

THE ROLE OF SELF-REFLECTION FOR THE PERMANENT FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

THE SELF-REFLECTION FOR THE PERMANENT FORMATION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

The importance of creating opportunities and means for the students to reflect on their own teaching practice is clearly seen in the results obtained by the students majoring in English at the University of Holguín. These students like the language and cherish the idea of becoming translators and interpreters but do not think the same about becoming teachers. It is, therefore, a hard task to motivate them to learn as much as possible from their practical teaching experience and seek for pre-professional development. Making the student-teachers aware of their strengths and weaknesses by a continuous reflection process on the teaching-learning process outcomes has proven its effectiveness. The results of a pilot study applied during the last three years are presented in this paper.

KEYWORDS: pre-service teaching practice; self-reflection; teacher development.

INTRODUCTION

In Cuba, the teaching of foreign languages has been a priority from the very beginning of the First Revolution in Education. A foreign language became part of the syllabus of secondary and pre-university levels as well as a compulsory

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subject in all university majors, so the demand for FL teachers made it possible that in the 60s, the 70s, and the 80s teacher training colleges and language schools for adults were opened in all provinces. These, now, Pedagogical Universities, are meant to prepare teachers for the primary and secondary education, leaving to universities the task of preparing their own professors. Early in the 90's, it was pretty clear that there were not enough language teachers to cover the needs of all the schools in the country, even less at the university level. Four other universities, besides the University of Havana, opened the major in English as a Foreign Language with the main goal of preparing translators, interpreters and professors.

The major started at the University of Holguín in the 1990-1991 school year. At the beginning it was a 5 year syllabus, and the students received a second foreign language (German at the time) for communication purposes. Later, in 1998, a preparatory course was added and the second foreign language was included at a professional level and became part of the professional profile of the major. It is a 6-year major now, and its main goal is to prepare translators, interpreters and professors of English, a second foreign language (French, in Holguín) and even Spanish as a foreign language. As a relevant fact, it should be emphasized that out of the need of teachers of English at the university level, some provinces started the so-called Major in English Language with a pedagogical profile which contributed to the formation of University Teachers of English in different universities. In the case of Holguín, this *branch* of the major emerged in 2005, and took care of just three groups of students.

It happens that the students majoring in Foreign Languages like the idea of using the language in communicative settings, of becoming translators and interpreters, so they respond in a more positive way to the pre-professional practice that has to do with practicing the language in real communicative settings, like working with tourists, for example. They are also very happy with the translation and interpretation practices but they do not happily welcome the teaching practice. When they actually become teachers and are responsible for a group of students, the vast majority of them change their minds and, even though they still say that they dislike the idea of becoming teachers, TEACHING as such is something that they enjoy.

"I do not have any methodological interest. In fact, I moved from the Teachers' Training College because I happened to dislike teaching... I do not feel that teaching could be something I would do for the rest of my life". (Luis, 2006)

"Anyone who has had to teach will agree with me if I say that it is rewarding to enter a classroom and see that your students welcome you with a smile, and ask immediately what is that day's text going to be about. It is good to know that the students know that you have searched for texts they find interesting". (Karina, 2011)

The pre-service teaching practice is preceded by two courses on Language Pedagogy. The first course is intended to give the students the main theoretical

aspects about teaching. Among the main contents taught are: approaches and methods in language teaching; current trends in FLT; the communicative approach; designing and implementing classroom materials and techniques; theories of second language acquisition; principles of language learning and teaching; lesson planning and classroom practicalities; the Foreign Language Syllabus, among others.

The second course deals with specific aspects of foreign language teaching and learning. Among them; the FL lesson, its main components; lesson objectives; assessment and evaluation; integrating language skills, why integration?; teaching oral comprehension; teaching speaking; teaching reading; teaching writing, teaching pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary...

