

Teaching English in primary: Are we ready for it?

Rosalba Cárdenas Ramos

Universidad del Valle

The present situation:

The teaching of English in primary in our country is recent by decree, at least in the official sector. It generates, as all changes and innovations do, interesting discussions, challenges and important decisions to be made. The discussion we would like to consider now focuses on two aspects: Who is or who should be in charge of teaching English in primary in our context? and what can be done to prepare teachers for primary English language teaching?

In Colombia, as well as in many other countries that have had a similar situation, the answers are not so evident, due to the fact that in face of an innovation, most teachers do not fit what would be the appropriate profile for doing the job.

Who is teaching English in primary?

A survey I carried out in 1995, in 25 schools in Cali, including official, private and bilingual institutions, showed the following results: (Cárdenas, 1995)

- Teachers with a BA in Languages (*licenciados*) 11
- Elementary school teachers with some knowledge of English 5
- Teachers with a BA in Primary Education with some knowledge of English 4
- Native speakers of English, without teaching preparation 3

- Native speakers of English, with EFL teaching preparation 3
- Foreign Language Students 1
- Teachers with a BA in pre-school and some knowledge of English 1

One year after the New Education Act (Ley 115) had been issued, most teachers in charge of English teaching in primary were *Licenciados*; however, most schools participating in the survey were private schools because the official ones were going to start teaching English in September, 1995 or in January 1996. A wider survey carried out by the group of *Pasaporte al Segundo Idioma, Nueva Generación-Investigación Inglés*, sponsored by the Secretaría de Educación Municipal of Santiago de Cali in 1996, found that there were 642 English teachers in public elementary schools and 2.006 in private ones, of which 173 (27%) in the public sector and 622 (31%) in the private one were *Licenciados*.

Again, we found that regarding teachers' English language preparation, the private sector outnumbers the official one. It was disturbing to realize that the panorama for the public sector to implement the educational innovation was not very clear, for elementary school teachers had no foreign language preparation to face the task and sending *licenciados*, who usually work at the secondary level, to work in primary schools was not easy either.

The situation was similar in Popayán in December of the same year (Zuluaga, 1997). A survey carried out by five language students and a professor at Universidad del Cauca found that 48 public institutions were teaching English in primary; out of 126 teachers, 52% were homeroom teachers, 26% were language graduates and the rest had degrees in other areas. This is just a little example of what was happening in part of the country; nevertheless, this situation was probably very similar in the rest of it.

A recent survey (August 1999) carried out in Cali in 20 educational institutions, including 8 public and 12 private ones (2 bilingual and 10 monolingual), to look at the state of English language teaching in elementary schools showed that the pattern is still the same: homeroom teachers are mostly in charge of the teaching of English in public schools and language *licenciados* in private ones.

A closer look at these data shows the following :

Type of teacher	Licenciados	Homeroom teachers	Foreign language students	Native speakers with some preparation.
Public (8)	2	5	1	1
Private (10)	8	2	1	1
Bilingual(2)	2			

At this point, let us consider the characteristics of homeroom teachers and *licenciados*, the two main groups carrying out the task, in an effort to understand how schools were facing the implementation of the new Education Act (Law 115):

Licenciados in Modern Languages possess the language preparation that is required for the task; they also have a theoretical

and practical preparation in the field of English Language Teaching methodology. Nevertheless, they do not possess the knowledge about pedagogical principles and procedures to work with children, neither do they possess the bases in the field of psychology (cognitive or developmental) nor do they have experience in close contact with groups of children.

On the other hand, the primary school teachers possess knowledge about children, about the capabilities and limitations inherent to their stages of development. They also have the experience of working with them on a daily basis, which provides them with a good knowledge of their general learning. Besides, they know about the pedagogical principles and practices which are more appropriate to work with children and about the materials that are more suitable for the task. Their weaknesses are represented in a low or non-existent knowledge of the English language, of the methodologies to teach it and of the cultural aspects associated with it.

