

**DEVELOPING SECONDARY STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE  
COMPETENCE: POLITICS AND REALITY**

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*That theory and practice do not always go hand in hand is something of a commonplace. The same holds true for what is legislated about how languages should be taught, and how they really are taught in schools. This relation between politics and classroom reality is the topic of the present paper. In it secondary school teachers' attitude towards language teaching and students' perception of the way in which languages are taught are compared with what, according to government policies should be going on in classrooms. At the end of the paper, possible reasons for the divergence between one and the other are forwarded.*

*Keywords: educational reform, teacher thinking, change.*

**1. Introduction**

With the wide acceptance of the postulates of communicative language teaching, the aim of EFL has generally been defined as developing students' communicative competence in English. Correspondingly, foreign language teaching in the *Spanish Educación Secundaria Obligatoria* has to "proporcion[ar] a los alumnos una competencia comunicativa en alguna lengua extranjera" (Real Decreto 1345/1991; suplemento del número 220 del BOE: 70). The same document further states that "la finalidad curricular de este área no es enseñar una lengua extranjera, sino enseñar a comunicarse en ella." This clearly reflects a communicative approach to

language teaching, but apart from it, foreign language teaching at secondary level also has to be learner-centred. Thus

Conseguir que el alumno llegue a ser autónomo y se responsabilice de su proceso de aprendizaje exige que se le ofrezca participar en las decisiones relativas a los contenidos y en la evaluación del aprendizaje realizado. La negociación y la autoevaluación serán pues aspectos esenciales de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en esta etapa (suplemento del nº 220 del BOE: 71).

However, it is also clear that legislating one type of language teaching is not concomitant to teaching in this way.

In a first step towards exploring the relationship between educational policy and classroom practice, this paper sets out to evaluate the extent to which teachers of English in secondary schools in the *Comunidad de Madrid* embrace the principles underlying communicative language teaching and learner-centred approaches. It does so through a survey using the attitude scale developed by Karavas-Doukas (1996), and by comparing what teachers reflect in this survey with what actually goes on in second language classrooms. These data, it is hoped, will shed some light on the degree of communicativeness of English language teaching in secondary schools in Spain.

Once this degree of communicativeness has been established, it will be necessary to find the reasons for teachers' commitment – or lack of commitment – to the principles underlying communicative language teaching. To do so, I will look at the opportunities teachers have for becoming familiar with methodological principles and issues, and the extent to which they can integrate these into their ideas about teaching.

## **2. The study**

The study is based on two types of data, which try to establish, on the one hand, how communicative second-language teachers are, and on the other, what type of teaching goes on in secondary schools in the Madrid area. The first type of data was collected through an attitude scale developed by

Karavas-Doukas (1996)<sup>1</sup>, which was sent out to 20 secondary schools in the Madrid area. Teachers were asked to rate different statements related to language teaching/learning, and to say what they thought had exerted the strongest influence on their ideas about teaching. In addition, they were encouraged to comment on anything they thought relevant. The second type of data stems from the analysis of university students' comments about the teaching of English they had received at secondary school.

As regards the attitude scale used, it is composed of 24 statements about language teaching/learning, which make reference to different aspects of the teaching/learning process. The themes they focussed on were:

- Group/pair work (statements 2, 13, 21, 22).
- Quality and quantity of error correction (statements 6, 10, 14, 15).
- The role and contribution of learners in the learning process (statements 4, 5, 8, 9, 20).
- The role of the teacher in the classroom (statements 7, 11, 16, 19, 24).
- Place/importance of grammar (statements 1, 3, 12, 17, 18, 23).

In order to increase the reliability and to avoid teachers answering what they think is expected of them, the questionnaire contains both statements that reflect a communicative approach, and statements that contradict it (see Karavas-Doukas 1996: 189-191 for the process followed in the creation of this tool). This made it necessary, in order to be able to work out a score for the degree of communicativeness of the respondents, to reverse the scores given to the statements that do not reflect a communicative approach, the negative scores of 1 and 2 becoming 5 and 4 respectively, and the positive 4 and 5 becoming the scores 2 and 1 respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> For the attitude scale, see Appendix I.

