An Inquiry Project: A Way to Develop a Meaningful Learning Context

La indagación: un camino para desarrollar un contexto significativo de aprendizaje

Norha Esperanza Pineda Torres*
Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Colombia

Actions speak louder than words.
Anonymous

The main purpose of this article is to share an inquiry experience from EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes, and the reflection that deals with the practical benefits participants have when they are involved in an inquiry proposal. Firstly, there is an introduction to this inquiry process describing the main question that guided this paper. Secondly, a theoretical framework and the authoring cycle description is presented considering the way the inquiry process took place within my classroom by means of meaningful actions and contexts. Thirdly, a data collection section by some reflective responses regarding participants' learning during the process of developing the inquiry project; and the analysis of findings are explained with some samples. Finally, there are some pedagogical implications as well as some conclusions.

Key words: Inquiry, learning, question, participation, project and interests

El propósito principal de este artículo es comunicar una experiencia de indagación que desarrolló un grupo de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. Durante este proceso, los participantes lograron aprender varios aspectos educativos, de los cuales se obtuvieron muchos beneficios y enseñanzas. Este artículo consta de una introducción al tema central y las preguntas que generaron este trabajo. Después de esto, se presentan algunos aspectos teóricos importantes sobre el tema, así como una descripción del proceso significativo de indagación que se aplicó en el contexto de clase. Luego se describen y analizan la información y los datos recogidos durante el estudio. Por último, se presentan algunas implicaciones pedagógicas y conclusiones finales.

Palabras clave: Indagación, aprendizaje, pregunta, participación, proyecto e intereses

PROFILE 8, 2007. ISSN 1657-0790. Bogotá, Colombia. Pages 59-74

59

Approach to this Research

Commonly, we as teachers have seen that there is a wide range of problematic issues regarding the way education is being conducted within some academic institutions. In some schools in Bogotá, EFL teachers spend a lot of time instructing students in the rules of English grammar. Traditional practices need to be evaluated and new approaches to teaching EFL considered as a way to transform foreign language pedagogy. Why not to start by exploring students' areas of interests through English classes?

The previous consideration led me to design and apply this learning experience in teaching English via inquiry-based practices and at the same time, in orienting my students to become actors of their own learning process. I suggest that students and teachers generate through their participation and engagement, constant actions and alternatives to promote changes that improve their daily practices, not instructing them but letting them build their own knowledge by means of their own inquiries and learning experiences.

I consider it urgent and necessary that schools instigate their own transformation towards a friendly space, which promotes certain democratic practices such as tolerating and listening to others, not as a favour but as an obligation to respect the decisions made by the majority (Freire, 1998). That is why this teaching experience deals with one of those pedagogical proposals that has to do with the issue of learning through inquiry practices, to developing EFL classes by including the participants (teacher and students) in significant learning environments.

Theoretical Framework

We make the road by walking.
From a song by Joan Manuel Serrat

The main theories reviewed to enlighten this study were basically about language learning, learning from inquiry, a curricular framework, literacy process and conceptions about learners' beliefs. This literature revision also includes a description of the authoring cycle model as a curricular structure, which involves seven stages of learning from inquiry. This article contains only the essential approaches to some of these theories.

Language involves wide complex issues that help us to understand, constitute communities and live in societies. Language allows us to interact, communicate, generate culture, knowledge and to transform all around us, including human nature. In general terms, it is a great tool to know, experience, discover and change reality. A child who learns the language learns many other things at the same time through the language, thus s/he might form a real picture of what is around and also his/her own picture inside.

Language is a social fact. It emerges in the individual's life by continuous, meaning interchanges with others; in this sense language is a product of the social process. During this social process, the construction of reality is inseparable from the construction of the semantic system in which codified reality exists. Moreover, language is a potential of shared meaning as well as an inter-subjective interpretation of the experience (Halliday, 1994, p. 9).

For Halliday, language does not consist of sentences or of bits of discourse: meaning

is constructed in interpersonal contexts of any type. The contexts in which meaning is interchanged are not devoid of social value; a verbal context is a semiotic construction that tends to provide understanding among the members of a group (Halliday, 1994, p. 10). In this sense, the context relies on the participants involved in the discursive situation, which means that learning is provoked under the same conditions. To develop a learning process, it is necessary to provide contexts in which students can interact and construct their own concepts, ideas, thoughts and social image. "Through the language use in situations like those is the way s/he constructs and amplifies his/her potential of meaning" (Ibid, 1994, p. 45).