We have, then, two groups of teachers with different and complementary knowledge, skills and experiences. It would be ideal, if, in not such a long term, teachers were educated, exhibiting the appropriate profile and possessing all the characteristics that made them suitable for the task of putting into practice what the General Educational Act and our modern society need of them in this respect. COFE document No. 4

(Cárdenas et al, 1994: 49) offers a list of characteristics which would be desirable in an English Teacher for the Primary level:

"In our view, Primary Foreign Language Teachers need:

To develop an understanding of young learners in the different areas of their development.

To have a level of competence in the use of the foreign language that makes them face classroom work and class preparation with confidence.

To be familiar with the processes of foreign language acquisition in children and to be able to relate them to those of the acquisition of their mother tongue.

To be familiar with the principles and practices involved in teaching young learners at the general pedagogical level.

To possess the knowledge of suitable foreign language methodologies for teaching children.

To possess essential teaching skills for planning and preparation, lesson presentation and management, discipline maintenance, students' motivation, assessment and materials selection.

To have a fair knowledge of the curriculum for primary education, to be able to establish links and relate contents of the different areas in the foreign language lesson.

To be able to analyze the social and cultural implications of foreign language teaching in our context, and act accordingly.

To possess a good level of awareness of the foreign language to be able to apply it to their professional practice.

To identify areas and situations for the design and implementation of classroom research projects, in an individual basis or with colleagues".

This set of characteristics could be complemented with a set of very important, general ones presented in a document by Cárdenas and Acero, 1995. It includes elements such as self-esteem, a clear cultural and professional identity, good knowledge of the socio - cultural environment, ability to identify priorities in the community and generate alternatives for solutions from the educational perspective, commitment, capability for self-evaluation and self-criticism and the ability to create or transform educational environments to make them suit the nature and characteristics of those who use them.

We would say that if the institutions in charge of teacher education and development at the secondary and tertiary level would try to direct their efforts to form teachers with this profile, we would ensure that teaching English in primary, in all sectors, serves the educational and social purposes it was conceived for and is not just another fad that fades away.

What has been done since 1995 to form teachers with the appropriate profile?

Some official efforts include :

The creation, by the Ministry of Education, of an interdisciplinary national group which, for three years, met and worked on aspects such as general guidelines for the teaching of foreign languages at the basic and *media* levels (primary and secondary, up to 11th grade) and achievement levels for

students.

The sending of groups of teachers (*licenciados*) to the USA for two months to general training sessions, in order to improve both their level of proficiency of the English language and their understanding of the American culture.

The establishment, in some cities, of massive in-service training programs, mainly for elementary school teachers, focusing on methodological aspects but also dealing with linguistic ones. Material and equipment have also been distributed.

The approval of Teacher Education and Development schemes in universities that have education programs in the field of language teaching.

The introduction of courses or seminars about the teaching of foreign languages to children in the curricula of Modern Language programs, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels in some universities.

The opportunity given to students in teaching practice to work with children.

The design of several diploma programs (*Especializaciones*) for teaching English to children

The acquisition of *English Discoveries*, a package for teaching and learning English through computers; a number of elementary and high school teachers and some teachers at the tertiary level are being trained in its use around the country, both to use it in schools that have computer rooms and equipment and to train more teachers in its use.

In many parts of the country Secretarías de

Educación and universities are joining efforts, planning and implementing programs for the preparation of teachers. Some programs have been very successful; such is the case of Antioquia, for example, where they have organized "La Mesa de Trabajo de EFL", with the main purpose of coordinating actions towards the process of forming and up - dating English teachers, with the participation of five universities, Secretaría de Educación de Antioquia and the "Asociación de Institutores de Antioquia". They have an efficient communication network and meet regularly to plan, coordinate and evaluate actions. Teachers join a program with five levels of English and pedagogical, research and linguistic orientation. Some other massive programs have been rethought because of their orientation, their results or because of financial difficulties and are, at present being carried out in a minor scale. This is the case of Cali, where *Pasaporte al Segundo Idioma, Nueva Generación* was in operation for two years and involved approximately 8.000 teachers and 100.000 students from both, public and private sectors; many of these teachers followed a three - level methodology program. At present, Universidad del Valle carries out a program of initial formation and development for English teachers, with 180 hours of English in three levels, 180 hours of Methodology in two levels, a Culture component and a Research component, but it is not a massive program.

