

MEXTESOL Journal



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MEXTESOL Journal

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Founded in 1973 Mexican Association of English Teachers, Mextesol, A. C.

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The Mission of Mextesol

MexTESOL, a professional organization for teachers of English in Mexico, seeks to develop in its members, as well as in non-members, the highest standards for teaching English to speakers of other languages so that their students can communicate effectively in all the diverse situations in which they may find themselves.

More information about Mextesol is available at the website:
www.mextesol.org.mx

The Mission of the Mextesol Journal

Focusing on the special circumstances of teaching and learning English in Mexico, the Mextesol Journal publishes articles dealing with both practical and theoretical topics of interest to the classroom teacher. Articles and book reviews related to EFL teaching in Mexico and in similar situations throughout the world are accepted for publication. Articles may be written in English or Spanish. Abstracts are to be written in both languages.

The Mextesol Journal is published three times a year, in April, August, and December.

La revista Mextesol Journal se publica tres veces al año, en abril, agosto y diciembre.

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Editorial Policy

The Mextesol Journal is dedicated to the classroom teacher in Mexico and Latin America. Previously unpublished articles and book reviews relevant to EFL teaching and research in Mexico and Latin America are accepted for publication. Articles may be of a practical or theoretical nature and be written in English or Spanish. The Journal reserves the right to edit an accepted manuscript in order to enhance clarity or style. The author will be consulted only if the editing has been substantial.

Research-based Articles: A research-based article should report original research or discuss research-related issues. These articles are usually submitted as refereed (judged as acceptable, conditional, or not acceptable) by two members of the Editorial Board who are experts in an area related to that of the article. The refereeing process is blind but, if an author wishes, a referee may be assigned as a mentor to guide the author through the revision process. A footnote will state that the article was refereed.

Professional Practice Issue Articles: In order to open the publication process to more authors, refereed or non-refereed articles are accepted in this section. These normally describe professional teaching experiences or library research related to teaching which the author wants to share with the readers. These articles will be read, judged and styled by members of the Editorial Staff for originality, quality and clarity of ideas.

Reviews: The Journal welcomes review articles summarizing published research or professional practice, position papers which promote or defend positions on a current, controversial topic, and book reviews of classroom texts, recorded material, computer software or other instructional resources. Reviews are non-refereed but are subject to editing.

Submission Guidelines: In order to facilitate the publication process, if possible, submissions should first be sent by e-mail to the address of the Journal. The article and any graphics must be written using Microsoft Word and sent as an "attachment." Please specify if you are submitting for a **Refereed** or **Non-refereed** article.

Any correspondence to the Journal concerning manuscripts should be e-mailed to the Editors at the address below. Information concerning advertising in the Journal or MEXTESOL membership should be sent to the National MEXTESOL Office at the addresses also listed below.

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Política Editorial

La revista Mextesol está dirigida al maestro de inglés en México y en América Latina. Se aceptan manuscritos y reseñas relevantes a la enseñanza del inglés como idioma extranjero e investigación que no hayan sido previamente publicados. Los artículos pueden ser de naturaleza teórica o práctica y pueden ser escritos en inglés o en español. La revista se reserva el derecho de editar un manuscrito aceptado para brindarle mayor claridad o mejorar su estilo. El autor será consultado únicamente para sugerir cambios.

Artículos basados en la investigación: Un artículo basado en investigación debe reportar investigación original o discutir asuntos relacionados con la investigación. Estos artículos generalmente se someten a arbitraje (juzgados como aceptable, condicional o no aceptable) realizado por dos miembros del consejo editorial expertos en un área relacionada con el artículo. El proceso de arbitraje es anónimo, pero si el autor lo desea se le puede asignar a un árbitro como mentor para guiarlo en el proceso de revisión. El artículo se publica con una nota al pie de página para indicar que es arbitrado.

Artículos relacionados con la práctica docente: Con el propósito de abrir las posibilidades de publicación a más autores, se aceptan artículos arbitrados y no arbitrados. Generalmente describen experiencias docentes o investigación bibliográfica relacionada con la enseñanza. Estos artículos son leídos y juzgados por miembros del personal editorial para asegurar su originalidad, calidad y claridad de ideas.

Reseñas: La revista acepta reseñas de investigación publicada o de práctica docente, ponencias que argumentan a favor o en contra de temas actuales o controvertidos y reseñas de libros de texto, materiales audiovisuales, programas de computadoras, y otros recursos didácticos. Las reseñas no son sometidas a arbitraje pero son sujetas a edición.

