Teacher Development and Isolated EFL Tutors: Reflections on Working in Small and Rural Communities

Cristina Fernández

Abstract

Teacher development is a key action to take into account due to different aspects and reasons, such as refreshing, improving teaching techniques and developing a compendium of educational methods and ways to improve teaching. Teacher development courses offer an overview of teaching methods and inspirational introductions to different ways to teach, besides gaining knowledge about a variety of unknown fields and sharing experiences with colleagues. Teacher development is remarkably essential for those self-employed, freelance teachers working in small and isolated communities, whose face-to-face contact with colleagues is highly diminished if compared to teachers working in other institutions such as schools or universities. This paper aims to highlight the importance of teacher development courses to integrate all the educators within the ELT community as a whole, as a source of knowledge and learning for those under the least favourable conditions: rural, self-employed teachers.

The Emerging of a New Community of Teachers

The number of people who use English as a communicative language has been increasing during the last years, especially since the arrival of the XXI century. Because of the role of English within a global perspective, the number of English teachers has increased as well[1]. English schools, English certificates, English as a second language, among other factors, have contributed to the spreading of teaching English and opening a market which in the past was only reserved to cities and populated places: teaching in small and rural communities. Schools and universities outside the UK, North-America and other English-speaking countries are now bilingual or multilingual schools.

Furthermore, the rising demand of English teachers[2] around the world has brought with it a revision of the knowledge and qualifications required for the position. Teaching qualifications, such as CELTA (University of Cambridge), DIPTesol (Trinity College of London) and teacher development courses have also risen the standards within the English language educators scale. For that reason, educators are demanded to have a good command of written and spoken English and governments. In Spain for instance, a B2 English level certificate is obligatory for teachers who work in schools of this kind to meet the CEFRL standards, which hadn't happened in the past and led to academic failure regarding the English subject.

---

[1] According to the data provided by International TEFL Academy, there is a number of 250,000 of native English speakers who work as English teachers. This number includes all English teachers, who has some relationships with schools and other language institutes as well. Unfortunately, there are no provided numbers on how many freelance ESL teachers are in the world who don't have any connection to education institutes, given the lack of stability in this sphere.

[2] Surge in number of international schools sees teaching positions rise threefold in a decade, according to The Guardian.

Nevertheless, this is just one more example to illustrate the need for qualified teachers, especially in small communities. The lack of adequately qualified teachers had been globally developing for years. Still, it is now when plenty of them are studying English to reach a B2 English certificate because it is obligatory in order to hold their job position, as well as it is now that teachers are refreshing techniques and attending conferences organised by universities or teaching associations, such as IATEFL. The revitalisation of the collective is real.

In any case and due to these factors, the community of English teachers is slowly spreading to small and rural areas, where English teachers are needed, especially in the context of non-formal education spheres, such as English schools or freelance professional teachers. Nonetheless, this group of teachers (whom we refer from now on as a community of rural teachers) is being affected by isolation and lack of communication with colleagues and educational institutions. There are little initiatives that encourage teaching development and improving qualifications for a collective of people who are working in the least favourable conditions. As far as the author is concerned, specific actions regarding this collective have not been taken yet and according to the given situation, could be a bullet point in future teacher development courses.

This paper aims to explain how the need for English classrooms in a non-formal education context is continuously growing and covering market demand. Also, to reflect on how rural teachers' identity has a role in the rural community; to point out the necessity of creating spaces (face to face or virtual spaces) for teachers who work in small and isolated areas and bringing on ideas such as "communities of practice", besides SIGs and associations.

The Need for Multilingual Spaces in Rural Areas

The window for English lessons in small communities has been increasingly opening for the last years. Basing our analysis in the example above, the rural area "As Frieiras" in Galicia (Northern-Spain), the service and market demand of an English language space was born as a result of the community needs. The widespread of the English language created awareness of the so-called "bad English level", meaning that children at school do not perform or produce the English language as it is reflected in the school curriculum. The concern about underperforming written and spoken English led to many families to enrol their children in private English schools, of course, far away from their hometowns. This implied overall a one-hour car ride to nearby populated locations. To this is added a feeling of rootlessness and the obligation to resettle their children in a community other than their own.

