



Enabling English Teachers' Expertise and Voices to be Visible Through Publishing

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1. Introduction

Publishing in academic or scientific journals has gained attention among teachers, policy makers and administrators. This has been acknowledged as a means for teachers to share good practices, innovations, concerns, and the results of inquiries. Publishing is also a way to empower classroom practices and improve the quality of education [1], [2], [3]. Nonetheless, there is a disparity in the policies that rule the publication of journals for they are often open to core communities –established research groups, authors from English speaking countries and manuscripts that are thought to add to a given field of existing knowledge. Opportunities for grassroots teachers and authors from diverse contexts are more desired [2], as well as initiatives to foster publication among practitioners who are mostly associated with the practicalities of ELT (English language teaching) [4].

The *PROFILE Issues in Teachers' Professional Development* journal was created in 2000 at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, in Bogotá. The idea was to disseminate the results of action-research projects carried out by schoolteachers of English who participate in a teacher development programme whose curriculum includes language development, pedagogical updating and action research. The increasing interest of the teaching community in our publication as well as the motivation of the University to consolidate scientific publications encouraged us to meet the challenge of following the parameters of international journals as required by Publindex-Colciencias –the national indexing system for Colombian journals. Gradually, the journal opened its doors to a wider number of contributors and gained readership. This, in turn, helped us consolidate the PROFILE's mission and vision, as well as the sections that characterize it nowadays: Issues from teacher researchers, Issues from novice teacher researchers, and Issues based on reflections and innovations. To describe the experiences of the journey, I have resorted to information gathered in previous studies on the nature of research undertaken by in-service teachers [3], [5], the creation and evolution of teacher study groups in a professional development programme with the purpose of developing action-research / innovation projects [6], my narratives as creator and editor of the journal, and a survey answered by 65 authors who have published in it. Some testimonies taken from it can be read afterwards.

2. Strategies used to procure teachers' contributions

Initially, the manuscripts published were authored by teachers from public and private schools and some teacher educators involved in the professional development programmes. The former were the result of small-scale action research reports submitted as part of course completion and were edited with the help of the tutors who were in charge of the language and action research modules. The latter provided not only theoretical frameworks, but teaching issues and reflections for implementation. The starting point evidenced that action research is present in most works contributed by schoolteachers with the purpose of exploring, developing and sustaining change processes both in classrooms and entire organizations such as schools and universities [7].

Nonetheless, and given the fact that writing for publications is neither an easy task nor a common practice, we have explored different strategies to ensure contributors feel committed to submit their manuscripts to the journal. First, we have gathered some criteria to motivate article writing completion: using a style sheet which can be used as a framework, having a stable view so that we write for a specific audience, expressing individual and others' views, supporting ideas with samples, asking for and keeping in mind feedback, and maintaining communication with the editor. Although these strategies derived from our work with schoolteachers aimed at getting published, they are part of the evaluation processes carried out by our reviewers and help us assist pre-service teachers refine their manuscripts before they are sent to evaluation.

Reviewers are also aware of the journal's mission and of the author's profile, and keep the editor informed about ways to foster better quality, evaluation parameters and visibility. This, together with the monitoring of the editing processes, requires an ongoing update of our guidelines for authors and constant assistance to novice authors, particularly school- and pre-service teacher researchers.

Reaching a wider readership and getting contributions has been achieved by sending notes to professional lists and teacher associations. In addition, the reviewers' support and the inclusion of the journal in databases as well as indexing systems have been vital to this end.

3. Difficulties faced

As found in a survey [3], schoolteachers, who have been away from long written tasks, have difficulties coping with the demands of article preparation. They highlighted the following: language proficiency (mainly in grammar and lexis) and its impact on clarity of ideas, lack of writing practice, the problem of synthesising, lack of experience writing articles, short time for the writing task and group writing: lack of peers' critical reactions to



products. Difficulties are overcome by reviewing key aspects and drafts, rewriting, listing important aspects and developing text from prioritized issues, getting editors' and teacher-educators' feedback, and allocating extra time to go over documents. This shows that "for this kind of tasks it is a must to have someone with expertise, so you can handle any situation and have a product with a reasonable quality" (Author 44).

On the other hand, in a survey answered by 65 authors, we inquired about their experiences along the processes of publication (submission, evaluation, adjustments) of the articles. We found these burdens: following the format of an article (31%), fulfilling a demanding task (30%), following reviewers' requirements (26%), team writing (9%) and not getting suggestions from reviewers (4%).