Indicaciones para enviar una propuesta: Para facilitar el proceso de publicación se recomienda enviar el manuscrito por correo electrónico a la dirección de la revista. Se debe utilizar un procesador Microsoft Word para el artículo y gráficas que lo acompañen y ser enviado como un attachment. Favor de indicar si se desea que el **artículo sea o no arbitrado**.

Cualquier correspondencia a la revista que tenga que ver con artículos para publicación debe ser enviada vía fax o correo electrónico a las direcciones que aparecen abajo. La información concerniente a propaganda en la revista o a membresías debe ser enviada a la Oficina Nacional de MEXTESOL cuya dirección también aparece abajo.

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Manuscript Guidelines Mextesol Journal

Articles must be typed, double-spaced and preferably no more than twenty pages long. The format should conform to the Publication Manual for the American Psychological Association (A.P.A.) guideline format.

In-Text Citations:

References within the text should be cited in parentheses using the author's last name, year of publication and page numbers (shown below):

Rodgers (1994) compared performance on two test instruments.

or

In a recent study of EFL writing (Rodgers, 1994)

Or for Direct Quotes:

Rodgers (1994) argued that, "most existing standardized tests do not accurately assess EFL writing performance" (p. 245).

Reference Page:

The list of references found in an article must appear at the end of the text on a separate page entitled "References". The data must be complete and accurate. Authors are fully responsible for the accuracy of their references. The APA format for reference page entries is shown below.

Books:

Brown, J. (1991). *Nelson-Denny Reading Test*. Chicago: Riverside Press

Journal Articles:

Ganschow, L. (1992). A screening instrument for the identification of foreign language learning problems. *Foreign Language Annals*. 24, 383-398.

Web sites:

Pratt-Johnson, Y. (2006). Communicating cross-culturally: What teachers should know. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 12. Retrieved November 22, 2007, from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Pratt-Johnson-CrossCultural.html>

From the Editors

This is the second issue of the new Editorial team and Board of the MEXTESOL Journal. In this issue we include three articles which were originally intended for the Special Issue of the Journal on Self-access Centers.

Our first article, *The What, Why and How of Language Advising*, by Hayo Reinders, discusses how language advising can be used in self-directed learning, self-access centers or as a complement for classroom teaching. The author mentions how language advising is a support system to help meet the individual needs of a language learner. The article also focuses on the rationale behind language advising and practical procedures of how to implement language advising.

The next article, *Past, Present and Future of a Mexican Self-access Center: The Case of the SAC at UABJ*, is a critical narrative of the self-access center at the Universidad Autónoma de Benito Juárez Oaxaca written by a permanent professor and researcher of UABJO, Angeles Clemente, and a visiting professor and researcher, Joan Rubin. This article relates the history, problems and evolution of this university SAC. An analysis and insights of how SAC counseling training based upon Learner Self-management, a community of learners and a community of teachers are offered by both authors.

The next article, *Instructional Strategies for Using Problem-based Learning with English Language Learners*, is by Beverly J. Hearn from the University of Tennessee at Martin and Peggy F. Hopper from Mississippi State University. This article provides us with an overview of problem-based learning which was originally initiated in the medical profession and which now is gaining status in the ESL field. These authors provide us with the benefits of problem-based learning and two examples for beginning to advanced levels.

This issue also includes three other articles related to aspects of English Language Teaching in general.

The fourth article, *A Study of the Effect of a Writing Assessment System on Instruction*, is written by Ana Muñoz and Martha E. Álvarez Villa, both from the Universidad EAFIT in Colombia. This research article is concerned with the use of a Writing Assessment System in a private university with the hopes of providing changes within writing instruction. This article describes how the Writing Assessment System was implemented, how teacher training and portfolios were carried out, and lastly the positive results that the use of this system produced.

The last two articles are of potential interest for teacher trainers and administrators of Teacher Training Programs. In the fifth article, Patricia Cánovas describes the process a team of teachers at the CELE/UNAM went through in redesigning their Teacher Training Course. A detailed account of the background which motivated the redesign, the stages it went through, and its piloting and on-going evaluation is offered. The final article was written by Jane Mackler of the University of Quintana Roo at Chetumal. In her article, Mackler tells us the 'The Whys and Wherefores' of a Teaching Practice course in which students are 'immersed' in a classroom as a way of providing them with an inside, realistic view of what is required of a teacher.

As always, we hope that you will find these articles interesting and useful for you. Hopefully, you will also become inspired to submit an article recounting your classroom experiences or sharing your research work with the other 2,400 members of MEXTESOL. Please check out the guidelines for article submissions in this issue as well as on the webpage:

<http://www.Mextesol.org.mx/?modulo=main&id=16>.

