THE RE/CONSTRUCTION OF ENGLISH TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF A BRAZILIAN TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This study aims to understand how the English teachers deal with the demands raised from the transformation of information and communication technologies (ICT), and from the educational system of a Brazilian public technological university, and how they re/construct their professional identity. A qualitative approach with a case study format was used, and the participants were English teachers from the institution. Documentary research and a semi-structured interview were used to gather the data. The results reveal that the teachers struggle to reach the demands. It is verified that identity re/constructions are being performed by their own actions, choices and decisions.

Keywords: professional identity, foreign language teachers, technological university, digital technologies

Introduction

The end of the last century was responsible for technological advances that promoted deep changes in the political, economical, cultural and social fields. These changes have become even more radical in the 21st century and have contributed to the broadening of educational demands once Communication and Information Technologies (ICT) became part of our everyday life.

While the way of teaching before was centered on the teacher, learning environments today focus on the learners and have to be relevant and connected with their needs. This knowledge society values human skills, relationships and organizational knowledge. It also requires flexibility, creativity, innovation and initiative. Thus, teachers need to be articulated with the principles of developing multiliteracies, which forsee the process of teaching and learning within a context that involves the use of ICT and globalized knowledge. This is the context in which teachers need to construct their professional identity.

Xavier (2008) and Kalantzis and Kope (2010, 2012) affirm that collaborative learning is the most promising direction for education. The teacher's main role is not just to transmit knowledge, but also to encourage learners to seek for knowledge, to develop multiliteracies and critical thinking. The teacher's goals should be to exchange knowledge besides monitoring, managing and conducting the learning processes. In this scenario, teachers often feel that their professional identity is being threatened, because they perceive that they do not dominate digital literacy or dominate it very little.

The National Curricular Parameters (Brasil, 2002) advocate in favor of learning as a process produced by interactions, which is in accordance with sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). The documents also prescribe the use of the computer as an instrument that can be used to research, select, compare, organize, register, review, correct and socialize information, as well as perform most of the everyday social practices. Thus, the focus of learning lies in the interaction between learners and technology, the teacher and the learners, among the learners themselves, and between the learners and the world.

This research was carried out at Centro Federal de Educação Tecnológica de Minas Gerais (CEFET-MG). Earlier, the institution was a technical high school, and the staff had started working there as high school teachers. After the implementation of the undergraduate and graduate courses CEFET-MG became a technological university. This issue has created a great impact on the teachers' careers. In order to deal with the governmental rules that regulate these changes, the institution has undergone a series of transformations. Among them came the necessity of qualifying its academic staff to increase the numbers of master's and PhDs, as required in its Institutional Development Plan (Brasil, 2012).

This study aims to understand how the English teachers from CEFET-MG are dealing with the demands that emerged: (a) from the educational system of a Brazilian public technological university and (b) from the spread of ICT.

A Brief Review of the Concept of Identity

In order to understand how those English teachers are constructing their professional identity, a brief review on the concept of identity anchored in the poststructuralist perspective of cultural studies was undertaken.

Previously, identities were determined by birth and social class, which defined the roles individuals should perform in society. Today identities have lost their stability. They are displaced, contradictory and difficult to understand (Bauman, 2005). The decline of the old identities, which for so long stabilized the social world, fragmented the individuals' references. Identity ceases to be fixed and stable to become unfixed, fragmented, displaced (Hall, 2006).

The so-called identity crisis is seen as part of a larger process of change that is shifting the central structures of contemporary societies. Thus, identities are crossed by differences, divisions and antagonisms. Identities can be articulated depending on the circumstances and the moment. Thus, identities remain open to new articulations and to the creation of new identities. Identity is therefore a process which is always under construction, never completed (Hall, 2006).

Identity is submitted to social and material conditions. Both are part of a symbolic marking needed for the construction and maintenance of identities. They give meanings to social relationships and define who is socially included and who is excluded. In this sense, the existence of at least two groups which are in opposition to each other can be seen: 'we' and 'they'. The construction of

identity happens in opposition to other(s) identity(ies) in a dualism in which one is always more valued than the other, establishing the difference between them (Woodward, 2009).

The professional identity of teachers is embedded in those arguments. It is also connected with their curriculum and with the representations and meanings which are built through constant peer-to-peer negotiations. For Celani and Magalhães (2002) and Celani (2010), representations about knowledge, competence, skills, attitudes and values are always changing according to the historical and social context. Therefore, the continuing formation is becoming increasingly necessary for teachers. This tends to lead them to re-evaluate their pedagogical actions and to offer important theoretical subsidies for their professional updating.

The English Language Teacher in the Current Brazilian Context

Education has been strongly impacted by technological advances. Mobile phones, for example, already allow users to perform various actions besides just making and receiving calls such as: listen to music, watch videos, record, take photos, read books or articles, search and share information, etc. Finally, the access to mobile phones favors instant connection with the world and as a consequence it has changed the learners' profiles (Tavares, 2010).