Rural spaces are usually far from the madding crowd and far from some idyllic countryside scenery, which usually is the description received. From now on, the author will exemplify the case of As Frieiras region (A Gudiña and A Mezquita councils), an extremely depressed area affected by emigration and high unemployment rates located in Galicia-Northern Spain (Figure 1, Figure 2).

To summarise, the real landscape in As Frieiras is characterised by a high rate of unemployment, low demographic growth, inequality between men and women persists, emigration to higher populated places, sexism, low-quality or inexistent services for citizens (childcare, hospitals or Government offices, just to quote some) nor educational services outside the formal education (Figure 3, Figure 4).

That is not a beautiful picture. Nevertheless, non-formal education is a high-profile tool within rural communities. Research and practice have proved the success of the implementation of non-formal education programmes and projects in severely isolated areas of South-America, where actions and projects have universalised access and improved the quality of basic education for young people and adults, overcoming limitations inherent in the structure of the school system (Gajardo, 1988). Neighbourhood associations, cultural associations or youth associations have a cohesive network which provides educational and cultural services to residents in the area.

The lack of resources was a key factor in this low-key student daily migrations to bigger villages to improve their English. Residents faced the need for an English lessons space but also the lack of qualified teachers. The reason is that it is normally neglected to work in an extremely depressed area, as living conditions are tougher and offer more difficulties than working in an urban space. Besides that, the native English teacher effect has also applied to rural areas, making that qualified (but non-native) English teachers are rejected because of this fact.

Applying to our example, as the author aforementioned before, the necessity brought a market in. Once there is a market, the possibility of creating a space for English lessons became a reality. The necessity of a physical space for improving English skills met the residents' needs and the aim or purpose of a teacher as well. Then, enrolling students as a non-native tutor and thus the possibility of development as a rural freelance teacher is a long process, battling self-conscious issues and sometimes facing criticism. However, the author (a qualified English teacher in the area) proved that years of gaining self-confidence and trust from students as well finally paid back.

Even in the smallest regions, there is room for new spaces that allow students to develop their English skills, creativity and communicative abilities. The enrichment of the rural community, including the teacher and facilitator, is visible in many aspects. This space becomes now a meeting point for students of all ages and a starting point for students who want to further their English knowledge and turn it into a real qualification, for instance by taking the Cambridge English exams and being successful in the task, since English language certificates are highly demanded.

Teacher Identity and Isolation Risk

There are many questions to be asked and willing to be answered regarding the identity of rural teachers. As far as we are concerned, rural living conditions are challenging and difficult to deal with. How is it like to work in a rural area? Is it about losing or gaining experience? Is it about keeping the identity as a language teacher and coping with the standards of usually extremely traditional-based communities? What is the impact of living in such communities in the life of a teacher? How do teachers keep on track with colleagues? Do rural teachers can communicate with other teachers?

According to UN data, in 2007, urban and rural populations were almost precisely equal at 3.33 billion each. For most of human history, most people across the world lived in small communities, according to the University of Oxford "Our World in Data", although the criteria to define rural and urban population is an ongoing matter. Therefore, roughly half of the population and territory of the world is rural (although the data provided is contested). However, the ghost of marginalisation is still faced by those who work in isolated places and small communities. Does it create isolated teachers?

Undoubtedly, isolation is a part of the reality when teachers work in a remote community. As social beings, humans need contact and communication with their kind. As teachers, we need to exchange knowledge, we need feedback from both students and colleagues, among other information, as an essential part of our own identity as educators. The possibility of classroom observation is diminished if compared to those teachers working in more prominent and consolidated institutions or teaching in less remote locations. The process of learning and development can be paced down by the surroundings we live in, meaning that contact is often reduced to seminars or conferences disseminated in time.