Saul Santos

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The What, Why, and How of Language Advising ¹

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Abstract

Language advising is a type of language support where teachers meet with students on an individual basis to offer advice and feedback and to help students develop self-directed learning skills. Language advising is an increasingly popular form of language support in many parts of the world, especially where for practical, financial, or pedagogic reasons students are asked to learn the language by themselves. Language advising is also more and more offered alongside classroom teaching as a way of focusing on individual learners' needs and of making links between classroom and out-of-class learning. This brief article looks at what happens in advisory sessions and what their potential benefits are, and provides some practical advice on how teachers can get started with offering this type of language support as a complement to their classroom teaching.

What is language advising?

Language advising (also called 'language counselling') is a form of language support. It consists of one or more meetings (online or face-to-face) between an advisor (a teacher or dedicated language support person) and a student, usually one-to-one. The purpose of advising is to provide guidance to students about their language learning and to encourage the development of learner autonomy. In this way, it is different from tutoring or conferencing in that the focus is not directly on the language, but rather on how to learn the language. Also, the advice is specific to the individual student, and the advising takes place over an extended period with ongoing monitoring and feedback; in this way advising is different from the brief meetings teachers may have with students after class to discuss their progress. Language advising sessions can be conducted in any language that the teacher and the student share, and can take place at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, at language schools, and as a way to support self-directed learning. However, it is most common at the tertiary level to support self-access language learning.

¹ This is a refereed article.

Is language advising useful?

Research has shown (e.g. Reinders, 2006) that yes, advising is useful in the sense that students are grateful for the help and rate it very highly. Here is a recent, and quite common, comment that I received from a student:

Thanks for all the help you've given me. I wouldn't know how to improve my English without your help. I really enjoyed all my sessions with you. I'll really miss talking to you when I get back to... [my home].

In terms of formal assessment, less is known about its effects. One of the reasons for this is that the sessions never take place in isolation; students are at the same time also enrolled in language classes or make use of a self-access centre. It is thus difficult to attribute language gains to the sessions alone. There is also the question of differences between learners; perhaps the more motivated students are more likely to come for advice. An important goal of advising, as mentioned above, is to encourage learner autonomy, and this is one aspect for which there is a lot of anecdotal evidence from advisors who see clear improvements in the ways students approach their learning and their level of independence. Formal measures to assess students' autonomy do not exist (but see Sinclair 1999, and Lai 2001 for attempts) and for that reason clear findings are therefore not available. Having said this, advisory sessions are an important form of support for students engaged in self-study, such as in self-access learning. Many of those learners would be likely to have withdrawn from their learning without the help they get from their advisors.

Characteristics of language advising

There are probably as many different kinds of advisory sessions as there are advisors because such sessions allow a great deal of room for the advisor's (and the student's!) creativity. However, certain characteristics can be found in most sessions and these include first and foremost that the sessions are *negotiated*. Telling a student what to do would be contrary to the goal of developing autonomy. That does not mean that practical and specific advice is never given, but that at least it is left up to the students to choose from different options.

A second characteristic is that the sessions are by their nature highly *personalised*. Although the advisor may be working from a template of pre-determined questions or recommendations from a limited set of resources, the fact remains that everything centres completely around the student's wants and needs. Sessions are also highly *flexible*. This applies to both the content of the sessions where one thing could happen in one session and something entirely different in another but also applies to the

fact that such sessions are often on a drop-in basis where it is frequently completely unknown who will come and for what reason. Where bookings are made, students do not always show up. This creates a challenge for many advisors. As Fu (1999) writes:

A person will come for what the counsellor perceives is a substantial and interesting discussion or learning dialogue, and then the counsellor never sees that person again, therefore getting neither any feedback nor report on progress (or lack of it) (p. 107).

This does not necessarily mean that the session has been fruitless. As Fu (1999) points out 'a seed may have been planted' (p. 107). However, the voluntary nature of such sessions creates other problems too. Voller, Martyn and Pickard (1999), for example, point out that sessions can lack clear objectives and fail to provide learners with sustained guidance. It would thus only be fair to include as an additional characteristic that language advising is *challenging* and *very different from classroom teaching*. In fact, advising is so different from classroom teaching that in our self-access centre every new staff member, regardless of the length of their previous experience as a teacher, is trained in language advising over a period of several weeks and many say it takes much longer than that to become good at it.

There are many different types of language advising. The most common (especially at the tertiary level) takes place outside the classroom and is done to support students' self-directed learning, as shown in Figure 1. These can be offered as a drop-in service or by appointment.