The third subject is closely linked to the pre-service teaching practice. In this semester, the students put into practice the knowledge previously acquired about the teaching-learning process. The student/-teachers are in charge of teaching a course under the supervision of a tutor. During their teaching practice they have to put into practice the knowledge previously acquired in a real setting, adapting his/her teaching to the characteristics of the course and the level of the students. It also implies that the teachers-to-be become familiar with the ethic and esthetic of the pedagogical profession and develop their sense of responsibility as FL teachers.

The European Profile for Language Teacher Education - A Frame of Reference

(2004) presents a list of items which could be included in a teacher education program to equip language teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge, as well as other professional competencies, to enhance their professional development and to lead to greater transparency and portability of qualifications, precisely something that we have to bear in mind in order to encourage our student-teachers to learn as much as possible from their practical teaching experience and to make of them highly motivated teachers-to-be.

To fulfill this aim, the application of the ARCS-V model has been extremely useful by stimulating the student-teacher's curiosity and posing challenging questions and problems to be solved through the application of action research cycles to promote reflection, inquiry and a sense of understanding and efficacy of the teaching-learning process.

CONTENT

"So you've decided to be a language teacher! Welcome to a profession that will guarantee you more than your fair share of challenges, growth and fulfillment." With these interesting words, D. Brown begins his excellent book *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*, (Brown, 2001:34). And, this remark is a hundred per cent true. For the vast majority of teachers and professors, maybe for all of us, the teaching profession is an everyday challenge that we have to overcome with creativity, commitment and hard work.

There is also a sense of continuous and steady personal and professional growth, of fulfillment. According to J. Keller (2013:18), *the job of successfully teaching a second language class, like the requirement of being a high performing student, contains many obstacles to building and sustaining personal motivation*, since teachers have to find answers to questions all the time, as well as new ways and methods of going through the content, and of looking at the students and at ourselves. The pleasure that fill us comes from the excitement of looking our students grow not only as students but also as persons.

“Most of us remember our initial teaching appointment and that first encounter with our very own class. My own experience was an unforgettable one.”, says David Nunan in an article entitled *The very first day of the rest of my Life* (2006:23). Certainly, teaching is an exceptional opportunity, an unforgettable experience, a privilege, that all human beings should enjoy.

Being a foreign language teacher demands effort and commitment. Teachers constantly seek for a better teaching practice and for even superior outcomes on the part of the students. Knowing that we can contribute to make a change, no matter how little this change could be, to help people be better persons who might be able to create a better world, is the best satisfaction our profession can offer us.

Foreign Language Pedagogy starts in third year, but considering that they have had a preparatory course; it is their fourth year at the university. They have had enough time to fall in love with English and French, with cultural issues on both languages, applied linguistics, translation and interpretation among other subjects. All this experience reinforces their idea that they do not want to be teachers.

Departing from the certainty that intrinsic motivation is out of the question, we work hard in seeking and reinforcing extrinsic motivation. The student-teachers know that they have to pass the three subjects and the State Exam in Foreign Language Pedagogy if they want to complete their university major successfully, but this is a threat that we avoid to nurture. We want them to see and feel the beauty of opening doors to their students, to make them aware that as Mark Van Doren says: *“The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery”*.

Even before the students begin their pre-service teaching practice, when they are dealing with the topic in lesson planning, or teaching the language skills, on their second semester on SL Pedagogy, they are asked to reflect on the way they were taught the foreign languages (English and French) and how they reacted as foreign language learners. Usually their answer to this reflective exercise brings happy memories and they speak nicely about their experiences and about their professors. There are times when they openly express that they dislike the way they were taught a given component or ability, like writing. Their main complaint is that they got bored in the writing class. In both cases, we grab the opportunity and ask them to give reasons why they liked or disliked the language courses they took. The opinions they give are written

down and then used to analyze their actual teaching in the pre-service teaching practice.