Once the questionnaires (21 of the 98 sent out)<sup>2</sup> had been collected, the responses were collated and mean scores found for each of the teachers, the whole questionnaire by all the teachers and each of the questions by all the teachers. All of these data together were expected to shed some light on teachers' attitude towards communicative language teaching, and thus on the extent to which what has been legislated through the reform of the educational system has really been put into practice by classroom teachers.

Apart from the attitudes of teachers towards communicative language teaching as reflected in their answers to the questionnaire, the other source of information we have for what goes on in classrooms is the students' experience. Thus, I will try to illustrate what seems to go on in classrooms by looking at what 10 university students wrote in the student diaries they kept for their course in Methodology<sup>3</sup> about the way they had been taught. By letting the students speak for themselves rather than asking them directly, and without focussing their attention towards the teaching they had experienced as students, I assumed that what they said reflected more truthfully what went on in their English lessons at school (for a similar point, see Woods 1996: 27).

To find these comments, all the diaries were read several times, and those passages where mention was made to teaching and learning in a secondary school context were copied. I later grouped them according to the topic they dealt with, and coded each of the quotations so as to identify the author without revealing his/her identity. Students' comments were not

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<sup>2</sup> The fact that such a small proportion of the teachers asked to fill in the questionnaires actually returned them, which to a certain degree is inevitable, nevertheless opens up questions about the extent to which these teachers are representative for the whole teaching population – at least in the Madrid area. One could argue that only the most committed of the teachers are likely to answer a questionnaire like this – the most committed also being those that tend to be more willing to adopt new methods.

<sup>3</sup> This is an optional subject which students take in their 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year of study. For more information about this course as well as about the student diaries, see Halbach (1999a; 1999b).

edited, so as to avoid an even greater bias than the one inherent in a selection process of the type described above.

### **3. The results**

#### **3.1. The degree of communicativeness of secondary school teachers**

The first of the scores that was determined from the analysis of the questionnaires was an individual score for each teacher. Thus, the "degree of communicativeness" of the teachers ranges from a score of 2.7 to a score of 3.7 on a 5-point scale. While neither of the two extremes indicates a clear tendency in favour or against a communicative approach to language teaching, they can neither be said to give an impression of great enthusiasm towards it. The overall mean score of 3.309 for all the teachers gives a similar impression of indecisiveness.

However, as Karavas-Doukas points out, a score of 3 does not necessarily indicate a neutral position towards the communicative approach, since "a respondent can obtain a middle-of-the-range score by either being uncertain about many items, or by holding inconsistent or strongly favourable and strongly unfavourable attitudes towards the attitude object in question" (Karavas-Doukas 1996: 192). It therefore becomes necessary to look at each answer in greater detail. To do so, and since the statements are related to five different aspects of the teaching/learning process, the mean scores of teachers' valuations of the different statements are going to be grouped and analysed according to the issue they make reference to.

##### **a) Group/pair work**

Statement 2	Statement 13	Statement 21	Statement 22
3.5	3.25	3.05	2.91

All of these scores represent a fairly neutral position with no more than 0.6 variation between the scores given to each of the statements, so that

in respect to group/pair-work teachers seem to have a rather neutral position. This may be explained by the comment made by one of the teachers in the questionnaire:

[group work]: it's perfect in a small centre with students interested in what they are doing (T 3)

implying that in secondary schools, with large groups and unmotivated students, using group-work is not feasible. Thus, this neutral score might reflect teachers' agreement with the benefits of pair- and group-work, but their impossibility to use it because of practical problems.

#### b) Quality and quantity of error correction

Statement 6	Statement 10	Statement 14	Statement 15
3.6	3.5	3.1	2.66

In relation to this second group of statements we find that, again, teachers seem to have a more or less coherent opinion about the way in which errors should be understood and dealt with in language learning, at least as reflected by the score given to the first three statements. In this case, teachers seem to hold slightly more "communicative" opinions, since their scores are all slightly higher than the neutral 3, except, once more, for the last statement.