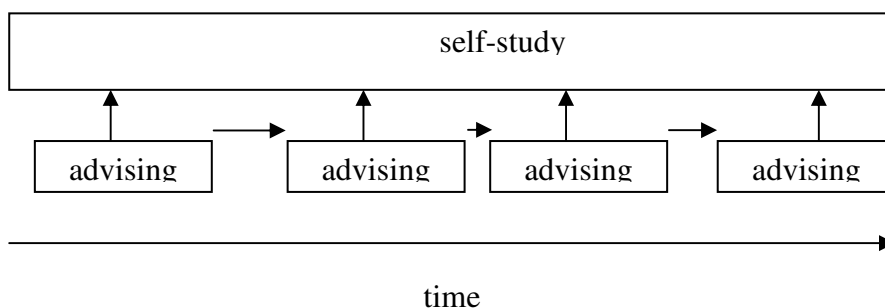


Figure 1: Types of language advising

As the above figure shows, the advising sessions take place over an extended period and support the self-study process. Similarly, advising sessions can support self-access learning or classroom learning. The sessions are not isolated but link from one to the next to ensure there is continuity in the support for the learners.

Often sessions take place in a self-access centre but they can also take place in a variety of other contexts. Makin (1994), for example, reports on 'telesupport' through email, Hurd (2001) reports on advising in open and

distance learning programmes, and Reinders (2006, 2007) discusses support offered through an electronic learning environment. Advisory sessions are also commonly offered as an 'add-on' service to students enrolled in language classes. Language schools, for example, increasingly offer an advisor to help students make the most of their learning. In secondary schools advisory sessions are offered as a type of remedial service and some countries have implemented elements of this at a national level (e.g. Thailand). Figure 2 shows the arrow originating from within the classroom. The content of the language advisory sessions is in this case informed by what happens in the classroom. The advisory sessions can be a great source of information to the teacher as they quickly reveal problematic areas, which is why the arrow points back from the advisory session to the classroom. The advisory session also affects students' self-study. Students bring their experiences back to the classroom and to the next advisory session. In this way language advising is an iterative and dynamic process. The following figure represents this process.

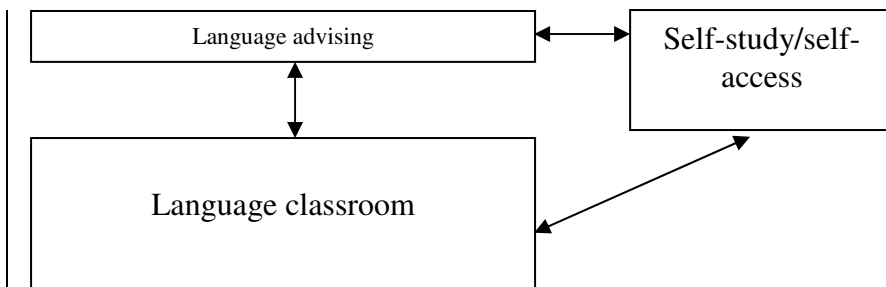


Figure 2: The process of language advising

The rationale behind advisory sessions

There are different reasons why schools, self-access centres and individual teachers offer advisory sessions, but one of the most common ones is to prepare students for and support their out-of-class language learning. This is even more important with students who are not enrolled in formal language classes and who are working largely on their own to improve their language such as is the case for many students in tertiary education. Attrition rates in self-directed learning are high with many learners not achieving their own goals (Reinders, 2005). Another common problem is that many learners do not recognise the need to, and do not actively work on improving their language. In a recent study at the University of Auckland (see Reinders, 2007) it was found that approximately 12,000 students had an English level that was not considered sufficient to be able to cope with the academic English demands during their studies. Many obtain lower grades or fail courses as a result. Of these students, only an estimated 15% sought help of some sort by enrolling for language courses, workshops, or by doing regular self-study. Offering a language

advisory service is one way to encourage students to think about their language study and of ensuring that they are better prepared for their self-directed learning and thus more likely to succeed.

A second rationale for advisory sessions is that they offer language professionals a chance to coach learners in becoming more autonomous. Elsewhere (Reinders and Cotterall, 2001: 88) I have defined autonomous learning as 'an act of learning whereby motivated learners consciously make informed decisions about that learning'. By this I meant to emphasise that learners' awareness of themselves and their learning is a crucial part of autonomy. It is precisely this awareness that many learners lack and that as teachers we can encourage. In advisory sessions this is done through careful scaffolding: more guidance and support in the initial stages and a gradual hand-over of responsibility and decision-making to the student. The advantage of advisory sessions is that the advisor remains available to monitor progress and to offer help on an ongoing basis. So when a student is unsure, for example, which materials to use, or how to practise what they have learned in their classes, the advisor can help. The greater level of personalisation of advisory sessions makes it easier for an advisor to monitor such progress and to ensure students are taking control over their own learning. In the words of one of our advisors:

I feel different when I am advising. I don't feel I have to be 'in control' so much, partly because it is actually easier to know what the student is doing. I like getting to know the student at this level and their particular preferences and needs. When I go back to my classroom, things can feel quite impersonal sometimes.