Other cities are aiming at what is called *bilingualism*, probably using this term in its widest or minimalist sense; if we take into account that most of our educational system is monolingual, and that we live in a predominantly monolingual society, with no environmental support for the practice and real use of the English language, we

would consider attainable the level of bilingualism in the minimalist definitions of Haugen (1953), according to which it starts when "...the speaker of one language can produce complete, meaningful utterances in the other language", or Macnamara (1967), in which bilingualism means "possessing one language skill - even receptive - in a second language at a minimal degree of competence". In places like Cartagena, Yumbo, Buenaventura, and others, teachers are being trained to use English Discoveries at the high school level, and elementary teachers are also working in their language improvement. In Cartagena, the program "Cartagena Bilingüe" presently involves 300 primary schools, 55 pre-school institutions and 29 high schools with the aim of covering a population of 42.000 students.

All this seems to amount to a lot, but six years after the General Education Act was passed, the situation at the official sector has not changed much. Several reasons, among which we can mention the lack of planning, the lack of aggressive, first-quality development programs, the lack of a clear, sustained national policy and the making of some not so good decisions, have caused that the efforts and steps previously mentioned have not borne the expected results.

The survey carried out in Cali in August 99 in 20 institutions also explored teacher's involvement in INSET activities. When asked about the opportunities for up-dating and improvement in their schools, we found that in three of the public institutions and two of the private ones there is none; in 7 of the private institutions, 1 of the bilingual schools and in 2 of the official ones these opportunities are sporadic and depend on editorial

houses or on contacts with specialists from universities. In three of the official institutions, one of the private ones and in one bilingual institution teachers attend or have attended development programs regularly.

This makes us think that the preparation of teachers, especially in the public sector, and in some cases the decision about who teaches a foreign language in primary has been more circumstantial (willingness on the part of the teacher to try, necessity of the institution to comply to regulations or "the fad" of attending training, which in some cases fades away; many teachers drop out of training programs) than the product of a carefully planned education and development scheme.

In many institutions and in several regions of the country, the teaching of a foreign language at the elementary level has not started. In many others where it has, decisions about who had to teach were taken rapidly, depending on the characteristics of each institution, its possibilities and the availability of teachers with some knowledge of the foreign language or the willingness to join the training opportunities. The results: many of the teachers who are teaching English in primary, especially in public institutions, are not well qualified and consequently lack confidence to do the job or do it unwillingly. They are learning the language themselves, and their performance as models of English speaking offers an "interlanguage talk", not very grammatical and not very fluent, to the student. According to Pica and Doughty (1985) and Porter (1986) this results in incorrect input and may result in *fossilization* in the students, considering that it is, in most cases, the only input they receive.

International experts in the field of language teaching, both theoreticians and practitioners, have different opinions about who (primary or *licenciados*) should teach at the elementary level. Brumfit (1991: vii, viii) mentions, as basic needs for the language teacher, language competence and language teaching methodology for this level. With regards to the first element, he expresses that "there is little justification for exposing learners to teachers who themselves lack confidence in their ability to teach and use the target language"; as far as the second aspect is concerned, he asserts that "the skills for teaching at this level are very different from those needed elsewhere in the education system."

Gefen (in Stern 1969: 85) says that "the classroom teacher is the most indicated to teach (foreign languages in primary) to his students, given that he possesses a good knowledge of it and the training to teach it". A more radical position is the one adopted by Berthold (1991: 18) who, after considering several options (who should teach) for the teaching of foreign languages in primary schools in Australia, states that the last solution, a long term one, would be to take teachers who do not know the language, but who are motivated to learn, and give them the opportunity to develop proficiency; as he sees it, the worst thing that could possibly be done for language teaching and learning is to rely upon a less than competent teacher who is barely ahead of the students.