Learning from inquiry is a style of conceiving the way people learn from reality and all the aspects involved as relevant components that provide them a wide range of experiences and opportunities of expanding knowledge. This means that there are many situations and contexts that provoke multiple interactions to understand and discover what is going on and also to find different alternatives to learn and to solve problems, questions, dilemma, issues, etc.

Constantly we are having new learning experiences from reality that help us increase our knowledge in order to uncover and transform it. Learning from inquiry activates our natural curiosity about the world and about ourselves. This highlights the value of starting from curiosity to discover real learning. Thus, inquiry might be the first step to explore our students' curiosities in order to satisfy them.

Inquiry practice requires a willingness to achieve an environment that induces learning by group participation. It has to do with an attitude towards wondering, asking questions, understanding alternatives and sharing with others' attempts in terms of uncovering answers for them (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). In this sense, the purpose of inquiry "is not 'knowledge for its own sake', but the disposition and ability to use the understandings so gained to act informedly and responsibly in the situations that may be encountered both now and in the future" (Wells, 1999, p. 121). Definitely, inquiry practices and their implications are an option oriented to letting students assume an active position, to encouraging them to think and to decide by themselves.

Inquiry is a constant state of curiosity and learning through an active exploration of the world. The inquiry process might provoke tensions and questions that matter in the life of the inquirer whose investigation generates new understandings, new issues, some more questions and possibilities than when it was started (Short et al., 1996).

The Authoring Cycle Presentation

There will be an illustration of an inquiry practice, which is characterised by the operation of all conceptions, interests and needs articulated in an explicit scenario. Thus, the model called the authoring cycle (Short et al., 1996) was applied in this inquiry practice because it was one whose stages were based on a process that guided and encouraged the participants to think and decide by themselves throughout this project (See the following diagram).

The first stage developed in this authoring cycle, "building from the known", deals
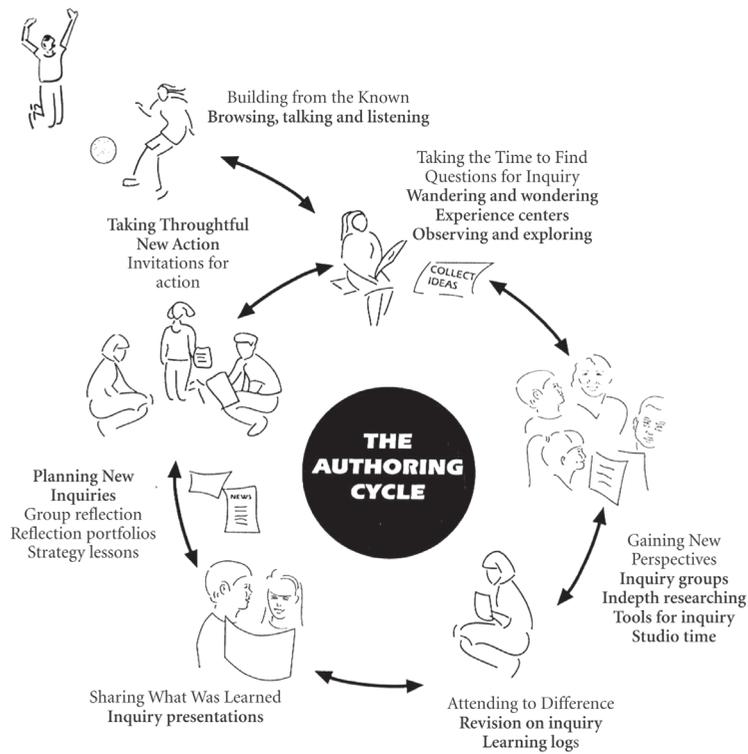
Diagram 1. The Authoring Cycle Model (Short et al., 1996, p. 262).

with students' life experiences, perceptions, current concepts, levels of understanding, and all the knowledge they bring to the institution. Additionally, it connects students' background and their engagements to build up knowledge from the known.

Teachers and students should be patient when they look for inquiries. "Taking the time to find questions for inquiry" takes time, but they have to work together to find inquiries to be uncovered gradually through different conversations and observations. It means that it is a bit difficult to arrive at inquiries all at once. It has to follow a process based on wanderings and wonderings in the sense that the field of interest has to be selected, explored and examined from multiple perspectives in order to focus the inquiry on the questions that are most significant to the student.