This certainly changes how advisors perceive their roles. The same advisor continues:

In a classroom situation, I tended to be obsessed with 'teaching'. We know that no one can educate another person, that all of us must educate ourselves, and that a teacher's role is that of a helper in this process.

Another reason for offering advisory sessions lies in its position half-way between the classroom and the students' lives. Crabbe (1993: 447) talks about the need for a bridge between 'public domain' learning such as in a classroom, and 'private domain' learning. Classrooms shelter students from the outside world and provide a safe environment for learning. Advisory sessions have the potential to make links with the outside world through flexible access to a wide range of materials and opportunities for practice. And this is certainly necessary; in a study at a University in New Zealand it was found that 60% of all users in a self-access centre only used English 'sometimes' outside the University (Reinders and Cotterall, 2001). Concerning this point another advisors says:

In class I always strongly encourage the students to go out and practise what they have learned in class but I know very few will. When I am advising students, I will recommend something that is specific to what I know they like. The other day we used the student's portable gaming console and found a way to do some practice with that!

There are also practical reasons for offering advisory sessions: in many situations there are simply too many students to help through direct classroom teaching. In such situations (common especially in many tertiary second language settings; see above) self-study is the only practicable and financially viable way to improve students' levels. The guidance offered by the advisory sessions can help ensure students' success. However, the soundness of this argument has to be tested in practice. There is a cost to students not having the required language level at the start of their course and advisory sessions and the infrastructure needed for them are, of course, certainly not free either.

The practice of language advising

So, what happens in a typical advisory session? In a first session an important part of the process consists of establishing rapport with the student. Part of this is explaining the purpose of the sessions and making it clear that they are not a form of private teaching. This helps avoid misunderstandings later. In the past we found that some students mainly used the sessions as an opportunity to practise their spoken English (cf. Reinders, 2005). The next part of the session is one of the most important ones: I encourage students to tell me their story. They talk to me about their studies, their difficulties and, with probing, what they have tried to do about them. From this I build up a picture of the students' needs. Are they academic, social, or perhaps psychological (in which case I may refer students on to Health & Counselling)?

The next stage consists of filling in the gaps in this picture. When they say they have difficulty with speaking, do they mean speaking in academic discussions, or when talking to friends? If the former is the case, is it because of a lack of vocabulary, or because of a fear of speaking in public, or some other reason? In some centres this phase consists of a formal needs analysis, sometimes with the help of a diagnostic test. In other cases (for example where the student has very clear and limited language needs), this may not be necessary. In our case we ask the student to complete an online needs analysis which stores the results on the computer so that we can look at them again at a later date (and make changes if progress has been made).

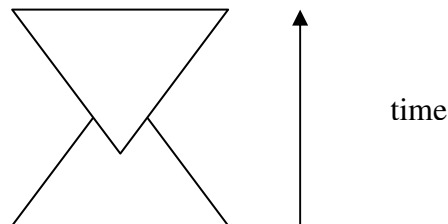
The next step is to work out a plan of action. Together we look at the amount of time the student has available and discuss the strategies the student can use. This process is negotiated between the two of us. The

student shares interests, learning needs and preferences. The plan is then worked out in greater detail by specifying what materials, strategies, workshops, and other sources of information and practice will be used.

After a couple of (or with some students, more) sessions, responsibility for the above is gradually handed over to the student. So instead of giving feedback, the advisor would ask the student to evaluate the student's own progress, similar to the way the advisor did in the preceding sessions.

Some advisors like to follow-up in between sessions via email, and many also move to email-only advising when they feel the student only needs occasional help. This process can be visualised as two triangles with the bottom one representing the advisor's role which is reduced over time and the top one representing the student's role which increases. At all times, however, the advisor provides a solid base:

student



advisor

Figure 3: Advisor vs. student roles

In summary then, an advisory session may include the following elements:

- explaining the purpose of the sessions
- building rapport
- identifying needs
- developing a plan
- recommending specific resources such as workshops, materials and strategies.

Follow-up sessions involve:

- checking progress
- giving feedback
- identifying difficulties
- recommending further resources.

How do I start?