Some factors could potentially influence the loss of identity and a more general feeling of "disconnection" between rural teachers and the ESL community; therefore, it implies a risk of isolation. The most relevant considerations are factors such as lack of contact and exchange with colleagues, difficulties in accessing to face-to-face development courses added to insufficient opportunities of self-reflection and sense of "disconnection", in addition to the amount of work of self-employed workers. Furthermore, the feeling of rejection is added to the equation as a considerable handicap, preventing non-native freelance educators from establishing themselves in rural zones.

To prevent isolation and disconnection rural teachers should be proactive and try to find the counsel of colleagues and keeping in touch with them when needed (online and offline). Also, joining Facebook groups, teacher associations, SIGs and mailing lists will help to keep updated during the school year. These aspects will be developed in the next segment.

Teacher Development and Education: Communities of Practice and SIGs

EFL/ESL rural teachers are equally part of the worldwide community of EFL teaching, and nowadays, as mentioned before, the Internet and social media networks are pivotal to know about teacher development.

Yet, English teachers in low populated areas must continue learning about their own identity and impact as teachers, as well as discovering more about the repercussion of their work within the community. The strong sense of kinship developed in these rural settlements has made self-employed teachers a huge part of the community, especially regarding children activities and English improvement in non-formal education, since the English classroom is a meeting point for both children and adults. In the classroom, not only students share their ideas and issues within learning the English language, but they also share their curiosity about the English culture. The classroom becomes then a nexus between local traditions and the English ones, and the English language educators are the nexus between these different cultures, cohesively. Still, they are a dispersed and non-cohesive group themselves.

To turn a dispersed community into a cohesive and robust body of educators is necessary to look for new perspectives and ideas, such as SIGs (Special Interest Groups - IATEFL) and COFP (Communities of Practice) focused on teaching in small and rural environments, both interesting approaches to align the efforts and improve communication among freelancers in risk of marginalisation.

Communities of Practice

Community of Practice (CofP) is a recent term; however, CofP as a description of a type of collaborative effort, is a concept that has gradually gained wider circulation as a

perspective for understanding group work. Many people in professional specialities such teaching are focusing on the concept of CofP to improve personal and organizational performance (Yang, 2009). CofP is a way to develop the efficiency and cohesion of an organization, with a specific focus on the teaching-learning and teaching domain. Wenger (2011) defined the CofP as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. A "community of practice" is formed by a group of people who share the same field or area of interest and are involved in a collaborative learning process. Quoting Wenger, it requires participants from a domain to share their knowledge, such as a group of teachers working in different rural areas around the world.

These communities can be built within an organisation or involve members from diverse associations, and they also can be recognised formally or be informal. These differences can characterize CofP in various places. CofPs can be built at home, within or across organisations, and even in schools; this means that all human beings belong to CofPs. The expression "community of practice" is used to denote the communities that "act as a living curriculum for the apprentice. Once the concept was articulated, we started to see these communities everywhere, even when no formal apprenticeship system existed"(Wenfer, 2011). Therefore, this practice is considered dynamic and includes everyone in the learning process.

Undoubtedly rural teachers have to initiate forms of CofP within various domains. By providing a new approach, CofP allows people to focus on social structures, which enable groups of them to learn collaboratively from and with each other.

A hypothetical rural teachers' CofP would be formed as a collective of rural teachers in their specific geographical areas, assembling teachers from both formal and non-formal educational contexts, so that it would cover the educative needs of each community completely. Besides, it should assemble professionals from different fields, such as psychologists and social educators, to create a multidisciplinary and collaborative team, ensuring appropriate counselling and support for teachers and students. Face to face interaction would be key to favour contact, sharing information and transmission of experiences among all the teachers. Taking action now is vital for this collective.

