniques to teach grammar which I consider is the most difficult skill to teach"* (E. from ELT Methodology).

1.2 Materials' role in the construction of a new view of communication

Students regarded this as a process characterized by, on the one hand, meaning negotiation. Participant B. said in an interview:

> "Este tipo de actividades siempre son buenas debido a que tienes que estar atento para entender y debes esforzarte con tu pronunciación para que tu compañero comprenda."

On the other hand, that innovating perception of communication relates to the integration of the four skills as mention by D:

> "...*las actividades más provechosas son las que usan como ++ se, se reúnen todas en un mismo ejercicio y se hacen a corto tiempo, sí? O sea, se pueden practicar absolutamente todos los + las cosas del Inglés y es en corto tiempo.*"

1.3 Materials leading students to make a stand in relation to the ideas their authors express

Students' answers revealed that they are not passive thinkers when facing the ideas expressed on exercises provided. F. says:

> *"I really liked the reflection the author proposes about the use of reading questions (that they are intended to grade, not to teach or improve) because I have always thought the same."*

2. Students' reflections on how course aims were met through materials

As we analyzed the relation of students' perceptions about materials goals compared with the initial objectives set for the courses, we drew key patterns which belonged to different levels of objectives in our courses. At the same time, we established if students' perceptions of aims through materials were met completely, partially or went beyond course goals. The following chart intends to show the patterns regarding specific types of objectives and some of the evidence to support the patterns.

PATTERNS FOUND REGARDING DIFFERENT TYPES OF OBJECTIVES	EVIDENCE
BECOMING AWARE OF THEIR FUTURE ROLES AS TEACHERS	*"I realize that we as future teachers are encourage to think in ourselves not only as students but as teachers"* (G, ELT methodology student) *"Nosotros esperamos al final de la carrera ser profesores. El profesor debe tener esa habilidad de comunicar a las personas..."* (C. Basic English I student)
FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS	*"I chose this because this activity helps me to develop creativity, at the same time it helps me to develop cognitive strategies"* (H. ELT methodology course) *"Improve also speaking spelling, pronunciation, **logical thinking and comprehension** which correct writing and listening"* (C. Basic English I student)
MOVING FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE	*"I liked very much the eliciting technique and since I learned it I have tried to apply it in every presentation I've had"* (E. ELT methodology course) *"Por ejemplo, estas actividades yo las volví a hacer pero con mi hermano ----- mi hermano está aprendiendo Inglés conmigo. Son actividades +++ a él le gustan y él siempre llega y ¿Qué le hicieron hoy en Inglés? ¿Qué me va a enseñar hoy?"* (D. Basic English I student)
STREGNTHENING SPECIFIC COMPETENCES IN STUDENTS REGARDING THE COURSE NATURE	• Regarding Teaching Skills: *"To take into account the different ways to organize the classroom in order to create a better atmosphere inside it"*(F. ELT Methodology course) • Regarding Language Skills: *"Este juego de rol quiere trabajar en los conceptos de presentación (edad, trabajo, dirección. Además permitirá un poco de **fluencia de nuestra parte**"* (B. Basic English I student)

Chart 1. *Patterns regarding specific types of objectives and evidences.*

Turning to the way students' perceptions of materials goals met course aims we found that this relationship was present completely, partially or went beyond course goals.

To start with, a student from English Basic I course wrote as an objective for one of the activities in the course: *"practice and identify stress of countries"*. Bearing in mind that the course aim in relation with that specific activity was *"to practice stress patterns"* it can be deduced that in this case aims perceived by students totally matched teacher's aims set for materials.

Referring to aims perceived by students that partially match teacher's goals set for materials, G, a student in the ELT Methodology course, mentioned *"This extract intends to make students aware of the importance of context in the design of an activity to teach a new structure";* while on other hand the course aims for that specific activity was "to look at ways of presenting both meaning and form of new language". We can notice how the student only realized one important element to which teachers introducing new language should pay attention to "context", leaving aside, for example the sequence, pace and variety among relevant elements in a successful language presentation for students.

Finally, in the course of English Basic I, there was some material which main goals were: "a) to be exposed to a description of someone's routine, b) to discuss about cultural differences and c) to practice the four communicative skills." Looking at student's perception regarding the same material, D. expressed: *"Improve also speaking, spelling, pronunciation, logic thinking and comprehension with correct writing and listening"*. When comparing students' perceptions about the goals of the material and course aims it can be seen that those perceptions go beyond course aims in the sense that he highlights the aspect of logical thinking which was not considered.

Conclusions

In this section we will make explicit the relation between the two pillars we stated as our north at the beginning of the study, and what we found along the data analysis process.

To begin with let us recall the first objective which was to identify students' perceptions of the materials filed in their portfolios. Regarding this aspect, students agreed on basic views of the materials used in the course. They made emphasis on particular qualities of the aids contained in their portfolios, among them, the possibility to have fun while being challenged. In the same regards, they valued materials which through their clarity allowed them to develop their processes efficiently.

In relation to the reasons behind students' selection of aids it is worth mentioning that this included their beliefs about language regarding its development, essence as a means of communication and integration of its nuclear skills. Additionally, students felt attracted to those materials which presented ideas they could establish a position about. The reasons exposed above were shared by participants independently from the course they were attending. Then, materials were nuclear in their approach to language as a tenant of their major.