The first question should probably be whether you need to offer this type of service at all. If you are a classroom teacher and there is a self-access centre in your school, it may make more sense to go and talk to the staff there first. They may already have an advisory service and you could

discuss ways of referring your students to it and ask the staff to report back to you.

The second question is whether you can afford the time and energy to develop this type of service. Meeting students individually is obviously time-consuming. Having said that, in the long term, it may save some time. Advising sessions allow you to detect and remedy problems early on. Also, by helping students develop their self-directed learning skills, you can gradually incorporate more activities that students can complete independently (time you could, perhaps, use for remedial purposes with individual students).

As always, the best advice is to start small and to work with a colleague. Rather than starting with a full-blown advisory programme, perhaps you could start seeing those students who need extra help. This will give you the basic skills and confidence to find ways to integrate advising into the curriculum. Perhaps your department head could give you some time to set up a programme and to share your experiences with your colleagues.

If you are a classroom teacher here are some options to get started:

1. If your teaching is (in part) task-based, then you could make yourself available as a 'task advisor' for (groups of) students to come and ask you for advice.
2. This also works well with projects.
3. If you have a number of students in class who are struggling, you could offer advisory sessions as a remedial service.
4. Advisory sessions could also be offered alongside the course. In the first session have your students complete a needs analysis and ask them to report to you during the semester so you can give advice.
5. Ask students to develop an individual learning plan for part of their class time during which they can study independently. Offer an advisory service to support them.

At a practical level, you will need some type of recording system to take notes for the students you have seen. Any calendar/contacts software can be used as long as it lets you quickly look up the details of previous meetings with a student and to set alerts to remind you to follow-up with them. I usually record the student details, date and time, the number of the session (i.e. first session, second, etc), and the context (e.g. did the student ask for help, or is it a compulsory session?). I then take notes throughout the meeting. I have a column for 'language needs' as identified by the student and myself and a column next to it with preliminary ideas, which I often add to after the session ends. This could include materials I will recommend, learning strategies I want to model, or even my own reflections on the student and his/her learning; for example, when I feel the student is not committed, or when I suspect certain impediments to his or her learning (e.g. a difficult home situation).

The third column lets me record the actions we agree the student will complete. At the bottom of the page I write down my overall assessment (which I may or may not share verbally with the student) and the actions I need to undertake in relation to this student. This could be to look up additional learning materials, to talk to a colleague to find out more about a particular problem, or to contact the student to monitor the student's progress in two weeks' time.

It is important that the student also get a record of the session. In our self-access centre we use an electronic learning environment for this purpose but a pen-and-paper system, incorporating similar elements to the advisors' record mentioned above works just fine. This record could also be used as a learning diary where the student records what he or she does, what works and what does not work, and what the student can bring back to the next session.

If your school does not have a self-access centre then you may not have ready access to materials to refer students to. In that case it may be worthwhile to collect online materials you could bookmark on the school computers, or to set up a mini 'mobile self-access centre', which is a trolley that you can wheel from class to class and that has a selection of materials suitable for self-study. Email me if you would like more information about this.

If you work in a self-access or any other type of flexible environment, then you will find that simply advertising personalised help will quickly attract students. The key (in all situations) is to make it clear to the students what you will and will not help them with and how much of your time they can have. In our centre we sometimes make a 'deal' with the student: 'I will help you by giving some advice on your essay, if you come to the academic writing workshop and proofread your own essay with this help sheet before we meet again'. It is important to set limits and it is all right ask for some kind of commitment in return for your time.

Is language advising for you?

Of course, there is much more to language advising than I have been able to point out here. The references section will give you some starting points and I would be happy to answer questions via email. The main point, however, is that language advising is one of the most creative, personal and rewarding types of language teaching. It can also be one of the most challenging, especially when it is not clear if students make progress or when they do not return. If you enjoy dealing with individual students and are reasonably flexible, you will probably thrive in an advisory context.

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Past, Present and Future of a Mexican Self-access Center: The case of the SAC at UABJO ¹

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Abstract

This is a critical narrative dealing with the Self-access Center (SAC) at the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca (UABJO). It is divided into two parts. In the first part, Angeles Clemente, a 'permanent' professor and researcher at UABJO, narrates the social and educational history and development of the SAC. In the second part, Joan Rubin, a 'visiting' professor and researcher at UABJO for a period of three months, describes the counseling training she gave to SAC counselors, since she considered this a critical area to work on in the SAC-UABJO.