Rural environment SIG

IATEFL's well known Special Interest Groups (SIGs) give teachers and other ELT professionals opportunities to share knowledge and best practice and specialise in key areas of English Language Teaching and Learning. The SIGs offer newsletters, websites, training events, workshops and conferences organised around the world each year, as well as discussion forums and networking opportunities. IATEFL's SIGs are essential to keep on track with teacher development courses and conferences where teachers get the opportunity of meeting colleagues, exchanging information and are part of community. The Internet offers great opportunities, but the benefits of a hands-on course and kinship among colleagues are always well received.

It is necessary to agglutinate a solid group of rural teachers to prevent isolation and marginalisation. A rural environment SIG would provide a net of support for those working in disadvantaged conditions, while official qualification courses could be publicised and reach a wider audience and potential new teachers.

Time for Reflection: The Future Is Unwritten.

Education in rural areas is integral to a holistic development approach that recognises the profound differences in the context of rural schools compared to urban schools, particularly those concerning a historical legacy of neglect resulting in limited facilities and services, including the provision of English language facilitators. It may require supporting the group of teachers willing to work in this environment.

In this context, support means that teachers need to be equipped to meet the challenge mentioned above: teaching in small communities is. Creating specific workgroups, such as rural teachers CofPS, could be a *supportive mattress* to face the preceding challenge. On the other hand, teacher development courses are a crucial part of the isolated teacher own professional growth. Including specific focus in teaching in rural areas could be encouraging for educators who feel on the verge of disconnection from the teaching world. Let's remember that teachers who work and live in rural environments are "one of a kind". They are rare and must be supported by other teaching collectives.

This paper has concentrated on protecting rural educators from disconnection from their own collective and helping them to keep their identity as teachers as a pathway to learn about English culture and language as a foreign language in rural areas, adding ideas to prevent the isolation of the rural teacher.

Acting and implementing new programs and ideas requires targeted and focused professional development programmes that empower the main actors: rural teachers. Still, the possibilities afforded by public-private partnerships in facilitating the improvement of learning English must be considered. Acting and implementing new programs and ideas requires targeted and focused professional development programmes that empower the main actors: rural teachers.

Biographical Note

Cristina Fernández is a CELTA qualified tutor living and working as a freelance EFL teacher in rural Galicia (Northern Spain). She has many years of experience teaching young learners and adults in small hamlets and villages. She has a special interest in researching about teaching in rural communities and remote areas. Cristina is also a member of IATEFL and part of the YLSIG group. She has recently contributed to the IATEFL blog with the article "The isolated teacher: a few reflections on being an EFL tutor in a rural community".

References

Alexander, J. and Bach, D. 2013. Creating classroom community with reflective blogs. *The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge, and Society*, 9(2), 17-29.

Conrad, D. (2008). From community to community of practice: exploring the connection of online learners to informal learning in the workplace. *American Journal of Distance Education* 22(1), 3-23.

Domingo Peñafiel, L. and Boix Tomàs, R. 2015. What can be learned from Spanish rural schools? Conclusions from an international project. *International Journal of Educational Research* 74, 114-126.

Es.wikipedia.org. 2019. La Gudiña. [online] Available at https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Gudiña

Gajardo, M. 2020. [online] Unesdoc.unesco.org. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000084246

Foote, L. (n.d.). Transformational Learning.

Ganesh, G., Paswan, A. and Sun, Q. 2015. Are face-to-face classes more effective than online classes? An empirical examination. *Marketing Education Review* 25(2), 67-81.

Gl.wikipedia.org. 2019. A Mezquita. [online] Available at https://gl.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Mezquita

Goodpaster, K., Adedokun, O. and Weaver, G. 2018. Teachers' perceptions of rural STEM teaching: implications for rural teacher retention. *The Rural Educator* 33(3).

Hardré, P. and Sullivan, D. 2008. Teacher perceptions and individual differences: how they influence rural teachers' motivating strategies. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 24(8), 2059-2075.

