

Chapter 8

Challenges and Opportunities for Material Developers in Rural Settings

Throughout the development of this research study, we realized that there are some challenges that we perceived as opportunities for teachers as material developers and teacher education programs. These challenges relate mainly to the need of developing more humanized materials for rural institutions. In other words, it is concerned with the fact that classrooms should be more culturally responsive. Thus, educators and tertiary institutions in charge of working with future English teachers should work towards more meaningful teaching.

Tomlinson (2003) stated that materials should be humanized. He further argued that a humanistic teaching material is the one “that respects its users as human beings and helps them to exploit their capacity for learning through meaningful experience”(p.163). Bearing in mind that the teaching and learning process at any institution requires the use of material, much more attention should be paid to the way these materials help to humanize students’ learning experiences. Designing contextualized material has been demonstrated, through this research study that is meaningful and useful not only for students, but also for teachers. Thus, workshops, in this research, were more humanized than the ones developed by publishing houses.

As we, as researchers and material developers, knew about this rural context beforehand, we were able to respond to the geographical and cultural context of the learners through the workshops we developed. Thus, we used topics that were commonplace for the target population. This helped us to “acknowledge students’ cultural heritage validating their home culture” (Ramos & Aguirre, 2014, p.140). Besides that, working with topics that were common place for students allowed them to decrease anxiety and then, start speaking in English.

Since speaking is an anxiety-producing skill, it is not an easy language skill to be effectively attained. Approaching speaking requires many aspects to be taken into account in the classroom. The activities must be suitable and contextualized to foster students to be immersed in an initial stage of expressing what they want to share. Of equal importance, a comfortable environment is crucial to help students feel at ease and have advancement in their oral expression. Likewise, a good rapport between teacher-students influences language learning performance. All these aspects must be considered to develop valuable materials that provide friendly and motivating experiences in the classroom (Harmer, 2012).

Designing material requires extra efforts and strong desire to fulfill students’ expectations and preferences. It is an issue that has to deal with time-consuming tasks that need to be developed at home. Furthermore, it demands commitment and desire to think of appropriate and suitable activities according to students’ features. The activities must cater the differences in learning styles, encourage learners to talk about themselves and their own experiences, be varied, and humanizing.

Creating contextualized material inquired about being creative, enthusiastic, and active; having patience, dedication, some expertise, and the most important aspect, knowing students’ realities. Thus, creating material should be the task of every teacher who has the opportunity to know and address students’ necessities in a more close and contextualized way. In this sense, materials development is one more element within the larger concept of teachers taking responsibility for what happens in their classes. Besides, if we are to be reflective practitioners in the field

of ELT, we need to think about all aspects of our teaching. Preparing our own materials is one of those many aspects. In this respect, Ramos and Aguirre (2014) argued that:

one of the most relevant sources for teachers to develop their materials from is students' opinions. These opinions need to be heard in order to improve the content, the topics, the kind of exercises, the instructions, and so forth, of the in-house materials. (p. 139)

If materials are to be more humanized, students' voices need to be recognized and considered as the most important input to develop materials. In this way, students will be seen as human beings and their interest will guide the teaching and learning process. In this line of thought, instructional materials need to foster a culturally responsive pedagogy. This can also be done by understanding the concept of culture and thinking about possibilities to incorporate students' home culture in the teaching materials.

García-Canclini (1997) suggested that culture is related to those practices, socially constructed, that provide meaning to the world. In this sense, from a culturally responsive perspective, materials need to promote a concept of culture that is dynamic and ever changing.

One way to promote this view of culture relates to the inclusion of aspects that refer to intercultural competence. "The intercultural competence is understood as the knowledge, skills and attitudes at the interface between several cultural areas including the students' own country and a target language country" (Ramos, 2013, p.209). In what has been called the intercultural dimension, the speakers are not only supposed to master communicative competence but are to become mediators in a communicative exchange that acknowledges the differences in language use, accents, etc. as well as in all cultural particularities.

This approach aims at breaking the stereotypes by allowing participants in conversations and exchanges to be themselves; at the same time, to be aware and respectful of the differences of their interlocutors. The

objective is not to make the learner an alien to her or his own culture or to make him resemble a member of the target language culture. The goal is to strengthen the values, belief systems and behaviours of the source culture while relating to the values, belief systems and behaviours of the target language culture.