In the last decade of the last century, the concept of self-direction in education was translated into simultaneous openings of SACs in most of the state universities in Mexico. We believe that there are approximately 80 operating in Mexico today. For many teachers in the public educational sector, this sudden profusion of SACs appeared to offer a way to achieve what obviously was not being accomplished in the six compulsory years of secondary school and high school: a good command of English for every Mexican undergraduate at public universities. These SACs became, for some teachers, an imagined community (Kanno & Norton, 2003). In other words, the teachers imagined self-access centers as spaces for learning communities, that is, students working together with counselors and adopting new and successful approaches to learning languages, particularly English. However, this type of thriving learning community did not become a reality for the SAC in the UABJO; the results have not been as they had been imagined. The purpose of this article, therefore, is an analysis of the past and present SAC-UABJO through the dual collaboration of Angeles Clemente and Joan Rubin and it offers suggestions for working towards the desired results.

¹ This is a refereed article.

The Self-access Center at the UABJO: An abbreviated history (Angeles Clemente)

The following is my subjective narrative of the SAC history in a public state university of Oaxaca, Mexico. I am able to tell this story due to my involvement in the SAC project as an implementer, counselor and researcher (Clemente 1996; Clemente, 1998; Clemente, 2000a; Clemente, 2000b; Clemente, 2001; Clemente, 2003; Clemente & Kissinger, 2007). For some readers it may appear a rather personal account and with a strong tone of disappointment. My involvement in the whole process makes me feel this way, but it also makes me share the responsibility for its failures. I do so in hopes that this account and our proposed new approach may shed some light and help other SACs which may find themselves in similar situations, that is, the imagined community and development of the skills of Learner Self-management (LSM) have not come to fruition.

This story starts sixteen years ago, in 1992. At that time, the *Centro de Idiomas* (CI) [now *Facultad de Idiomas*], which offered language courses to the Oaxacan community and Spanish courses to international students, opened a new program, a BA in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). In October 1992, the Mexican Ministry of Education invited us to participate in a nationwide program of Self-access Centers. In order to take advantage of this offer, I needed to convince my university administrators, teachers and students of the merits of the SAC project. Since at that time almost nobody in Oaxaca knew about self-access centers, I portrayed our proposed SAC as a specialized library or resource center that would serve all the university students and members of the Oaxacan community who wanted or needed to learn a language. Furthermore, I tried to convey the idea that self-direction was the solution to all our problems, above all the crowded classrooms and the heterogeneous groups. I explained to the CI teachers that, in a SAC, learners could work at their own pace and choose materials according to their own learning styles and individual needs (Clemente & Kissinger, 1994). I also hosted a "self-access day," converting the school patio and classroom spaces into exhibits in order to promote the idea of self-directed learning. The next step was to train the teachers. At that moment I realised that everybody (including myself) needed to learn about self-direction in language learning. We developed a training program for the teachers. This was at two phases: the formal training before the opening of the SAC, followed by informal training (on-the-job experience) when the SAC was in operation. The first phase (December 1992 and February 1993) of the formal training was achieved through a series of seminars and workshops given by scholars from England and France. The input was an introduction to a self-directed learning scheme in the context of

language learning and a practical orientation of organizing and processing materials. This clearly helped the teachers gain confidence and get involved in the project. Since most of the work was processing materials with content they were familiar with, the teachers felt that the workshop contributed positively to their expertise.

Part of our formal training was conducted by CRAPEL's (Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues) staff and particularly by its leader, Henri Holec, who came to Mexico twice: to Oaxaca and to Chiapas. Four teachers from Oaxaca attended the seminar in Chiapas, which was later taught by some of us to the rest of the team in Oaxaca. As a follow up to these on-site training seminars, in August 1993, a group of professors from six Mexican universities were invited to the CRAPEL center in France for a continuing developing of our training as SAC counselors. The month that we spent at Université Nancy 2 seeing the *Centre de Recherché (Research Center)* in operation, making copies of materials, and even developing our own SAC materials, were the most practical and important parts of our education in self-directed language learning ⁽¹⁾.

After coming back from CRAPEL in September of 1993, we opened the SAC to students. It was, at that time, the second SAC operating in Mexico (the first one was opened in Mérida, from the same national project) and the largest (400 square meters), with facilities to attend to more than one hundred students at a time ⁽²⁾ (Clemente & Kissinger, 1994).