4. Main achievements

We are convinced that "publishing is a way for members of the academic community to share ideas and possibly contribute something to the world's store of knowledge" [8, p. 33]. For authors, having published in PROFILE has meant a personal and professional achievement as well as an opportunity for professional growth and sharing. On the other hand, because of the little professional regard in which grassroots teachers are held in Colombia, which is sometimes also the case in mainstream ELT, too, Colombian primary and secondary schoolteachers traditionally suffer from very low self-esteem. Thus, we have tried to contribute to teachers' self-esteem and empowerment as the journal prioritises the inclusion of teachers' voices as a means to add to the construction of local knowledge and teacher community. The achievements mentioned in this paragraph can be witnessed in the following testimony, from one of the authors who first studied in the in-service programme that originated the journal and then participated as a teacher educator: "We are used to do certain things in our everyday classes and we sometimes think it is not worth sharing them in such a formal way. However something I have been learning through my experience with PROFILE, not only as an author, but as a student-teacher and as a tutor is that new knowledge does not grow up in genius brains but in real-life-people, informed and reflective perspectives" (Myriam).

We have gained a place in the ELT community; hence, the number of submissions has steadily increased. As stated in the survey answered by 65 authors, four reasons explain this: the teachers' commitment to contributing to the profession (45%), the journal's prestige (31%), teachers' interest in achieving a goal (12%), the certainty of getting support from the editorial team in such endeavour (9%) and some practical motives like getting credits in their professional career (3%). This shows that authors feel motivated because of the usefulness of the articles published. They are convinced papers contained in PROFILE are read by teachers since their contents respond to common concerns practitioners inquire about, are backed up with theoretical foundations, and acknowledge the work of authors with different backgrounds. They also feel that publishing makes it possible to be part of a professional community that, besides supporting them in their teaching job, provides learning experiences. In this respect, they admit that despite the arduous work the publication process involves, they have learned from the reviewers (81%), they have mastered how to follow the format of an article (18%), and learned how to guide novice teacher-researchers (1%). On the other hand, for many Colombian universities, the journal helps them increase indicators of visibility for accreditation agencies. Likewise, teachers' tenure and advancement committees assess their staff publications in well-ranked journals.

Besides the consolidation of our mission and vision, we have evolved to meet the international standards for academic journals. This has entailed learning from the parameters used by other journals, following Colciencias' guidelines, getting an editorial team and submitting our publication to evaluation by different institutions and organizations. The results can be seen in the consolidation of our policies, the criteria for publishing, the sections of the journal, the editorial and scientific committees which are made up of knowledgeable and committed reviewers, the monitoring of editorial processes, and our preparation in the publishing area. Besides, we provide open access to our journal and exchange printed copies with other academic groups involved in similar processes. We have gained visibility in different databases and indexing systems, to wit: Publindex-Colciencias, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, Directory of Open Access Journals-DOAJ, MLA International Bibliography, Latindex, Educational Research Abstracts online (ERA), Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts database (LLBA), SciELO, Redalyc, and EBSCO.

5. Conclusions and challenges ahead

PROFILE emerged from the interest of a teacher development programme for local ELT knowledge. It was conceived as a modest in-house publication serving the local grassroots teachers in terms of their need for recognition as professionals who were able to engage in and share small-scale classroom research projects. Thus, an editorial committee consisting of tutors of the programme was formed. As we gained expertise in the editing field, we discovered that it was necessary to incorporate the editorial teams and processes that best suited the standards of educational publications and, at the same time, stick to the policies that could grant recognition at institutional level and in external indexing systems. By opening the publication doors to English language teachers from different backgrounds we attest that "narrative as a vehicle for teacher inquiry generated in the periphery, in particular, broadens the nature of stakeholders and its purposes. Because it is from and for more diverse professional contexts, it is generating new uses by creating alternative systems for making practitioner knowledge public" [9, p. 503].



Nonetheless, we cannot lose sight of the challenges ahead to sustain our initiative and to move forward. Regulations for academic publications portray neo-liberal ideologies that give a higher status to 'pure' research only associated with the elite –university staff or established research groups– and less status to the importance of applied research. "Action research and alike methodologies tend not to be treated as knowledge producing methodologies in themselves [7, p. 2-3]. They are often seen as an instrumental contribution to the betterment of practice and social issues whose processes or products are not considered 'scientific'. Hence, if we want to maintain a space that brings together authors from different backgrounds and research perspectives i.e. to continue providing equal opportunities for contributors, we need to persevere in our attempt to have an impact on the writing and publishing tradition in our ELT community so that more attention is given to research in teacher education programmes.

Although we cannot exercise influence on the incentives for teachers who publish, we play a role in empowering the profession and in positioning different teachers' voices in specialized publications. Lastly, we do not know if professional publications reach teachers and policy makers; therefore, we will have to explore options to position papers that comply with indexing systems' requisites and add to the field knowledge. Also, we need to examine the interplay that can be fostered via the works we include in the different editions. All in all we have to maintain or even raise standards of our publication, maintain the variety of authorship in the sections that characterize the journal and keep on working on increasing credibility.

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