Observation of an experienced teacher: After several of these *flash-back* sessions, the students are given the task of visiting a language lesson, if possible to approach the same professor who taught them previously. The idea is not to judge the professor, or the lesson. They are asked to take notice and analyze what actually happens in the language classroom; to „observe with new eyes“ how the language class works. It is amazing to listen to the students“ opinions about the class observed, and to the way they are now aware of the FL teaching-learning process.

The pre-service teaching practice is organized together with the third Pedagogy course. Each of the students is in charge of teaching a full course and he/she has a tutor who takes care of his/her teaching. The tutors assist the trainees in planning the lessons and in assessing the students but providing enough flexibility so that the student-teachers become more responsive to their students“ needs without disregarding the course objectives. In this situation mapping all the possibilities that might happen in the language classroom becomes impossible, but the options are there and the trainees have proved that they are more than capable of managing their class.

“Teaching has been a fruitful and amazing experience. It has helped me understand what being a teacher is like. Having the opportunity of teaching language lessons has made me improve my fluency while speaking as well as other aspects regarding my own learning of the foreign language. As I am a student, it was easy to grasp my students’ needs and interests and make them feel confident, not to be afraid of speaking. I believe I accomplished my expectations and the ones from my students. I felt as if I had been teaching my whole life. I established a good relationship with my students and everything went out perfectly well. This experience taught me to be responsible, dedicated and patient. (Lena, 2010)

The pre-service teaching practice is evaluated and assessed in a comprehensive way taking into account the quality of their actual teaching, attendance and punctuality to the working sessions with their tutors, as well as the completion of a portfolio containing the lessons taught and their reflection upon their teaching. The tutor also submits his comments on the performance and outcomes of the student-teachers.

Pre-service teaching practice helps student-teachers to understand their profession better and provides the necessary tools to encourage them to be creative and committed student-teacher-researchers. Their mentors normally set plans to support them and to provide useful and beneficial feedback about their teaching and suggest ways to improve it. One of the activities most frequently used by mentors and other teachers in charge of pre-service teaching students is to observe their lessons. Student-teachers accept supervision as an integral part of their training. They know they are students learning from their

mentors and teachers, ready to follow their instructions, ready to accomplish their tasks in order to get good grades in their courses as well as in their teaching practice and that being critical of their teaching and of their peers" teaching is an excellent way to reflect on their own teaching.

Motivating these student-teachers towards the teaching professional profile is one of our main tasks; we have searched for new ways to increase their interest in the teaching-learning process. To do this, several actions have been accomplished. Some of the most useful ones for the fulfillment of our objectives have been the application of:

- Action-research-reflection cycles
- Peer-teaching
- The ARCS model

Action-research-reflection. It is a natural way of acting, researching and reflecting at the same time in a flexible spiral process which allows action (change, improvement) and research (understanding, knowledge) to be achieved at the same time. The reflection allows understanding that may bring about informed change and at the same time is informed by that change, allowing the understanding to be widely shared and the change to be pursued with commitment.

- Strickland (1988: 76) outlines the following steps in an AR cycle:

1. identify an issue, interest or problem
2. seek knowledge
3. plan an action
4. implement the action
5. observe the action
6. reflect on your observations
7. revise the plan
8. identify another issue, interest or problem

The action-research-reflection cycles have been implemented during the pre-service teaching practice. The student-teachers find it quite useful and motivating since it serves as a guide to analyze their actual teaching and the learners" outcomes as they feel responsible for the quality of the changes they are able to make and fully in charge of the teaching-learning process by:

- helping them to notice what they and their students really do, rather than what they think they do,
- getting feedback on the success or failure of the teaching-learning process,

- helping them to tailor their teaching to suit the needs and interest of their learners and their context,
- being able to substantiate the choices they make during the process,
- increasing their knowledge about the teaching- learning process,
- motivating them towards teaching since, having so much to find out, they won't become bored while teaching

The results obtained by each of the student-teachers in their classrooms, the changes undergone in the teaching learning process, the learners' outcomes, are then discussed with their peers in a workshop organized by their mentor/s. The solutions proposed to solve the problems detected are quite creative and the student-teachers feel that they are able and ready to convey changes in the process as well as in their students' lives. It is encouraging to listen to their opinions after the solution they have provided to the problems encountered in the teaching-learning process. Even though, the majority still consider teaching out of their professional future, they accept that they like teaching, and that the feeling of satisfaction they sense when they are able to give an answer to a student, or to evaluate their students' performance in the classroom make them to become better students themselves, because the teaching practice gives them a comprehensive idea from the inside of the process.