Interestingly, this last statement is the most general of the four, stating that *the communicative approach to language teaching produces fluent but inaccurate learners*.<sup>4</sup> If teachers really hold this to be true then this

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<sup>4</sup> This is one of those statements for which the scores have to be reversed in order to find out how communicative teachers are. Therefore, although the score of 2.66 would indicate that teachers are indeed saying that they don't agree with this stance, because the scores have

contradicts what they have said about the fact that it is not necessary to correct students' mistakes (statement 10), for example. It shows, furthermore, that grammatical correctness and accuracy are valued highly, thus contradicting the apparent value given to the teaching of grammar as reflected in the fifth set of statements.

**c) The role and contribution of learners in the learning process**

Statement 4	Statement 5	Statement 8	Statement 9	Statement 20
2.45	3.45	3.8	3.43	2.33

Generally speaking, teachers seem to be in favour of giving learners a more active role in their learning process, helping them to take on responsibility for their learning (statements 5 and 8) helping them through learner training to develop their full potential (statement 8), and having some control over their own learning (statement 9). However, once again we find scores that seem to contradict these conclusions.

Thus, the scores given to statements 4 and 20 are more than 1 point below those given to the statements discussed above. On closer inspection, we find that these two statements directly mention the teaching process: number 4 mentions the *content of the lesson* while number 20 makes reference to *tasks and activities*. The selection of both of these have traditionally been the responsibility of teachers, and through the low scores given to these statements teachers seem to be saying that learners are in no position to intervene in this aspect of the teaching / learning process.

Once again we find, then, contradicting opinions, which can be explained however, if we take into account that one of the recurrent ideas that appears in the statements rated positively is that students should take on the responsibility for their own learning. Although learner training is

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already been reversed, this valuation indicates that teachers agree rather than disagree with it. Thus, what this score reflects is that teachers do think, to a certain extent, that the communicative approach produces fluent rather than accurate learners.

mentioned explicitly in statement 5, it is possible to understand even this statement as dealing with the issue of students' responsibility alone, which would in no way contradict a more traditional point of view. Traditionally, it is the teacher who selects the tasks and activities and organises the teaching, but it is the learners' responsibility to actually do the learning. Maybe in this case, then, the scores all reflect a quite traditional distribution of roles in the classroom. Whether or not this is true needs to be decided in the light of the way in which teachers respond to the next set of statements, about their role in the teaching/learning process.

**d) The role of the teacher in the classroom**

Statement 7	Statement 11	Statement 16	Statement 19	Statement 24
2.35	1.4	4.05	3.1	4.57

Already at first sight, this appears to be the issue where most contradictions appear. It is the set of statements where both the highest (4.57) and the lowest (1.4) scores have been given. Initially, the valuation given to the last 3 statements would indicate that teachers' opinions are in line with the ideas underlying the communicative approach while the first 2 would indicate almost the contrary.

As regards statement 7, in it teachers express their doubts about the idea that *the teacher as 'authority' and 'instructor' is no longer adequate to describe the teachers' role in the classroom*. This would be in line with the interpretation made of the scores given to the previous set of statements, where it became apparent that teachers tend to hold on to a rather traditional understanding of the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom.

The next statement, number 11, touches on one of the problems of the Spanish educational system after the *Reforma*, the problem of mixed ability classes. Thus, although initially, following a more communicative and learner-centred approach we would say that *it is not impossible in a class of 30 students to organise your teaching so as to suit everybody's*



*needs*, it is almost a commonplace to say that one of the great challenges teachers face in their everyday teaching is the so-called “diversidad”<sup>5</sup>. Thus, it is not surprising that they almost unanimously give this statement a score of 1 or 2.

One of the teachers very nicely links the scores given by most of her colleagues to these two statements by saying

Si yo supiera cuál es la mejor manera de enseñar el inglés la habría patentado. No hay una única vía, pero con el alumnado actual, tan heterogéneo, es casi mejor volver a sistemas más tradicionales que, de hecho, yo nunca había utilizado. (T 1)

In the light of this comment, it also becomes clear why the other statements are given such positive scores. In the case of statement 16, teachers agree with the fact that *the teacher as transmitter of knowledge is only one of the many different roles he/she must perform in the course of a lesson*, but not because, as would be in line with a more learner-centred approach, the teacher has to act as a facilitator too, for example, but rather because, as one of the teachers puts it

... teachers can't cope with everything: students, syllabuses, behaviour & discipline problems. (T 3)

The teacher is not only a transmitter of knowledge, but also an administrator, an educator, a policeman...