Hoare, S. 2010, Nov 30. Rising demand gives English-speaking teachers a world of choice [online]. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/education/2010/nov/30/international-schools-english-teachers-hoare

Huysman, J. 2019. Rural teacher satisfaction: an analysis of beliefs and attitudes of rural teachers' job satisfaction. [online] Available at https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Rural-Teacher-Satisfaction%3A-An-Analysis-of-Beliefs-Huysman/c39b4175a8873e148b6d61304abb105613b6c44b

Iatefl.org. 2020. Special interests | iatefl.org [online] Available at https://www.iatefl.org/special-interests

Improving the conditions of teachers and teaching in rural schools across African countries. 2019. UNESCO [online]. Available at https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000216062

Ine.es. 2019. Inactivos por situación de inactividad y provincial (3992) [online]. Available at https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Datos.htm?t=3992

Ine.es. 2019. Instituto Nacional de Estadística. (National Statistics Institute) [online]. Available at https://www.ine.es/dynt3/inebase/index.htm?padre=525

International TEFL Academy. 2020. How large is the job market for English teachers abroad? [online]. Available at https://www.internationalteflacademy.com/blog/how-large-is-the-job-market-for-english-teachers-abroad

Ireson, J. 2004. Private tutoring: how prevalent and effective is it? *London Review of Education* 2(2), 109-122.

Jrre.psu.edu. 2019 [online]. Available at: http://jrre.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/35-2.pdf

Kozulin, A. 2007. *Vygotsky's educational theory in cultural context.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kozulin, A., Gindis, B., Ageyev, V. and Miller, S. 2003. *Vygotsky's educational theory in cultural context.* Learning in Doing. Cambridge University Press.

Kriner, B., Coffman, K., Adkisson, A., Putman, P. and Monaghan, C. 2015. From students to scholars. *Adult Learning* 26(2), 73-80.

Ritchie, H. and Roser, M. 2020. Urbanization, Our World in Data [online]. Available at https://ourworldindata.org/urbanization

Schnitzer, E. 1995. English as an international language: Implications for interculturalists and language educators. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 19(2), 227-236.

Wenger, E. 2020. Introduction to communities of practice | Wenger-Trayner [online]. Available at https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/

Yang, S. H. 2009. Using blogs to enhance critical reflection and community of practice. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 12(2), 11-21.