Peer-teaching

There is no a magic recipe to teach a course and to make the students learn a foreign language, but they need a guidance, ideas and recommendations for their lessons. The contradiction arises when trainees try to apply in the classroom what their tutors have told them to do. The real classroom setting and the learners themselves provide a richer environment and a wide array of options that the teacher-to-be is not ready to face, hence our duty is to prepare them accordingly.

Peer-teaching is a way to improve the student-teachers' performance and to provide useful and beneficial feedback about teaching as well as suggesting ways to improve it. There is no doubt that peer-teaching observation has become a common practice as a vehicle for professional development worldwide. A peer observer can give the teacher specific advice about techniques that can improve his/ her performance, and help him/her to set goals based on an open discussion on strengths and areas of growth.

As it is used in our course, peer supervision allows the students to observe the performance of one or two or their classmates during the semester. This is very helpful because student-teachers understand better their teaching while observing how their peers teach. Effective peer teaching techniques improve the overall teaching and learning environment and success of all students when implemented properly; it constitutes a way for students to compare what they are doing well or wrong and decide what would work better in their lessons.

Their fellow student-teachers can encourage them to present individual beliefs and practices for comparison with others in a supportive and friendly atmosphere where spontaneity is accepted and, in many ways, fostered. Thus the student-teacher is helped to reorient his/her teaching to the changing conditions in the field and to devise his own techniques and materials, which can be tailored to suit the specific demands of their students.

A very useful and encouraging way to promote motivation towards teaching has been the implementation of open lessons. To have several, if not the whole group of your peers visiting your class is a highly demanding but rewarding activity that provides the student-teachers with a better understanding of their actual teaching. The clear and precise orientation about the way this group control develops, offers students the needed feedback that allows them to pay attention to the essential elements that require special care. It is very encouraging for a student-teacher to listen to his/her classmates' assessments and to new, fresh and innovative ideas, since they are their peers, trainees just like s/he is. Comments are not sensed as excessive criticism, they feel that their classmates do not judge them but share the same fears due to lack of experience and the same feeling of trying to be confident in their knowledge and skills in front of their students.

The open lesson is organized in three different steps for a better preparation on the part of the student-teachers:

Preparatory step: The professor explains the objective of the open lesson as a methodological activity. The student-teacher whose lesson is going to be observed is chosen. The professor and the rest of the student-teachers ask questions to get a better idea of the actual course the student is teaching, the characteristics of the students, the classroom physical conditions, etc. The student-teacher explains the lesson objectives and the characteristics of the syllabus he/she is teaching, how many students are there in his/her classroom as well as the main concerns he/she has about the teaching-learning process, including his/her reflections about his/her teaching. His/her tutor or mentor is invited to participate in the open lesson.

The rest of the student-teachers is grouped into pairs or trios. To give the trainees a better idea of what to do in the supervision practice, a set of supervision forms has been taken, designed or adapted from different sources to suit the objective of the course and of the supervision activity as such. Each of them received an observation form. The idea is to look at the lesson from eight (8) different perspectives. The procedure for the observation practice is explained.

The observation forms contain directions that orient the observer towards the essential aspects of the lesson he/she has to pay attention to, such as:

1. Self-observation sheet: The student who is teaching the actual lesson reflects on his/her lesson before and after teaching it and self-evaluate his/her performance.