He also says that teachers motivated to retrain should be given the opportunity and the time to sufficiently develop their proficiency and language programming skills before they begin teaching the language.

Other experts like Brewster et al (1992),

and even Gefen (in Stern 1969: 85), consider that knowledge of children and knowledge of the methodologies to teach them would incline the balance in favor of the primary school teacher, even if their level of competence is not ideal.

Nunan (1999) comments on the case of countries in Latin America, Asia and Europe, in which English teaching at the elementary level was recently made compulsory by their governments. Although this could be a positive development, he mentions that the introduction of English in these curricula has not usually been accompanied by appropriate fundings and teachers are not well trained to do the job. He also questions some of the motivations behind the introduction of English at younger ages, which is not bad in itself but which is not necessarily positive if conditions are not adequate. Among these conditions Nunan mentions the work of appropriately trained teachers, the support of high-quality materials, adequate resources and curriculum models that are suitable for the context. He insists particularly on teacher preparation.

According to these opinions, the adequate profile for the primary English is yet to be worked on. Despite all these considerations, either extremist or moderate, it is a fact that much work is to be done to help teachers develop the basic abilities and to acquire the necessary knowledge to teach English. The experience of many countries, mostly first-world ones, could teach us that an adequate preparation of teachers is the main element in foreign language teaching, determining success and failure in the teaching of foreign languages at the elementary level.

What could be done to help in the

development of the teachers we need to carry out the teaching of English at the elementary level?

Here are some suggestions for educating, developing and up-dating language teachers, language students and *normalistas*.

Intensify the teaching of English and include English courses in all grades at *Escuelas Normales Superiores*.

Include the teaching of basic descriptive linguistic courses (phonetics, syntax) and elements of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics in the last years of *media* for future teachers.

Include basic cultural elements of the English speaking countries in the English courses for *normalistas* and intensify this component in the *licenciatura* programs.

Include or intensify a component dealing with child psychology (developmental and cognitive) in the programs mentioned above.

Include a component dealing with methodologies to teach foreign languages to children, both at the *Normales* and *licenciatura* programs.

Include a component dealing with general Pedagogy and Pedagogy to teach children at both levels.

Expand the practicum of language students so that they can teach both at the elementary and secondary levels. Although the latest regulations of the ICFES require that programs train for specific levels, the fact is that at the moment of finding jobs graduates would benefit from a wider and varied experience because there would be probably no guarantee of their getting a job

in their specific level of training and degree award.

Work on the establishment of a partnership between elementary schools, normales, high schools and universities; the objectives of this partnership would be to develop an understanding of what happens at these levels, and to acquire the knowledge and familiarity with their practices so that working together can be fruitful, a better integration at the level of programs, progression, use of materials and structuring of curricula can be achieved and the preparation of teachers can be better informed.

Within this scheme, activities such as visits of observation, joint participation in seminars, forums, discussion tables, organization of groups to study, to reflect upon common and different practices, to produce teaching materials and to go into classroom research would be possible.

More opportunities of language and methodology work and of exchange programs for teachers.

Opportunities to participate in In Service Teaching Training (INSET) programs of high quality, conducted by competent practitioners; programs that go beyond recipes and work on the establishment of sound theoretical and practical bases to make teachers proficient, competent and self-confident in what they do.

This reflection and the facts here considered should help those of us involved in the initial formation and further development of English teachers for the primary sector to come to the realization that more and more sustained efforts are needed to prepare the teachers our educational system needs to fulfill the

requirements of the Education Act of 1994 and to take part of the advances and the benefits of the "global village".

Institutions forming teachers and language teachers at all levels should communicate and share, for what is done at one level necessarily influences what happens at the others. Most importantly, teachers themselves need to feel the urge to prepare well with the purpose of guiding their students in their learning, with confidence and satisfaction; they will experience, along the way, the pleasure of learning and discovering new things, of understanding a new culture and of contributing to a better understanding among peoples.