"Gaining new perspectives" is the next stage, when the participants, educator and the learners explore their issues more deeply and intensely support each other. There is a tactic that is to work by groups to gain new visions, to facilitate co-operation among the teams' sources of inquiry, to share strategies and to connect multiple understandings and different people's experiences in order to keep investigating and exploring their own questions.

In the stage "attending to difference", they are invited to be reflective in order to have fully in mind their own reconsiderations, what they really believe and understand about their inquiry by interacting with others, receiving ideas, strategies and many perspectives to be considered in the project from different agents such as partners,

revision of information, interviews, etc. Thus, learners' quiet reflection provides strength to revise their ideas and, consequently, to define their own thinking.

"Sharing what was learned" is a great opportunity that students have for the inquiry presentation. Their presentations reflected formal drafts of their thinking about their inquiries because most of the times when the ideas are shared they are transformed by the participants' understandings and experiences.

"Planning new inquiries" is inferred from the previous one due to the fact that "sharing what was learned" enlightens students to engender new inquiries, which can be planned to follow the authoring cycle that never ends. Then, "taking thoughtful new action" means that students can go beyond the significant findings to broader directions. Through new inquiry planning, they are engaged constantly in a wide range of inquiries because this cycle follows a process that flows continuously.

Participants and Setting

A group of 22 male eleventh graders who were between 16 and 19 years old, from a semi-private school ruled by the Catholic Jesuit priests, located in Bogotá and I, the teacher, doing classroom research for six months, designed and developed this learning experience by applying different activities, which were framed in an inquiry project. This case study is guided by the qualitative research characteristics, having in mind that this qualitative way of researching carries on with a systematic spectrum of aspects which are explicitly explained by Nunan (1995). One of the most important aspects is that it tends to understand human behaviour

and assumes a dynamic reality; also, it is subjective, close to the data and impossible to generalise upon.

This study was conceived based on the following question: How do 11th grade students manage inquiry projects in EFL classes? According to this question, the general objective of this experience was to explore and describe the way a group of eleventh graders developed inquiry practices in the English classes.

So far I have introduced the main purpose of this experience by integrating some educational dimensions, a theoretical framework based on an inquiry conception, an alternative model in which to apply this particular conceptualisation in a described setting with specific participants, which let us understand the context. Now, in order to continue the procedure planned, a pedagogical proposal will be presented to follow up on this reflection.

Organizing Pedagogical Actions

We first uncovered the learners' interests and needs to propose, plan and implement the whole project in order to have a clear road to follow. This inquiry project was the means of involving my students in learning and literacy practices, helping them to construct meaningful contexts, uncovering their interests, needs and wants, and becoming active participants in an EFL program.

This inquiry project started from the students' life experiences, perceptions, current concepts, levels of understanding, and all the knowledge they brought to the institution. Besides, it connected students' background and their efforts to build up knowledge from the known. Students

brought their experiences and knowledge to the school and, through inquiries, could gain and build a wider range of personal and social knowledge.

The first stage had to do with defining and putting into action some activities to observe and deduce the students' common interests and needs in order to have a clear starting point for the inquiry project. Then, this proposal was explained to my students, as soon as they were invited to belong to this project. What is more, as a teacher I started by describing and exploring students' inquiries in order to formulate and to establish a clear plan to begin the inquiry project.

Then I started to explore their needs and interests by allowing them to think, prepare and present their dreams. One key activity, called future plans, had to do with presenting through images one's future plans in terms of doing, being and having (Castillo, 2001). The purpose of this activity was to learn of the students' wants for their immediate future and explore their interests. In addition, they asked themselves questions about their own plans presented in the class. After some sessions, we noticed together that they wanted to go to university to study different careers.

This first moment involved two actions that are called by Short et al., (1996) "building from the known" and "taking the time to find questions for inquiry". During these two actions, the learners made connections between their own life experiences and their wonders about their future plans as professionals. One of those interests had to do with going to university after graduating from high school. In this sense, some of their questions were the following:

Where am I going to study after school? What is the best university to attend? What is the process to enter the university? Keep in mind that all their inquiries referred to the university and also that in their future plans they all mentioned studying at the university as the main goal to reach after high school. We agreed on exploring the university as a new educational context through an inquiry project that included interviews, searches in the web, visits, reports, etc., before choosing a major.