Turning to the second pillar of the project which was to explore how materials used met course aims based on students' perceptions, we can conclude that in the portfolios analyzed students' perceptions on materials goals matched course and teachers' aims showing the following tendencies. Some students' views of course goals were very similar to those posed by the teachers while other pupils prioritized a particular aspect of a broader aim from the material selected. The aspects students underlined in those goals evidenced their personal concerns, needs and interest. In a few cases, students' perceptions on materials aims went beyond teachers' expectations which evidenced students' awareness of other skills and processes implied in their learning. Finally it was interesting to find no evidence of students whose perceptions of aids goals might not have reflected course aims.

Students' own perceptions of materials objectives in relation to course aims also indicated that they found those materials useful to foster awareness raising, critical thinking, language and teaching skills. Furthermore, moving from theory into practice was also favored. These evidenced that aids were valued not only for the construction of language knowledge but also for students' engagement in reflection processes which might account for an integral professional development.

Students in the Basic course perceived materials selected as a means to participate in their class; they revised and practiced what they were studying through the application of these aids in their learning process which constitutes part of the general course aims. In the ELT Methodology class, materials' potential use in students' future professional life was an aspect that most participants mentioned, though in a particular case this issue was also mentioned by a student belonging to the Basic course.

Taking into account that portfolios were used as the assessment tool in our project; it is relevant to say that these aids proved to be useful means for students to express their beliefs about language, language learning and language teaching methodology. Furthermore, this small scale research validates the study by Oonchitti (1993) and Klenowski (2000) stating that portfolios promote students development of certain skills as organization and independence.

Finally, when we collected students' portfolios we noticed that they were of different nature. The portfolio students prepared revealed features of *Show case portfolios* since they commented about course aims, *Assessment portfolios* because they reflected on assessment objectives and *Collection portfolios* in which all materials used along the courses were kept.

Pedagogical implications

Findings in this small research project should lead teachers to make decisions upon key issues regarding the planning and implementation of their courses. In the following lines we intend to share the experience we had with this project through some suggestions in relation to the core issues of this study.

Since students' comments reflected their individual needs, interests and concerns, decisions to be made should imply informing and negotiating the selection of materials with participants as they are the ones affected by those choices. They might benefit, grow and become motivated with the use of aids brought to the classroom.

The lay out of materials should be designed having as a relevant objective the encouragement of students to get acquainted with course' aims, the writing of unexpected objectives and the evaluation of goals achieved. Thus, teachers need to be systematic in the socialization of material goals selected for the course since it is a way to raise students' awareness about what they are expected to achieve through the process. Additionally it favors the way students approach the task planned for that material. The lack of this procedure might originate misunderstandings which could not be in all cases positive.

Teachers need to revise the stages of material selection, adaptation and creation as students' interaction with them might play an important role in pupils' construction of their own mental framework. This becomes a key issue in the education of more tolerant and open –minded future teachers as well as in the development of individuals who exploit their creativity and skills related to the nature of their studies.

Students should be also involved in the evaluation of course aims as it can illuminate teachers and other individuals of the school setting in the planning of meaningful and appropriate teaching and learning experiences. Programs, teachers, students, materials and goals are and should be in a constant dynamics of change.

Portfolios should be seen as an essential tool which may provide future teachers with materials to be evaluated, adopted or adapted in their professional practices.

References

Bailey, K., Freeman, D. & Curtis, A. (2001). Goals based evaluation: How students perceive what teachers intend. *TESOL Journal, 10 (4)*, 5 –9.

Harmer, J. (1983). The practice of English language teaching. Sussex: Longman.

Klenowski, V. (2000). Portfolios: Promoting teaching. *Assessment in Education, 7 2*, 216 -236.

Merriam, S. (1988*). Case study research in education. A qualitative approach.* San Francisco: Jossey-Boss Publishers.

Nolasco, R. (1988). *Large classes.* Oxford: Macmillan.

Nunan, D. (1989). *Syllabus design.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Malley, J. & Valdez, L. (1996). *Authentic assessment for English language learners.* London: Longman.

Oonchitti, J. (1993). Alternative assessment. *Portfolios for learning and assessment, 14,* 8 -14.

Rodgers, C. (2002). Seeing students learning: Teacher change and the role of reflection. *Harvard Educational Review, 71 (2),* 230 –253.

Soars, J. & Soars, L. (2000). *New Headway.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tomlinson, B. (1998). *Materials development in language teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ur, P. (1988). *Grammar practice activities.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The authors

Aleida Ariza Ariza holds an MA in Applied Linguistics to TEFL from Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, and a B.Ed. in Philology and Languages, English – Spanish from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. She has worked with students from kindergarten to university levels. She was a research assistant for the RED project and worked for one year as a Spanish Assistant in The Weald of Kent in Tonbridge, England. She is currently a professor in the Foreign Languages Department at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia and a tutor for the PROFILE In-service Program.

John Jairo Viáfara, MA in Applied Linguistics to TEFL from Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, and B.Ed in Philology and Languages, English – Spanish from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. He teaches in the Foreign Languages Department at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia and ESP courses at Universidad Externado de Colombia. He is also a tutor of the PROFILE In-service Program".