Figures

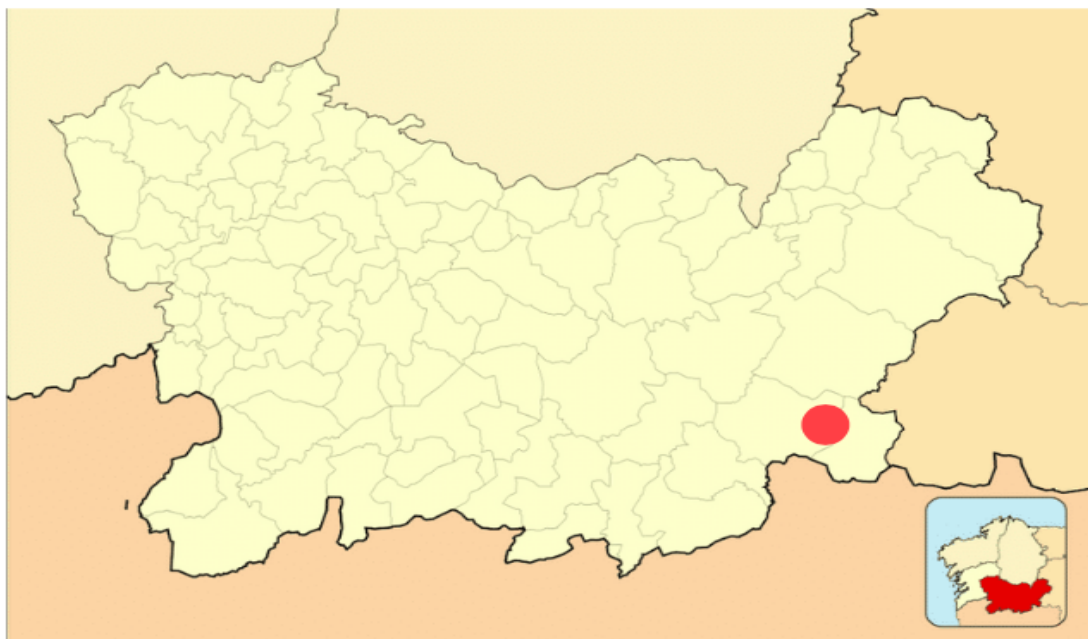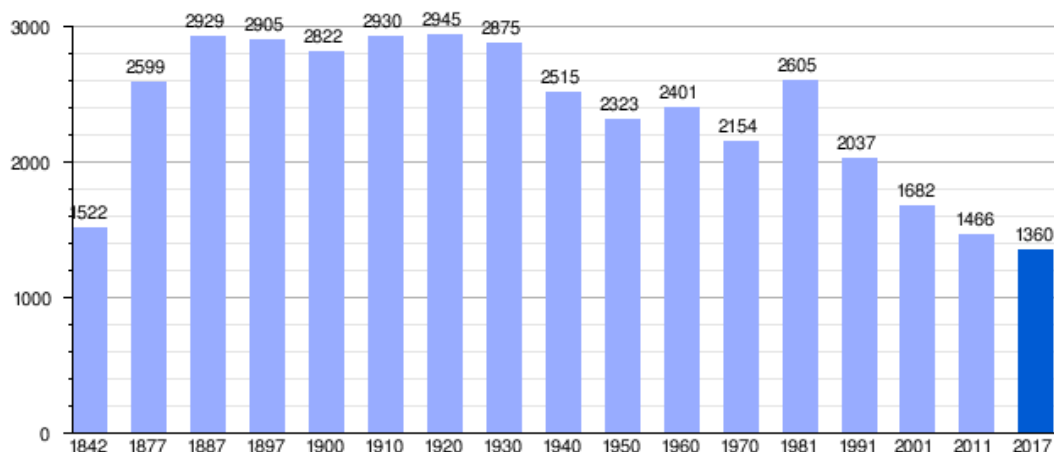Figure 1. "As Frieiras" region, located within Europe and Spain.

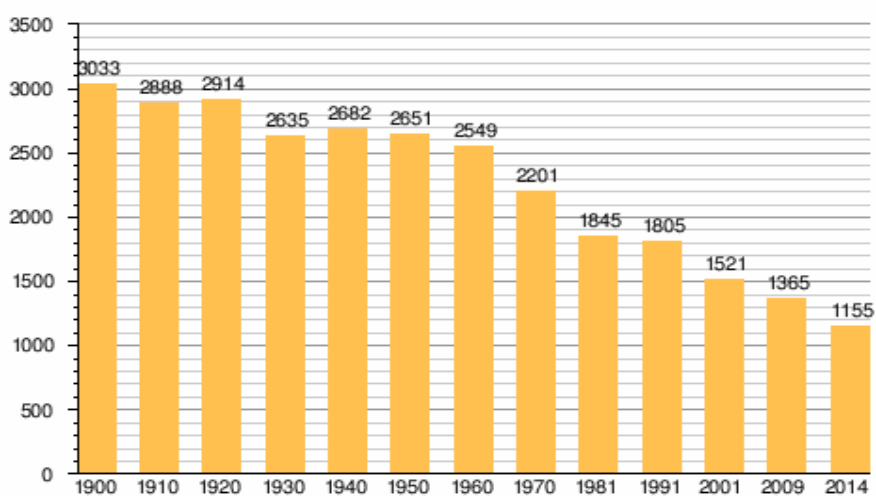Figure 2. "As Frieiras" region located within the province of Ourense.

Figure 3. Demographic decline in the municipality of A Gudiña (As Frieiras region), years 1842-2017.
Sources: INE/Wikipedia

1900	1930	1950	1981	2004	2009	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
3033	2635	2651	2098	1406								{{{13}}}	{{{14}}}

Figure 4. Demographic decline in the municipality of A Mezquita (As Frieiras region), years 1900-2018.
Sources: INE/Wikipedia