2. Official form approved by the Ministry of Higher Education to evaluate teacher's performance (M-CC); followed by the student-teacher's tutor for the lesson observation.
3. General aspects of the student-teacher's performance in the classroom as well as the established rapport between the teacher and the students.
4. Detailed observation of specific aspects on the teacher's performance in the classroom (technical knowledge and language use, methods of teaching, teacher-students relationship, general conduct and manner)
5. Writing down all the events that happen in the trainee's lesson that might be relevant for an afterward discussion: time devoted to the activity, what happened, comments and questions
6. Focus on specific aspects of the lesson, mainly on the learners' behaviour. The supervisor does not necessarily has to agree on the events to be taken for the observation practice, but it could be of help to determine in advance in which moments of the lesson (controlled or creative practice, group or individual work, etc) the learners' behaviour is going to be the center of attention.
7. Focus on the teacher/learners relationship during the lesson and the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process as a whole.
8. Focus on a given aspect of the lesson (how to check and orient independent work, dealing with grammar, correcting students' mistakes, for example). It can be used by the student-teacher him/herself to monitor his/her lesson paying attention to specific content or activities in the classroom.
9. Focus on the classroom, the activities, the teacher and the students.
10. Focus on the ARCS-V model as a descriptive tool in observation. What alternatives were used, what strategies and alternatives might have been used for promoting and sustaining motivation.

The time is set for discussing the lesson in the small groups, fill in the forms and the time for the „big“ discussion is also arranged.

Actual observation: All participants in the observation activity arrive 5 minutes previous to the beginning of the lesson. The idea is not to interrupt any step of the lesson including the way the student-teacher enters the classroom and begins the lesson. Throughout the lesson the observers just take notes following the instructions in the forms they have. *A golden rule: no interruption, no comments, no distraction.*

After observation: Here comes the best part of the observation practice. The discussion about the results of the observation task may take place several days later. The idea is to have the student-supervisors work with peers who have the same observation form, discuss their findings among them and reach conclusions as a team. The discussion takes the form of a workshop. First, the

student-teacher who was supervised gives a critical report of his/her lesson. Self-reflection is very important since his/her peers will also value this attitude of critical inquiry and honest self-evaluation.

The student-supervisee's peers will then give their perceptions and opinions about the aspect(s) of the lesson that are highlighted in the observation form they had. Since each of the forms is directed towards a different angle of the lesson, the discussion becomes very rich in opinions, perceptions and judgments. The professor plays the role of facilitator, giving the leading role to the student-supervisors and letting them reach to conclusions. The only comments that are made are those that are needed for clarification or to avoid deviation of the main objective of the activity during the lesson analysis. The student-teacher may reflect again on his/her teaching after listening to his/her classmates.

Only at the end, the professor and the student-supervisee's tutor will participate in the debate, giving opinions openly, not necessarily judging what went right or wrong. Finally a list of those positive aspects and the ones that did not go well are written on the board, as general remarks to be taken into consideration in the future, not for the trainee as such but for all of them.

As each team has a different form, one single lesson could have been supervised from 7 to 10 different perspectives, given the final discussion an infinite number of approaches to the lesson. The student-teacher learns from him/herself, from his/her classmates and from the activity as a whole. Certainly in the variety of viewpoints that come up in the debate rests the richness of the observation practice carried out. Different approaches are followed, offering an integral appraisal of the lesson, the professor, the students, the materials and of the interrelation among all of them.

The ARCS-V model of motivational design, devised by John Keller (1987), consists of a set of categories of motivational concepts and strategies that are derived from a synthesis of the research on human motivation combined with a review of successful motivational practices. It was developed "to find more effective ways of understanding the major influences on the motivation to learn, and for systematic ways of identifying and solving problems with learning motivation".

Since it is a problem-solving approach to designing the motivational aspects of learning environments to stimulate and sustain students' motivation to learn (Keller, 1983, 1984, 1987), the model offers unique opportunities to the student-teachers to reflect on the teaching-learning process from a comprehensive perspective that helps them and their tutors to create motivational enhancements that are appropriate for a given set of learners including themselves.