Knowing the main topic of this inquiry project, the sessions to carry out were planned and developed around the socialisation of activities. Together students and teacher identified ways to design and agree on the activities to develop in the EFL classes and apply a proper way to guide the students' questions and needs. Many activities were implemented in class such as interviews, brochures design, poster zone, computer section, essays, presentations, and class discussions, among others, to uncover the inquiry project proposed. All of them allowed us, in some way, to explore possible answers to the questions posed, to examine different kinds of information, to increase our knowledge about students' life in the university and to gain new perspectives and to augment the range of knowledge about our Colombian university system in this project. These characteristics are strongly related to the third stage explained in the authoring cycle model which deals with "gaining new perspectives" because the students, at this point, looked for information through different sources that matched the questions.

Through the activities programmed to uncover their inquiries, I could notice that

the students observed what happens in some universities to decide the best alternative for them and to have arguments to select the best answer to those questions that they had formulated.

After looking at different sources and obtaining a wide range of information, the students planned oral and written reports for the class in order to socialise and share all their findings with the rest of the classmates. In this sense, there were many discussions about the diversity of data gathered and about the distinctive points of view regarding the inquiry project. Those different alternatives led us to observe a phenomenon. The students also evidenced, through their discourses, that they took into account several ideas, comments, and reflections from their partners, teacher and many other people that helped them to understand not only the topic of the project, but also to ask many more questions about it.

Regarding the authoring cycle model, I observe that the above-mentioned is related to two stages they called "attending to difference". The first has to do with challenging our perspectives and ideas through interaction with others and the reflections to better understand, transform or reconsider the inquiry. The second, "sharing what was learned", means that at this point, the learners socialise their current findings by presenting them to share their ideas, understanding and all the information gathered throughout the project.

Even though the authoring cycle model has two more stages to follow, we could not go on with these stages in this study because of time constraints. However, the teacher could continue planning new inquiries by having students reflect on what they learned through their experience and think about their continuing questions because some possible connections to new actions were proposed and thought of by the students from ideas such as to uncover other kinds of options to ponder after school: the diversity of technology institutes, the international scholarships available to them, the military service, and tolerance in the universities. All those inquiries raised by the participants are considered in the next stage called "Planning new inquiries" of the model in mention.

There were some inquiries generated by this inquiry project which are related to the university. For example, "How is university life?" and "Why are not some people receptive to being interviewed in the university?", "Is the university a social requirement to get some kind of prestige? Even though Student One considers that:

> It is not enough to know the university life from outside, the most important part is to face this life, the inquiry project was just an introduction to the university, but there are many questions still to answer (St.1, Interview, 2001).

Those are the main inquiries that emerged from the students' perceptions and it seems to me that this project was the beginning, really, to start inquiring themselves as people leaving the school and facing other contexts.

Maybe beyond the classroom we will explore particular inquiry actions students want to take in their lives, which will keep the inquiry practices active. This would be the final step in the cycle that is "taking thoughtful new action", which is the moment to start another inquiry project based on the remaining inquiries in the previous project.

In addition, considering the model applied, I think that there were three moments that were significant in developing and implementing this inquiry project. They were "gaining new perspectives, attending to differences and sharing what was learned" because they represent the fundamental part and involve substantive moments of the whole cycle. In this case, their manifestation was repetitive. This means that multiple times, in the development of this project, we carried out these three stages constantly. Even to close this project, the students were asked to present their findings to other eleventh graders in order to share what was learned and disseminate the information they gathered by telling them their own experience developing this inquiry project.

Data Collection

To answer the main question in this study, it was necessary to take into consideration some specific methods, instruments and sources of data collection. Some of the methods rely basically on elicitation techniques, others consist mainly of observation, while others were based on introspection.

I used some primary data sources in this study according to each of the methods presented above. By the elicitation techniques, I took into account the interviews and class discussions, which were audio recorded. Through observation techniques, I carried out field notes and video recording when the students presented their findings.

Finally, the introspection technique has to do with teacher's diary, students' diaries and artifacts, whose purpose is to obtain a snapshot of attitudes, beliefs, intentions, reactions, reflections, conditions and/or events at a single point in time. Furthermore, weekly lesson planning, field notes and students' writing samples were also sources which were taken into account. These sources to gather data were important to observe, describe, analyse, evidence the main features and respond to the general question that guided the research process. Moreover, the data was gathered through the stages of the authoring cycle model by means of engaging the participants in collaboration in the study giving comments, opinions, points of view, suggestions, questions and general ideas, most of which were written in their diaries.