By surfing on the Internet, learners can either entertain themeselves, have social interaction or seek information. But, the circulation of information requires criterion and care. Snyder (2009) warns that teachers should encourage learners to use the Internet to acquire knowledge and to be engaged in authentic research. This can favor the understanding of the real world, develop autonomy and critical thinking, and stimulate curiosity. Critical thinking will lead learners to evaluate what is best for them and to participate in the construction of knowledge.

The use of technologies is seen as natural and fundamental for pedagogical actions and much more appropriated to the current reality of the learners. However, they tend to master technology much better than their teachers. Coracini (2006) claims that this aspect creates conflict and insecurity once teachers know that knowledge empowers the individuals. Because of this, while many teachers perceive the use of technologies as a solution to the problems of methodology and motivation, others resist.

More than ever, teachers need critical reading of the current society and deep understanding of the ways students learn. At the same time, they need to develop their digital literacy and understand its possibilities, potentialities and limits. Teachers need creativity as well to rethink the educational methodologies in a continuing process of learning. Therefore, education in the knowledge society consists of a constant challenge.

Analyzing the Re/Construction of the English Teachers' Professional Identity

The participants of this research are the English teachers from the Department of Language and Technology (DELTEC) from CEFET-MG. This department embraces the areas of Portuguese and English Language. It was structured with the purpose of giving support to the implementation of the undergraduate, master's and doctorate courses in Language and Technology. It also gives support to some extension courses such as Center for Languages and Cultures - CLIC. It is worth mentioning that the interviewed teachers were hired through public contests to teach in a technological high school. However, due to the institution's expansion, the English teachers have to give support to the other courses. Thus, teaching qualification has become even more necessary.

In order to reach the goal of this study, a semi-structured interview was conducted with all the eighteen English teachers from DELTEC. In this universe four of them are PhDs, six are doing their doctorates, four are master's, two are doing their master's, and two could not achieve the master's degree. The interview sought to delineate their academic qualification and their professional performance possibilities, the fulfillment of the institutional demands, and the use of new technologies in teaching. The Brazilian official documents (2002) as well as the documents that regulate the institution (Brasil, 2012) were also reviewed. For this paper, the data from all the interviews were taken into consideration, but only the voice of two participants were closely analyzed. They are known here as P1 and P2 and are both referred to as 'he.' They were chosen because they represent the profile of the other professionals interviewed; they have worked in the institution for more than twenty years and have experienced the most significant changes that outlined the transformation of a technical high school into a technological university. This is a qualitative research and it has the format of a case study (Nunan, 1992).

Complying with the institutional demands
As a university, CEFET-MG demands much more from its academic staff. Before CEFET-MG became a technological university, English teachers were required to teach in the technical high school and at CLIC. Besides the mentioned activities, the staff is now expected to work in undergraduate and post-graduate courses. Thus, they need to be involved with researches, mentor master's and doctoral students and participate in administrative activities, etc.

When questioned about his intentions to invest in his academic career P1 states: "I had no way to escape and now I am doing my master's. I am studying hard and I am investing in my academic career. I am reading a lot and I am trying to publish a paper. This is now necessary."

P2 had started his master's in order to deal with the institution's demands but failed to complete it. "Unfortunately, I could not defend my dissertation. It was very painful for me. (...) Here at CEFET, there is no more space for those

who do not have at least the master's degree. If you do not specialize you are no longer respected here."

The participants tried to find ways to achieve professional success and comply with the institutional demands. P1 realizes that knowledge evolves over time and is always under construction. Therefore, post-graduation studies became a necessity for him, "Updating needed to be inserted into my professional life and I decided to study again." It seems that his identity is being reconstructed since qualification empowers his curriculum and gives him support to feel safe and deal with his co-workers. On the other hand, P2 failed to achieve his purpose, probably because his target was not the master's itself. It is apparent that P2's professional ambition did not include the academic life but only being a high school teacher: "I did not really want to study anymore."

In order to comply with the institutional demands, some questions about their participation in research groups, congresses, mentoring, publications, administrative activities and extension courses were asked to the participants.

P1states: "I have been taking part of a research group and working with Portuguese as a foreign language since I started my master's. Now, I can say I like it." It is possible to verify his attempt to adapt to the new parameters required by the institution he works for. According to Silva & Aragão (2013), the ways to be pursued by foreign languages teachers today consist of the continuing formation and the practice of researching. These aspects enable teachers to reflect on their professional praxis and reconstruct their professional identity.

As P1 is in the first year of his master's, he is also trying to participate in some conference. "I am submitting two papers to some conferences. I hope they are accepted. It is a requirement of my master's." P1 is committed to his post-graduation course, and, for this reason, he feels included in the department he belongs to. He reports: "At first I did everything only to comply with the requirements of the master's, but I feel enthusiastic and interested now. I think my co-workers are also looking at me with other eyes."