Another aspect worth analysing is the incorporation of students' home culture in the teaching materials. As Canagarajah (1999) states, pedagogies need to be appropriated to different degrees in terms of the needs and values of the local communities. The inclusion of home culture may happen when materials developers contextualize the materials they design based on students real contexts. When aspects related to students' home culture are taken into account, students may feel more engaged towards learning the foreign language. Likewise, they may feel that the teachers are valuing the knowledge they bring to the classroom environments. This kind of knowledge is built at home with students' parents, community and the context where they interact outside the school context.

The teacher education programs must be prepared to provide student-teachers with the appropriate tools to start developing material for specific academic contexts. In the same way, it is vital that student-teachers get in touch with different students' needs and realities in order to gain experience when addressing educational demands. In this line of thought, Kumaravadivelu (2007) reminds us about the necessity of sensitizing practitioners to diverse students' social and cultural background and needs. Thus, the previous student-teachers' tasks should be one of the main concerns for the teacher education programs.

In the same sense, Ramos and Aguirre (2016) suggested that "Teaching Programs should insert pre-service teachers into the rural context as part of their teaching experiences" (p. 218). In this way, pre-service teachers can be more sensitive towards their students' realities and thus, build dialogical relationships that facilitate English teaching and learning processes. Along the same lines, Quintero (2009) mentioned that education should be seen as a way to build knowledge by considering

a dialogical relationship among the members of a community. Then, teacher candidates need more pointed opportunities to develop their sensibility in real teaching contexts.

In addition, university teacher educators can emphasize specific ways for teacher candidates to begin initiating collaboration with rural schools. In order for such relationships to grow, there should be a common goal among pre-service teachers, school teachers and administrators. By expanding on the possibilities for collegial relationships, teacher candidates “become more knowledgeable about language learning processes, learn ways to more accurately scaffold content information, and address any socio-cultural issue that may arise” (Liggett, 2010, p. 229). In so doing, pre-service teachers move closer to the context of culturally diverse students.

By carrying this research, we understood that issues in teaching EFL in rural areas in Boyacá outnumber the favoring factors in this teaching and learning process. But it could also be perceived as a challenging scenario full of opportunities to incorporate in the curriculum as a set of strategies supported by a pedagogy based on the real students, teachers, and institutions’ needs to better the curriculum.

During the last decade one main objective of the Colombian Ministry of Education policy has been to reach and provide access to population with education in all areas of the nation’s territory. The inclusion of EFL in rural schools’ curriculum is also one main purpose of this policy. These two broad objectives favor the implementation of an appropriate curriculum with a set of EFL teaching and learning materials accurately designed and developed for students and teachers in rural area institutions. In this way, the possibilities to enrich this EFL educational context are in a first step growing process which could initiate the practice of forming, reforming and transforming all elements in the curriculum. This is just the precise time to rethink the erroneous idea that one size curriculum, textbook, material for EFL could fit and satisfy the entire rural school population’s needs in Colombia. Then, the development of EFL material

for rural schools should grow from research based studies taking into account the needs of this target population.

The fact that a significant amount of the population attends rural schools in Boyacá is a factor that cannot be left aside. On the contrary, close attention needs to be paid to this situation. On one side, it is because more resources need to be allocated to the institutions in rural areas. The idea of having more educated people in rural context does not simply happen by hiring teachers and placing them in schools and/or by buying inadequate textbooks and materials. Accurate material for the teaching and learning process has to be placed in those schools, too. In the case of EFL, these resources need to be enough for the students in the schools and this material is expected to be well designed for this target population. We need EFL material which promotes students' motivation and full of contents that not only fits the curriculum but also reach the students expectations in terms of motivation, challenge, and content related to the regular activities they perform on a daily basis, in other words we need a more humanized material.

We also believe that creating appropriate materials for EFL in rural institutions is not enough to tackle the EFL situation in rural schools. There is also a need for EFL teachers to go and teach this population. The material itself does not help much if there are not enough EFL educators in the institutions. School Boards adopt *New School Methodology* for their rural institutions because there is not sufficient number of students in the schools to hire more teachers. The ratio of students in grade level by teacher is low. We also know that those teachers barely know English because they have teaching degrees in diverse areas of education but in EFL teaching. Thus, an adequate training for those in-service teachers who do not know English language it is needed. They would also need training sessions in how to teach English as a foreign language in order to have a much better complement for the EFL material. These efforts need to be united with the purpose of reaching the objective of teaching and learning English in rural context in Boyacá with enough EFL educators in schools and appropriate material for the students and teachers.