The diaries played a really important role due to their having registered personal accounts about our specific topic of interest. They contain observations, feelings, reactions, interpretations, reflections, hypotheses, and explanations about new material, things learned, different classroom activities, and other kinds of teaching materials, homework and so on. In some students' diaries were the excerpts quoted below:

> St5: I think that this project is very important, because we can investigate more about the careers that show the different universities. (August, 2001)

> St4: I think that this project is good, is another way to make education. (August, 2001)

> St3: I think that the interviews are important because they have important information about the University. (September, 2001)

> St2: The work we have done up to now has been really uplifting. The way the group has worked has been really good. Despite some difficulties in the interviews, I think we have worked very well. (September, 2001)

> St1: Today was a class very interesting because we made a conversation about the interviews.

Also we maked (made) a time-table with all the activities for evaluation. I consider that the classes go for good way. (September, 2001)

St6: This class was very important and interesting because we can know more about different universities in Colombia and the cost of each career. (August, 2001)

St1: The commentary about my essay is very good because I learn to improve my redaction in English. (October, 2001)

St2: I think that all classes were good. In the middle of the classes I felt fine, because in all the activities I learnt something new. (November, 2001)

The main purpose of the interview was to gain students' insights into inquiry project to understand the individual experiences and to establish a conversation with the participants by listening to them, their questions, perspectives, suggestions, feelings and reactions in a flexible, respectful and open environment. The questions planned for this classroom discussion prompted me to examine the key aspects that guide this research, which were an attempt to provide a portrait of what was going on in this particular classroom about all that had to do with the purpose of proposing, developing and implementing inquiry practices. Interviewing was also an opportunity to listen to the students' learning experiences, attitudes towards inquiry practices, self-reflection and to what extent their participation in the development of an inquiry project helped them think and question their own decisions regarding their future education and what they want.

The interviews and the group discussions allowed the participants to express themselves openly about the inquiry project and, mainly, they gave a lot of information about how the inquiry project was proposed, implemented and developed in the EFL classes. Thus

the central purpose of interviewing the participants was to determine the practices they followed to uncover their inquiries and, also, to perceive the structures modified by the project in terms of their learning process. They were interviewed once at the end of the project individually, and there were two group discussions guided by the researcher during the course, one in the middle and the other immediately after the whole process. Many reasons motivated and induced them to develop the project through finding different sources of information and obtaining a spectrum of ideas to deal with the university context. It was part of the questions posed in the interview in November, 2001. For example, some students expressed the following statements:

St1: We are interested in this activity because we need to know what our country offers in terms od higher education. That is what we are interested in.

St2: To know all the changes, the things one is going to experience when entering the university, which is going to be different from being at school. It was important for me to meet some people who I am going to be in contact with, to know that environment and to develop other skills like body expression.

St3: It was a tool for entering the university. It gave me some principles and basis to have a wider vision of the real higher-education context in Colombia.

St4: My motivation to work on the Project was to have a taste of the environment that I will surely have to face next year, knowing about universities, people and programs and have a clearer picture of what I want to study.

St5: To know the opinion of students and their university, to know another point of view about university, solve some doubts, and to know how trustworthy the information I have is.

Other sources of data such as field notes registered some students' attitudes and interactions in the classroom, their participation in the development of the project, and also allowed the researcher to consider the students as EFL learners and users. Additionally, the students' artifacts provided information on how they conceive university education, the way they produced and activated their knowledge and how they developed and participated in this project.

Analysis of Findings

The data collected were observed, classified, analysed and triangulated before arriving at a specific system of emerging categories according to the type of content found in each instrument applied. Firstly, the information was analysed several times to be described and classified coherently. Additionally, there was a general list of some of the most relevant characteristics that emerged in the whole data gathered. Then I grouped them according to the frequent meaning among them. Due to their discourse (written & oral) they expressed common ideas, utterances, similar statements and expressions that served as a guide to classify the data collected. After that, I named them by the main trait of the group, which allowed

me to organize the information. The next chart illustrates the categories obtained and analysed through this section.