Statement 24, regarding the textbook and the need to complement it with other material, might well reflect a more “modern” understanding of the textbook as a *sourcebook* rather than a *coursebook* (see Nunan & Lamb 1996: 183), but can also be understood as reflecting, once again, the problems related with catering for a large number of very mixed-ability

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<sup>5</sup> That this is so is shown, among other things, by the fact that many pre-service teacher training courses include an obligatory subject called “Atención a la diversidad”, and by the fact that many in-service teacher-training courses also deal with this issue.

students. Statement 19, finally, is valued in a rather neutral way, Thereby not giving much information about teachers' attitudes.

**e) Place/importance of grammar**

St. 1	St. 3	St. 12	St. 17	St. 18	St. 23
3.71	4.28	4.24	4.1	3.76	2.86

The place and importance given to teaching grammar seems to be the issue where teachers get closest to what represents a communicative approach to language teaching. The means of all the scores given are higher than 3.7, which is quite positive, especially if compared to those given to the previous groups of statements. However, once again in this case there is one score that does not fit into this picture, the score given to statement 23. This, although not overtly negative, is still much less positive than the other ones.

Looking at the content of the statements, statement 23 is the only one that is related to the way in which grammar should be taught, to the need of *direct instruction in the rules and terminology of grammar*. All the other statements deal more with the role of grammar in language teaching and the effect of grammar instruction on students' ability to use the language. Perhaps this indicates, then, that although teachers do agree with the basic communicative premises of teaching grammar as a means rather than an end, they also believe that in order to do so you have to teach the rules and the corresponding terminology. In any case, the discrepancy between the valuation given to the different statements related to the place of grammar in language teaching together with the contradictions found in the scores given to the statements related to errors and error correction seem to indicate that teachers tend to be in two minds when it comes to teaching grammar.

The analysis of teachers' responses to the questionnaire thus leaves us with the picture of teachers as mildly communicative with a fairly favourable attitude towards group and pair work. The results in relation to the importance of grammar and the role of errors and error correction are, however, less conclusive. It seems as if accuracy and grammatical knowledge are both valued rather highly, even though grammar is understood as a means rather than an end of the instruction. In relation to the

roles of teachers and learners, finally, it seems as if the traditional distinction is maintained, with teachers being responsible for teaching, and learners for learning. The great problem that appears in relation to learners is the high degree of mixed abilities inside the classroom.

All of these conclusions can be no more than tentative, and anything that has been said so far needs to be contrasted with what the students themselves can say about the teaching they received during their years at secondary school.

### **3.2. The students' perceptions**

What students comment on most frequently is the role given to grammar in their language classes. Thus we find the following comment by one of the students:

We have to teach all the grammar in the syllabi. We have to practise all that grammar with exercises... (P 27.2.)

When asked why she thought she would “hav[e] to teach all the grammar in the syllabus” in the future, the student answered the following:

The first question was about why the grammar syllabus should be completely taught, well, maybe it is not a very “methodological” answer but that’s what the system demands. It is very beautiful to think that at high school pupils are taught a language to use it. The reality is that they just learn to answer grammatical questions in a written exam. (P, answers to 27.2.)

The same experience is reflected in the comment another student made in relation to the attention paid to the development of the communicative skills as opposed to the development of knowledge about the language:

In this first day we have focused in the distinction knowledge-skills. Curiously, I realised that my almost 15 years of ESL have been devoted to the development of my knowledge and very few to my skills. (O 12.2.)

The picture that these two students present is thus one of language learning as being focussed on grammar - the knowledge about the language – rather than on the ability to use the language for communication. Interestingly, one of the students blames "the system" for this, a system which, in theory at least, promotes teaching a language as a means for communication.

A similar picture is presented by the comments related to the importance given to the practice of the four communicative skills. Many students point out the lack of listening exercises in their English language courses:

when I was at school I almost didn't do listening activities (I had just one teacher that used to play a cassette from time to time, while others just played it at listening's exam). (L 13.3.)