Besides studying his master's, P1 has got some administrative positions. He notes: "Besides doing my master's and being a teacher, I am the deputy chief of DELTEC and of CLIC. It is a lot of work." Probably because P1does not have the master's degree yet, accumulating tasks makes him feel important to his department. In addition, having a position of leadership may confer him some status and power. "Administrative activity is something I do with pleasure and I think I do it well. I like being a chief." P1's narrative is strongly associated to his pleasure and pride of the tasks performed. His experiences also make him develop a sense of belonging to the academic staff.

Unlike P1, P2 does not participate in any research group or conference, and neither has publications. P2 just teaches English at the technical high school and at CLIC. Therefore P2 does not feel respected and as part of the academic staff. As a form of resistance, we find in his narrative a strong marking of his position of high school teacher, since he was hired after a competitive public

contest. He complains: "I was hired to be a technical high school teacher. I was not hired to teach at undergraduate or post-graduate courses or even to be a researcher. I don't think it is fair to be discriminated by some co-workers for this reason."

It is clear that P2 feels excluded and wants to ensure his identity as a good high school teacher. "I really like to teach students from high school. What is important for me is that I am a good English teacher. I do my best and I know my students like me. I understand research is important but not for me."

As a consequence of just being a high school teacher, P2 faces difficulties regarding to belonging. "With all those changes our team is no longer united. There is a lot of competition. There is no solidarity. Everyone has to fight for his or her own survival. I do not feel comfortable here anymore."

Bauman (2005) states that solidarity has gradually been replaced by individualism and by fragile, artificial and fluid bonds. Competition, a framework that opposes solidarity, has led the individual to fear, insecurity, inadequacy and exclusion, as it could be seen in P2's narrative.

According to all teachers' narratives, it is possible to verify that there are two groups in opposition. On one hand the PhDs', professors, and on the other the ones who have not obtained such title yet. As Woodward (2009) argues, the construction of identity happens in a dualism in which one is always more valued than the other. The author (2009) also claims that identities are constructed in opposition to other identities. For thus, difference can be constructed negatively when it excludes or marginalizes those people who are defined as 'others,' but it can be seen as a source of diversity and heterogeneity, and for this reason it can also be enriching.

Having to deal with the difference between the two teams of the department, P1 chooses to face it and find ways of shortening it. He envisions new possibilities assuming administrative positions, doing his masters, participating in a research group and probably in future conferences. This curriculum seems to empower him and, as a consequence, makes him feel included in the group. However, P2 feels excluded, marginalized and different, since he has failed to comply with the institutional demands. He states "I feel that most of my co-workers do not see me with the same eyes anymore. It is embarrassing and as soon as I have the right to retire I will do it quickly."

Complying with the educational demands
The Brazilian official documents (Brasil, 2002) suggest that foreign languages should be taught from topics that are relevant to the students. Besides, these topics must favor a critical reflection of the society and enable critical and digital literacy. For this purpose, the communicative approach via textual genres was embraced by DELTEC, and it has been used to teach English for the technical high school since 2012. This approach deals with linguistic

functions and conventions and allows students to lead with authentic texts circulating in different spheres (Bambirra, 2007).

In relation to the adequacy to this new methodology, P1 and P2 report that they are in the process of adapting themselves to this approach. Thus, they are still not comfortable with it. P1 clarifies: "I prefer the methodology we used before. I am not very fond of this new approach." P2 narrates: "I think that working with the textual genre is difficult and you have to believe and understand this approach well. In fact, I come from another background, from the communicative approach. I liked the other way better."

Besides having to adapt themselves to the new approach used to teach English in the technical high school, the participants also need to use the digital technologies in their classes as it is advocated by the Brazilian official documents (Brasil, 2002). The students are inserted in a digital world, and therefore they make use of technologies in their everyday activities. ICT are not only a source of information; they are also a means of communication and can contribute favorably to the process of learning English (Murphy, 2000).

In this sense, according to Snyder (2009) and Paiva (2015), teachers must know why and how to use technologies for pedagogical purposes. Both authors believe that when teachers make use of technologies they become able to make choices, use and sometimes even refuse them. Therefore, teachers need to be ICT users in order to choose tools that can contribute to the students' learning process.

When the participants told how they insert technology into their pedagogical practices, it was identified that its use is still associated to old teaching practices and is basically confined to the presentation of schoolwork. P1 declares: "In my classes, technologies are used by the students to present the works they do in groups, usually PowerPoint or Prezi. I see that some colleagues are using cell phones, but I have not tried them yet." P1 expresses the difficulties he has and says: "I have never prepared anything special using technologies. It is very difficult for me to think about something useful to give to my students using technologies, and so I avoid them."