1. Students' Learning Experiences

The first category reflects an interpretation of the students' statements on what they have learned in the EFL classes, their learning experiences and the activities that generated those learning moments. In this sense, the evidence seems to highlight the students' learning the English language through the development of their linguistic and communicative competencies based on language skills defined in terms of reading, writing, speaking and listening, which seem to have been improved according to students' responses. At the same time, that data established that the students also assured that they had learned many other things. They learned through language.

This category refers to the students' learning experiences, which includes the statements related to their achievements in terms of learning the English language and also learning many other significant matters related to themselves and their project. Besides, there is evidence of some of the participants' statements that describe their performance as language learners and how their competencies were developed.

Category	Subcategories
1. Students' learning experiences	A. Learning about language B. Learning through language
2. Students' reactions and responses to the inquiry project	

Chart 1. Categories found in the data analysis process.

As presented in the chart, this category is structured into two subcategories that deal with learning about language and learning through language, which will be explained in the next paragraphs.

A. Learning about language

This first subcategory contains the students' statements that deal with their explanations about how they improved their learning of the English language by participating in this project. In this sense, this subcategory introduces the students' learning about language regarding their own responses, artifacts and the spectrum of samples, which reveal their English language growth.

The following chart will present some student's excerpts that demonstrate the characteristics of this subcategory:

These are also some statements that reflect a general appreciation and corroborate the benefits provided by this project, whose main objective was to allow students to practise and improve the use of English as a foreign language. Student One stated the following:

> This helps to let us realise that not matter how much grammar we have covered, it is very little what we know how to apply it, because many people made many redaction errors, didn't they? I think that this could improve by doing exercises of this type, such as written comments or writing co-evaluation; because it is very important for the future life, isn't it? Nowadays, English is an indispensable requirement wherever for, whatever job or for studying. So I believe that the students should reinforce the writing culture in English or any other foreign language, because this language is absolutely different from ours (St1, Group Discussion, October/2001).

The student included many aspects in this information. Firstly, he focused on the difference between knowing grammar and using it by writing several compositions. After that, he changed the first idea and he highlighted the importance of learning a foreign language, fundamentally English, by reinforcing the writing process.

Student's excerpts	Instrument/Date
St.2: "We develop the communicative competence through written essay, interviews, presentations and to express coherently in English".	Diary/September, 2001.
St.3: "To do presentation in English, the oral part requires from me high effort, I think that this has improved with practice, I learnt that oral part, the verbal expression".	Group Discussions/October, 2001.
St. 4: "The speaking and interviewing ability to someone, to have a fluent conversation, I think that is good and important because one is going to do it in the future..."	Interview/November, 2001
St.5: "I learnt to make a good editing, to carry a good connection of ideas".	Diary/October 2001.
St.6: "I learnt to develop my writing process".	Diary/October,2001
St.1: "…to write better and more vocabulary".	Interview/ November 2001

Chart 2. Some students' explanations about how they improved their learning.

B. Learning through language

The second subcategory refers to students' own learning through language, whose main focus is to describe and to illustrate the way students have learned much more than the English language; how they went beyond the language to develop other learning, and how they expressed their own individual growth through different fields.

This subcategory evinces different issues students learned in our English classes by inquiry practices that provided them with more elements to reflect upon their interests and to uncover what they really want to study after school. Particularly, all the participants expressed their enrichment by being the main actors in the development of these experiences. The following are some excerpts that exemplify their explanations:

> St5: Through the development of this project I had the opportunity to know a new world of the universities, by the way to learn English oral expressions... to look at different options of the universities and the careers they offer. (St5, Group Discussion, October/2001).

> St6: I learnt many things, I learnt more vocabulary and the most important I learnt to express myself and to talk better. All the activities were good because we the students learnt something. (St6, Interview, November/2001).

> St4: I learnt to prepare a conference, to make good questions for an interview... (St4, Diary, October/2001).

In examining these statements, we can infer that the project permitted students to learn different kinds of aspects of universities, careers and also ways to find out information to improve their answers to the inquiries announced before. In this sense, the students expressed significant appreciation about how the project helped them not only to increase their knowledge of English and to improve their performance, but at the same time to explore many other aspects that concern views of education.

2. Students' Reactions and Responses to Inquiry Project

This second category displays the participants' feelings and perceptions of the whole inquiry process since proposing, implementing and developing it through the activities planned and focussed on to uncover their inquiries. Besides, this category describes their interpretations regarding the advantages of developing the EFL classes by uncovering the students' inquiries.