Others mention the fact that they were never taught how to write:

I know that these writings are not taught to help students learning to write specifically, but to revise grammar, vocabulary ... (P 27.3.)

... I was taught to write to obtain a result or product so I don't remember any of my teachers telling me which process I had to follow to approach a good written result, it was more a process of trial and error... (L 26.3)

In relation to the exercises devoted to the development of the four skills, another aspect that is mentioned several times is the structure of these exercises, or rather the lack of any pre-listening and/or pre-reading exercises, geared towards helping the students with the comprehension of the texts:

They [pre-listening activities] are extremely important, and I have never in my life done this kind of activity before a listening. (N day12)

I have rarely made a pre-reading while I was at high school and now I see that it is fundamental for the activity to go well. My teachers used to arrive

at class and make us read by turns, but no expectations were raised, we weren't given a purpose nor background. (Lu)

What students seem to say here, then, is that they were left by themselves when it came to deal with the use of the communicative skills, that there was nothing to prepare them or nobody to teach them, but that working with them was more of a process of "trial and error" as one of the students put it.

These comments contribute to confirm the conclusions reached in the previous section about the fact that grammar still plays an important role in the teaching of English at secondary school level, and that sometimes even skills work like writing is devoted to practising the knowledge of the language rather than to developing the skill as such. It is, however, interesting to note that teachers, at some level, do not agree with this importance given to grammar and the elements of the language generally, while still teaching in this way.

On the other hand, the fact that students feel they have not really been *taught*, that nobody assisted them in their development of the skills, is in line with a traditional division of the roles of teachers and learners: it is the teachers' responsibility to decide what students have to do when and how, but it is the students' responsibility to do the learning. While the teachers' decisions are certainly important for the way in which the learning can progress, they are in some way separate from the learning process.

#### **4. Tracing the reasons for this situation**

Having reached this point, it becomes necessary to find reasons for this situation. Being able to trace the source of both this contradictory teacher behaviour and the generalised lack of incidence of the reform of the educational system on English language teaching is difficult and requires a careful analysis of the different factors at play which by far exceeds the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, I would like to forward a few possible

reasons for the seeming resistance to change of secondary school teachers in the Madrid area.

First of all, following Prodromou, "professional neglect of the backwash effect is one of the main reasons why new methods often fail to take root in language classes" (Prodromou 1995: 14). The one main exam secondary schools have to prepare students for is the Selectividad, an exam which has changed very little since it was first established in the late 1970s. What is tested is students' competence in reading and writing, as well as their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. The main focus in the writing assignment is also on the grammatical correction of students' language production, so that little space is left for "communication".

On the other hand, as Richards & Lockhart point out, "experience is insufficient as a basis for development" (1994: 4). However, if we look at the sources teachers quote for their ideas about teaching, we find that all of them (20 teachers) point at the practice of teaching as the main factor. Only few mention any other sources, such as in-service teacher training courses (9 teachers) or readings (4 teachers) as influential on their method. Without this outside input, it is very difficult to adopt a new methodology. Because of the requirements of the system, one can be certain that all of these teachers have attended in-service teacher-training courses, but somehow these courses seem not to have been meaningful for them.

One possible reason for this is that just being told *about* a more learner-centred, communicative approach to language teaching is not enough, since "it's no good talking about or imposing change [...], you have to let the 'changees' experience what you are talking about first" (Harmer 1999: 5). If this practical element is lacking, the new ideas will stay at a theoretical level, and their implications for the actual classroom practice will probably remain obscure.

Moreover, in order for any ideas transmitted in a teacher-training course to become part of teachers' own method, it is necessary that they have opportunities for reflection (see Wallace 1991), since

reflection may be a precondition for intake to enter the *teacher change cycle*, through which it will be processed at an increasingly deep and personal level to become part of the teacher's system of values and classroom behaviours. In this way, the intake to the teacher change cycle becomes *uptake* which is eventually represented in teaching outcomes (Pennington 1996: 343).

Maybe due to the very structure of the in-service teacher training courses, teachers have never really had the opportunity of reflecting on their own practice, and thus of integrating new ideas.