Topics for further discussion:

In groups of five, express your opinions and discuss about the following:

♣ The style of language teaching at the secondary level, where teachers go from one classroom to the other teaching many classes, is not the most adequate for the primary level, where pupils need to develop closer and more permanent links with their teachers.

♣ Except for bilingual contexts, it is not adequate that a native speaker of the target language, with little time of permanence in our country and not familiar with the environment of our primary classrooms and the local idiosyncrasy teaches English at the elementary level.

♣ The primary teacher, who has just started learning a foreign language himself would probably teach many mistakes inadvertently; this could lead to lack of motivation and conflict with children.

♣ It would be ideal to select two or three teachers in each school (the ones who are

really motivated and have some aptitude for the learning of languages) to receive the training and development necessary for teaching children in their own classroom and in one or two more groups.

♣ There is a danger in that language teachers, who are used to teaching adolescents and adults consider that teaching children would be just a simplification or reduction of the work they carry out with grown-ups, as if children were adults in miniature.

References

ALCALDÍA MAYOR DE CARTAGENA DE INDIAS D.T. Y C. and SECRETARÍA DE EDUCACIÓN DISTRITAL (1998) *Cartagena Bilingüe, The challenge of the Future.*

ALDANA, L. et al (1996) *Pasaporte al Segundo Idioma, Nueva Generación. Investigación Inglés.* Alcaldía de Santiago de Cali.

BERTHOLD, M. "Expansion of languages in primary schools". In *BABEL*, Journal of the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations. Vol. 26 (2) 1992.

BREWSTER, J. (1992). "Current trends and issues in teaching English to Children". In *TEFL in the Primary School. TRIANGLE 11.* London: Goethe Institute- The British Council. ENS-CREDIF.

BRUMFIT, C. et al (eds). (1991) *Teaching English to Children.* London: Nelson

CÁRDENAS, M. and ACERO, E. (1995). "Perfeccionamiento profesional del docente de lenguas extranjeras en el ciclo de educación

primaria" Unpublished Paper presented at the Segundo Encuentro Interinstitucional para la Planeación de la Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras en el Ciclo de Educación Básica y Media. Santafé de Bogotá.

CARDENAS, R. GARCIA, M. and RESTREPO, M. (1994). *Young Learners*. COFE document No 4. London: Thames Valley University.

CARDENAS, R. (1995) "*La Formación y Perfeccionamiento de docentes de lenguas extranjeras para el ciclo de básica Primaria*". Unpublished paper presented at the Segundo Encuentro Interinstitucional para la Planeación de la Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras en el Ciclo de Educación Básica y Media. Santafé de Bogotá.

GEFEN, R. "*Initial and in-service training for second language teaching in the primary school*". In H.H. STERN (de.) (1969). *Languages and the Young School Child* London: Oxford University Press.

HAUGEN, E. (1953). *Bilingualism*. New York: Longman.

Ley General de Educación Colombiana. (Ley 115 de 1994). Santafe de Bogota.

LOPEZ, G. and M. RODRIGUEZ. "*Enseñanza-aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras en la educación infantil: algunas claves para la formación del profesorado*." In MOYANO, A. et al (coordinators). (1996): *Enseñar y aprender una lengua extranjera en el segundo ciclo de la educación infantil*. Madrid: Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia.

MACNAMARA (1967). *Bilingual Education*. New York: McMillan Publishers.

NUNAN, D. "*Does Younger = Better?*" in *TESOL Matters*, Vol. 9 No. 3. (June/ July 1999).

PICA, T and M. DOUGHTY. "*The linguistic and conversational performance of experienced and inexperienced teachers*". in DAY, R. (de.) (1986). *Talking to Learn: conversation in Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

ZULUAGA et al. (1997). "*Primary ELT in Popayán: A research project briefing*". Popayán: Universidad del Cauca.