The ARCS motivational design process includes:

- knowing and identifying the elements of human motivation,

- analyzing audience characteristics to determine motivational requirements,
- identifying characteristics of instructional materials and processes that stimulate motivation,
- selecting appropriate motivational tactics,
- applying and evaluating appropriate tactics.

This model has been quite important in identifying the various elements of student motivation while organizing the pre-service teaching practice. We have highlighted those aspects of the process that we know are touching our student-teachers' minds and hearts and then design motivational tactics that are appropriate for them and, by extension, could also be appropriate for their students. The initial four steps proposed by Keller for promoting and sustaining motivation in the learning process are: Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction (ARCS). To these four components, the author has already added Volition as a fifth important element to his original model.

Despite the fact that we have taken into consideration a simplified framework of the model, we have been able to make our students aware of their responsibility as teachers and ask them to use the elements of Attention to the different aspects of the foreign language teaching-learning process they are in charge of. It is of utmost importance the incorporation of a variety of tactics to gain and sustain learner's attention by the use of interesting graphics and animations, visual or

verbal scenarios that introduce incongruity or conflict, mystery, unresolved problems, and other techniques to stimulate a sense of inquiry in the learners. It is also important to incorporate variability in one's approaches, because no matter how interesting a given tactic is, people will adapt to it and lose interest over time.

In their practical experience as teachers, the students need to give Relevance to their own motivation as teachers, to their commitment in the foreign language teaching and learning process. Their tutors must bear in mind that it is important to make the student-teachers aware of the six major strategies for accomplishing this:

- Experience - Tell the learners how the new learning will use their existing skills and help them to learn from teaching. We best learn by building upon our preset knowledge or skills.
- Present Worth - What will the subject matter do for me today? What will the lesson I'm teaching today do for me and my students?
- Future Usefulness - What will the subject matter do for me tomorrow? What about the usefulness of what I am teaching to my students?
- Needs Matching - Take advantage of the dynamics of achievement, risk taking, power, and affiliation while dealing with your students learning

strategies and styles.

- Modeling - First of all, "be what you want them to do!" Other strategies include guest speakers, videos, and having the learners who finish their work first to serve as tutors.
- Choice - Allow the learners to use different methods to pursue their teaching goals...

It is very important to allow the student-teachers to use different methods, techniques, and materials in the classroom, and assume different roles as teachers. Allow them to succeed and feel that they have succeeded by themselves, that they are responsible for their success, but also that they must take responsibility for their failure. Make them aware that they will never fail, that what they consider failures are just sizeable opportunities for learning and professional growth. This will give them as student-teachers the necessary Confidence in their capacities and skills to be successful in their teaching practice, to influence upon their conceptions as language learners, so that they can be sure that their success is a direct result of the amount of effort they have been able to put forth. The result might be a Satisfying feeling, since teaching and learning are both rewarding activities in many ways, mainly when intrinsic motivation becomes an integral component of the teaching-learning process, and they become intrinsically motivated towards this area of their professional profile.

The model has been extremely useful in the organization and development of the pre-service teaching practice allowing student-teachers to understand better their profession and providing the necessary tools to encourage future teachers to be motivated and creative in their teaching.

CONCLUSIONS

Pre-service teaching practice is a required component of the FL Didactic Courses that are compulsory to take by the students majoring in Foreign Languages at Cuban Universities. Student- teachers are engaged in the teaching and learning process with students under the direct supervision of a tutor.

Action research, Peer Teaching observation and the ARCS model have given the opportunity of approaching the pre-service teaching practice in a more structured way to motivate and help student-teachers reflect on their actual teaching as well as on their peers". We have worked to make our student-teachers become part and parcel not only of the teaching activity but also of the evaluation of the process; to compare themselves with their peers; to self-evaluate their performance by getting acquainted with those aspects of the teaching-learning process that have become red light spots for both the teacher and the students; to reflect more on teaching; to become more interactive and reflective as teachers.

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