Finally, for any change to occur, teachers, who in the last instance are those who effect the change, have to see it as relevant, practicable and desirable. In the light of teacher 1's comment about having to use even more traditional methods in order to meet the requirements of large heterogeneous classes with not very motivated students, it may be doubted that teachers have understood this methodological innovation as being either practicable or beneficial for them and for their students.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study has tried to shed some light on current practice of foreign language teaching in secondary schools in the Madrid area. In so doing, it has become evident that while a more communicative, learner-centred approach to teaching has been enforced by legislation for the last 9 years, teachers have made little change in this direction. They seem to hold on to a rather structure-based teaching with a traditional distribution of roles within the classroom.

While finding the exact reasons for this situation is not possible in this paper, it seems that somehow teachers have not been able – or been given the chance – to espouse the new ideas, to understand what is at stake, and to integrate the new methodological stances with their own personal theories of language teaching and learning. While it is nothing new to say that unless this process is done by teachers, change will not be effective, it is

still necessary to apply this knowledge and try to find out what exactly is not working, so as to be in a position to make the necessary changes to teacher training courses, for example. Further study is needed in this area, but I hope to have offered at least a starting point for it.

### Appendix I

Attitude scale

Read the following statements, and give them one of the following

ratings so as to reflect what you think about this issue:

- 1 – I strongly disagree
- 2 – I disagree
- 3 – I neither agree nor disagree
- 4 – I agree
- 5 – I strongly agree

If you are not sure what the question means, just leave it blank.

	Rating
1. Grammatical correctness is the most important criterion by which language performance should be judged.	
2. Group work activities are essential in promoting genuine interaction among students.	
3. Grammar should be taught as a means to an end and not as an end in itself.	
4. Since the learner comes to the language classroom with little or no knowledge of the language, he/she is in no position to suggest	



what the content of the lesson should be or what activities are useful for him/her.	
5. Training learners to take responsibility for their own learning is useless since learners are not used to such an approach.	
6. For students to become effective communicators in the foreign language, the teachers' feedback must be focused on the appropriateness and not the linguistic form of the students' responses.	
7. The teacher as 'authority' and 'instructor' is no longer adequate to describe the teacher's role in the language classroom.	
8. The learner centred approach to language teaching encourages responsibility and self-discipline and allows each student to develop his/her full potential.	
9. Group work allows students to explore problems for themselves and thus have some measure of control over their own learning.	
10. The teacher should correct all the grammatical errors students make. If errors are ignored, this will result in imperfect learning.	
11. It is impossible in a class of 30 students to organise your teaching so as to suit everybody's needs.	
12. Knowledge of the rules of a language does not guarantee the ability to use the language.	
13. Group work activities take too long and waste a lot of valuable teaching time.	
14. Since errors are a normal part of learning, much correction is a waste of time.	
15. The communicative approach to language teaching produces	

fluent but inaccurate learners.	
16. The teacher as a transmitter of knowledge is only one of the many different roles he/she must perform in the course of a lesson.	
17. By mastering the rules of grammar students become fully capable of communicating with a native speaker.	
18. For most students language is acquired most effectively when it is used as a vehicle for doing something else and not when it is studied in a direct or explicit way.	
19. The role of the teacher in the language classroom is to impart knowledge through activities such as explanation, writing, and example.	
20. Tasks and activities should be negotiated and adapted to suit the students' needs rather than imposed on them.	
21. Students do best when taught as a whole class by the teacher. Small group work may occasionally be useful to vary the routine, but it can never replace sound formal instruction by a competent teacher.	
22. Group work has little use since it is very difficult for the teacher to monitor the students' performance and prevent them from using their mother tongue.	
23. Direct instruction in the rules and terminology of grammar is essential if students are to learn to communicate effectively.	
24. A textbook alone is not able to cater for all the needs and interests of the students. The teacher must supplement the textbook with other materials and tasks so as to satisfy the widely differing needs of the students.	

Think about your answers for a moment. Who or what has influenced your ideas about teaching?

- the way you learned English or another foreign language
- one or more of your teachers
- your observations about how children learn to speak
- what you learned in various subjects during your studies (Filología)
- what you have read about learning languages
- one or more teacher training courses you have attended
- your practical experience
- others

Number of years in teaching English:

Thank you very much for your collaboration (and time)!

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