In relation to P2, most of the time his students also use PowerPoint to present schoolwork. "Students use PowerPoint, but I seek to encourage them to use technologies to improve their English. They use online dictionary and we communicate via email or WhatsApp. The students use technologies better than we do."

P2 reports that his students created a blog to share their schoolwork like videos and podcasts with other students. He states: "Inserting technological resources in my classes is a way to be up-to-date to their reality. I think that when we use technologies students can learn in a more autonomous way."

The data reveal P2's effort to adapt himself to the use of new technologies in his classroom, in spite of all his insecurity and limitation. "I have a lot of difficulties with technologies, and sometimes I feel insecure, but the students

use them all the time, and I try to use them as well. Students help me and I improve." In this sense, he does not only cease to be the focus of teaching but also becomes a learner, once he does not master technology as his students do. Despite of all his difficulties to deal with technologies, we can see that he is proud of himself. P2 sees himself like a modern teacher, a good teacher, a teacher who adds technological resources to the learning process. It seems that P2 wants to reinforce his identity as a teacher who is beloved by his students as he says: "Students like me and they like my classes."

Both P1 and P2 complained about the lack of assistance from the PhDs', professors or even from those who are already better adapted to the new approach and to the use of new technologies in the classroom. P1 states: "I do what I already know. We do not work as a team. Nobody helps you to improve your pedagogical skills." P2 says: "We work in isolation. There is no solidarity here anymore. They want us to change, but they do nothing to help us. They want us to learn by ourselves, and this is impossible." Their narratives show the lack of solidarity and pedagogical discussions in order to improve everyone's skills.

It becomes evident that the teachers are trying to use technology in some of their routine activities, although they still find it difficult to associate its use to add value to learning. It is clear that P1 only uses technology when his students are presenting schoolwork. Despite his insecurity, P2 is trying to insert technology with pedagical purpose although, it was not clear whether his actions lead to effective linguistic acquisition.

In fact, as Snyder (2009) states, it is useless to bring technology to the classroom and continue with old teaching practices. The question, therefore, focuses on how to change and how to teach and learn. Because of the depth of the impasse between when and under which circumstances should new technologies be used as learning support, our participants face some issues as it seems they have low digital literacy: (a) difficulties in using technologies, (b) difficulties in inserting technologies to bring relevant pedagogical benefits, and (c) work in isolation, without sharing theoretical and practical discussions.

It is understood that our participants want to feel part of the modernity of the 21st century. Adding technologies to teaching makes them feel modern, although they still find difficulties and do not know how to use them properly for pedagogical purposes. This is not an exclusive dilemma of the English teachers from CEFET-MG, but one of Brazilian English teachers in general.

Conclusion

In this study we have examined how the English teachers of a Brazilian technological university are constructing their professional identities. We have explored the problems they face in adapting themselves to the institution's new context, while it was transformed from a technical high school into a technological university. We have sought to emphasize the important role of technology in education, as well as the use of the genre approach to teach

English in high schools as it is recommended by the Brazilian legal documents (2002).

As we have demonstrated, getting a post-graduate diploma is one way in which teachers reinforce their professional identity, but using the genre approach and technological artifacts in education are also important components of constructing professional identity of the participants.

One of the challenges of constructing the teachers' identity is directly related to the use of ICT. As it has been pointed out in this study, most of the participants still use technologies to do what they have always done. Posting exercises, communicating with students via email, Facebook, WhatsApp, wikis or blogs, presenting schoolwork or searching the dictionary does not mean a technological revolution in education yet as argued Snyder (2009) and Kalantzis and Cope (2010, 2012). In this view, there is much more to be done to modernize our education and make it more effective for the learners. Thus, their greatest challenge lies with how to change, teach and encourage their students to become autonomous learners, capable of learning to learn.

One of the most pronounced tensions taken from the narratives is working in isolation rather than as a team. This shows that careful discussions and studies need to be done to help teachers solve the problem of adapting themselves to the new methodology and adjusting their pedagogical practices to insert new technologies to teaching.

In relation to the new educational needs, some of the participants feel unprepared and with low self-esteem. It is possible to see that in the struggle to negotiate their professional identities, P1 has chosen to continue studying and has started his master's, while P2, unable to adapt to the new contexts, has felt excluded and is eager to retire.

It is possible to conclude that the participants' own choices, actions and decisions are shaped by the power relations and the centrality of their curricula. Thus, their professional identity is being re/constructed with elements that are individual and collective, subjective and objective, involving dynamic processes and multiple contexts that are marked by uncertainty and insecurity, conflicts and dilemmas, and successive personal and professional transformations. The elements that have emerged from their narratives underlie their emotions, experiences, competence and motivation. All these elements have formed a correlation between their personal projects and the multiple demands contributing to the re/construction of their professional identities.

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