The following samples present some students' excerpts that demonstrate the characteristics of this category:

> St4: I have felt really good in this class, since we have applied learning modalities that are not conventional and that allow the easier assimilation of knowledge and a more fluent expression through practice or conversations (Group Discussions/October 2001).

> St1: The expositions help me to understand that there are many differences between all the universitites and to see other posibilities of university and career. (Diary /September, 2001).

> St2: Today, I learn that existing many types of universities and careers for many different people in Colombia. There are universities expensive and other very cheap. Universities very good and others very bad. (Diary /November, 2001).

> St3: I think that the interview and this process are very important because give aspects that can help me to choose better my university and my career. (Interview/ November, 2001).

> St5: In this opportunity, I know many things about current situation of the universitites in Bogotá. (Diary /October, 2001).

This category presents a spectrum of students' perceptions and reactions as regards the inquiry project and the way it was proposed and implemented. It means that there are many responses in terms of working through inquiry: the way they see themselves as learners, the way they perceive and interact as a co-operative group or simply their participation in the activities. The participants explicitly expressed those responses when they wrote in their diaries and when they were interviewed. Now let us have a look at this response:

> St7: I think it was very good [the inquiry project], because I think that it is a good way to round off the process we have had from sixth grade even up to eleventh grade. To have a better command of tenses and English writing, since it is not that easy for us. I think it was useful to develop those aspects and to round off all that has to do with that (St7, Interview, November/2001).

By this response, it seems to me that the student conceived this project as a way to complete the school process in the sense that it integrated different types of activities that put into action all they have learnt in terms of the English language.

In the next affirmation, Student Three states that he has obtained several experiences during this project implementation, perhaps some negative and positive but somehow, he seems to appreciate them due to the fact that they are very worthy. Let us observe it.

> St3: Well, my motivation was the fact that one could have access to more information about the university, right? And I could know my own specific expectations about that, right? The fact that we could have information moved me a lot since it was going to be useful and we had general information from many universities and the ones that each one wanted to study at. I could have a brief view of the way people live in universities and, although not very deeply, the way many people think. So I had a good picture of people's perspectives and of what is vital in university, right? How to behave there and how to deal properly with situations, right? It was very important for me that we could develop this because the different activities allowed us to know more about everything. That is very important because it gives you tools to make a better decision later. As I said before, it was really important for me that, at the moment of the interviews, people talked to you and told you what you needed in spite of their attitude and that is what I think that was important. (St3, Group Discussion, October/2001)

I firmly believe that making informed decisions greatly contributes to the growth of a community. Being informed is what enables people to make better, critical and more informed decisions. Likewise, an informed student greatly enhances his understanding of the possible decisions about the university.

Besides that, my students wanted to share the results of this learning experience and give different alternatives to their partners to guide them to collect ideas and gain new perspectives that could contribute to their future decisions. The participants honestly mentioned that by sharing and giving these explanations, they also learnt the way to prepare oral presentations, employ body movements and use the videobeam and transparencies. In general, they learnt to express themselves in English coherently to a large audience, as we can observe in the following two excerpts:

> St2: In English what demands me much more effort is the oral part, so it seems to me that by practising it is going to improve. Then I consider that I learnt that oral part and the verbal expression. Before we used to focus the theoretical part and the grammatical structures, but in this project we

emphasised the oral, written and spoken. (Group Discussion, October/2001).

St1: I learnt not to have scenic panic, to be sure if one did a good job and to overcome through the constant practice the nervousness when you give an oral speech. (Group Discussion, October/2001).

In general terms, this inquiry experience was achieved by exploring what learners already knew and what they wanted to know along with their inquiries. Then, their active participation in the classroom provoked significant experiences beyond sharing beliefs, findings and multiple activities. After that, students had the opportunity to move into the selected inquiry to investigate it, seeking different kinds of sources that provided new perspectives to understand and reflect upon the issues related to the inquiry. Thus, all together could share what they had learned, their experiences in the process of inquiry development, confronting their previous ideas about the inquiry and how they were transformed. From this participative meeting, students could integrate real facts and understandings in order to follow the project and plan new inquiries.

At the end of applying this cycle, the learners considered many positions for evaluating their performance in the project. For example, some students said the following:

St.1: My uncovering was very good, because I found out enough information for the investigation and I did the interviews to students and teachers. Besides my determinations and interest were very good. (St1, Interview, November/2001).

