

Professionalisation in English Language Teaching: The development of a discourse community

A lot of changes are currently taking place in all fields of knowledge around the world, and the field of language teaching is not an exception. Under the wings of these changes, we find a term which has a great influence on the teaching-learning process, namely, professionalism. Professionalism is defined in terms of “the process of continual intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth of teachers” (Lange, cited in Richards & Nunan [eds.], 1990: 250). From this point of view, professionalism is a vital characteristic or value that we teachers as facilitators of knowledge must have. And nowhere is this more evident than in the classroom, where teachers through this professionalism can lead learners to a more or less successful learning process (cf. Ibid: 246). Even so, the process of professionalisation is not easy, since for this process to take place, it is necessary to take into account factors like human and material resources or policies – to name a few.

This topic is very interesting, for nowadays we are living in a time where changes happen sooner than fifteen or twenty years ago. Related to our field, we are in front of different theories, models and hypothesis that emerge time and again with regard to the understanding of teaching and learning a second language. This is the result, however, of the globalisation of the policies in the ELT field. Consequently, we must do everything to look for the mechanisms to be inside and not outside professionalisation. This is the reason for which we must be at the forefront of current components concerning our teaching field, rather than stand back of changes.

Going back to the importance and necessity of professionalism, there are two ways to achieve it: Professionality and Discourse Community. Regarding professionalism (see Hoyle, 1975: 318. cited in Wharton, 1995: 24), we should be aware of the fact that we cannot work far from other colleagues or continue using just a small number of materials to carry out our teaching activity. On the contrary, we must be in contact with other teachers with whom we share ideas, proposals or information about our field. We must also be open to use as many resources as we can to teach in a professional way, not just the book and the workbook, for

example. Besides, we teachers must be willing to observe and be observed, and talk about our problems so as to find solutions which enable us to perform our teaching activity professionally. In this respect, Richards & Lockhart (1996: 40) say that “[t]he degree to which individual teachers have a sense of professionalism about their work depends upon their own working conditions, their personal goals and attitudes, and the career prospects available to language teachers in their community.”

With regard to discourse community, Swales (1990: 9, cited in Ibid: 25) points out that “discourse communities are socio-rhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals.” In other words, a discourse community is a group (local or global) of professionals who carry out the same activity, and whose main characteristic is the establishment of methods of intercommunication to share information and receive feedback, as well as to follow specific lexis. This is for the purpose of setting common goals among their members. Here, the understanding of what a discourse community is, as well as its impact on the teaching-learning process, is essential to promote our professional development. We must make an effort to be in contact with our local discourse community (English teachers of our faculty and other sister faculties, and with teachers of other universities in our State and country), and also with global discourse communities (Associations of English teachers around the world). This way, we will be able to improve our teaching activity and put into practice projects belonging to our field.

Without a doubt, professionalisation is a very important characteristic that should be cherished in teachers. However, it is not easy to be part of this professionalisation. At least not as easy as we have thought. Some of the requirements for this praxis to take place are our working conditions, goals and attitudes (cf. Richards & Lockhart 1996: 40). Even so, my questions as a Mexican English teacher are: Are we professional teachers in the sense described in this text? Are we part of this professionalisation? Unfortunately, I do not have the answers for these questions. However, what I do know is that we must be willing to improve our ELT process and learn to work with local and global groups of English teachers to be part of the changes taking place in the teaching-learning field. It is

my belief that we must be humble and willing to narrow down the characteristics that professional teachers have and cultivate them in our everyday practice. And, if we do this, sooner or later this will give rise to a professional development.

References:

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