St. 2: I think that my process is excellent because I could project myself in my future career and do a short research on it. (St2, Interview, November/2001).

St. 3: My performance in the project was very good because I was interested to develop it in a good way and working hard. (St3, Interview, November/2001).

St. 4: That is very good because is the opportunity to know the professional education and our ideas and dreams for the future. (St4, Interview, November/2001).

St. 5: I feel that my performance in the project was very good because I learnt so much about the educational system. (St5, Interview, November/2001).

The students attested they felt satisfied because they learned a lot by developing this project and focusing on what they really wanted. Not only have they learned about the topic of the project, but also to express their thoughts, feelings, opinions, etc. in English and to study the structure of this target language. Moreover, they said that they learned to know each other, to listen to others, and to question themselves about social aspects. In this sense, not only were students learning English but were also achieving a wide view and many alternatives to answer their main concern, which was to become familiar with the university context.

Most of them evaluated their performance as good because they accomplished satisfactorily the steps proposed at the beginning of the project. Some others thought they learnt a lot about the topic of the universities, educational system, secondary education, etc. Besides, they expressed that they were interested and highly motivated in developing this project which means that was an advantage to implement it and students learnt a lot from the different moments of this project.

Constantly, students were relating and building their experiences as well as their

knowledge. Inquiry practice enriched also our experiences by providing opportunities to inquire about their questions. Firstly, to determine the inquiry process, learners became aware of their wants in order to think about the significant curiosities in their lives. Then, they chose and wrote the questions that mattered to them in terms of being definitely motivated to look for the information for their inquiries and gaining the experiences of creating a proper way to find important answers.

After that, they presented their findings to the whole group and discussed more meaningful issues in order to define new and interesting inquiries for them. In consequence, they had the chance to integrate significant experiences looking for their authentic inquiries, to gain a lot of understanding and to develop their particular issues of interest in order to strengthen their own learning process.

Consequently, the authoring cycle never ended. Taking thoughtful new action was the last step that allowed the students to go beyond the significant findings to broader directions. Through new inquiry planning, they were engaged constantly to assume a wide range of inquiries because this cycle follows a process that flows continuously.

Conclusion and Implications

This study is an important aid to support the learning and teaching processes because through inquiry projects we, as teachers, can promote students' learning experiences. This exploration could be considered a source of information for teachers of all areas and especially for EFL teachers because it could help them start attending to their students'

needs or interests from their contexts. To plan the activities in the inquiry project, it is relevant to understand and consider our students' suggestions, wants and needs in order to have a significant program to develop in the classes. Inquiry project should be regarded as an integral part of any learning and teaching practice.

Considering this experience, I must conclude that I have learned many teaching and learning aspects through dealing with this exploration. The types of tasks used are very different compared with the ones I used in my traditional classes because all of them have to be connected in order to uncover the inquiry project. The classroom management and learners' roles have their focus on the project guided by the teacher due to the fact that the students are the ones who construct the sessions, based on their own learning process through their reports, presentations, consultations, group interactions, discussions, interviews, debates, portfolios, and readings, among others. In this sense, the evaluation is made with them through the realisation of significant activities, which motivates them to uncover their inquiries.

From this view, this project could have a very wide impact as a teaching methodology since it is based on a democratic process that involves all the participants in a negotiation around the stages to be followed throughout the project in order to satisfy the students' needs and interests. The inquiry-based practices increased the students' motivation, active participation, and relevance of suggestions and ideas, among others, which made them critical and creative agents of their own learning autonomy.

Finally, I can say that this inquiry project involved positive results. Experiencing an

inquiry project helped students reflect on the way they were learning and how they could apply the findings in their future decisions. This was an enriching project that granted us many learning experiences by joining efforts to grow together.

References

Castillo, R. (2001). Workshop about English teaching. Seminar in the M.A. program of Applied Linguistics. Bogotá, D.C: Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas.

Freire, P. (1998). Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Continuum.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1994). El lenguaje como semiótica social. Bogotá: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Nunan, D. (1995). Research methods in language learning. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Short, K., Harste, J., & Burke C. (1996). Creating classrooms for authors and inquirers. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Wells, G. (1999). Dialogic inquiry: Towards sociocultural practice and theory of education. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

About the Author

Norha Esperanza Pineda Torres holds an MA in Applied Linguistics to TEFL, Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, where she is currently an English teacher in the L.E.B.E.I Program.