We began operating our Self-access Center with the idea that the teachers' functions were to be counseling, writing reports, monitoring users, classifying, adapting and filing materials, developing support materials, updating the options menu and developing activities for authentic materials. In order to study at the SAC, users had to fill out a form with personal and academic information; this form was used to develop the users' profile as 'learners' as well as place the users within an introductory course. This was not a language course, but a workshop in which the user was introduced to the concept of self-direction; s/he also tried out independent work, defined his/her learning needs, objectives, and styles, reflected on key concepts (language and culture, learning and teaching), and learned how to self-evaluate and how to use the SAC equipment. When the course was finished, s/he had to carry out a series of orientation tasks for two weeks. At the conclusion of these tasks, the users would have their first counseling session with a SAC counselor in order to check their understanding of the SAC system and revise their study plans. From there they were expected to continue working by themselves with weekly counseling sessions to assist their learning. The SAC was open fifteen hours a day from Monday to Friday, eleven hours on Saturday and five hours on Sunday. For a fee of 200 pesos, users were

entitled to use the facilities and materials in any language available (English, French, Italian, Japanese and Spanish) for a period of six months (Clemente & Kissinger, 1994).

By 1995, approximately one thousand users had enrolled in the SAC. Most were from the CI, but many were also from other faculties of the university and a few were from the community. However, we noticed that most did not stay longer than four months. At the time, at least from a financial perspective, this was not seen as a problem because every day more people came to ask about the system and subsequently enrolled. After two months of working there, most users showed a strong sense of lack of direction and disappointment, and we became aware that we could not find a way to help them to self-direct their language studies. In short, things were developing differently from what we had imagined. So, in 1996 we decided to find out what was going on. First, we carried out telephone interviews with all the users who had dropped out to find out why they had not continued coming to the SAC. Their answers were consistent. Most of the people we contacted claimed to have something better to do ("I am busier now", "I am going to the gym now", "I am preparing for my exams", etc.). From their responses, we wondered if, after their experience in the SAC, they were no longer motivated to learn a language (in most cases English). So, the question was, if the structure and function of the SAC was (partially) responsible for not motivating them to continue studying.

Fortunately, by that time, from 1995 on, I was no longer head of the department, trying to implement what in fact was a top-down attempt at innovation (White, 1988). I say "fortunately" because, now as a language teacher and counselor, I could try things out myself. I was now in direct contact with students either in the classroom or at the SAC. Therefore, in my role as a counselor, I had the chance to share the same anxieties and fears that both the students and my colleagues had been experiencing. For the next four years (1995-1998), I carried out different studies (Clemente, 1996; Clemente, 1998; Clemente, 2000a; Clemente, 2000b; Clemente, 2001; Clemente, 2003) to analyze what was going on at the SAC. While these studies helped me be better informed about theoretical and practical issues of learner autonomy in other parts of the world (i.e. Clemente on learner awareness, 2000a; learners' beliefs, 2000b; teacher attitudes, 2001; counselor/learner discourse, 2003), they also allowed me to carry out empirical studies working with actual counselors and learners in the SAC-UABJO.

One of the first things I found out was that many people involved in the project blamed the learners: Mexican culture cannot accept an educational system that lacks the figure of the teacher as a leader of the process (see Clemente 1998; Clemente, 2007). However, that was a rather simplistic

view, and quite a broad generalization. I also noted that it was not the sense of learner-autonomy that gave the users a reason to go to the SAC; rather, the users were there for a more straight-forward reason: they were unable to enrol in a regular language class at the CI, due to space limitations. And, of course, most of these students would have preferred to work with a teacher, to be part of a group, and to remain in a 'conventional' classroom. As one of my counselees stated: 'And what is wrong about having a teacher?'

We also found that the users were reluctant to use the counseling sessions. Naively we thought that all these learners were 'naturally independent', but we soon realized that these 'naturally independent learners' were disappearing without having achieved their goals or even having made any progress towards them. In addition to this, SAC counselors expressed their preference for working with materials and equipment rather than having direct contact with users; in fact, some even refused to give counseling sessions. Furthermore, it seemed that both parties were unhappy with this situation. Neither the counselors nor the learners liked taking part in counseling sessions. The learners thus were basically working by themselves, with short or rare interactions with counselors. By 1996, the counseling sessions were reduced to dialogues initiated by the learners in order to ask for the location of specific material or to ask a particular language question.

From the study I carried out with the counselors (Clemente, 2003), I realized one problem was that, in spite of the SAC training that they had received, the counselors themselves did not believe in self-directed learning. Having been successful teachers and having learnt their languages in formal situations, they had not experienced, nor perceived, self-direction as part of their learning culture. They believed that to change their behavior would have meant a denial of the validity of their past history as teachers. It seemed to them that what they had been doing and improving on in constant years of practice was not valid any more. They felt that by working in the SAC they were being told that 'they were not going to be teachers anymore'. To cope with this self-perceived contradiction, most SAC counselors adopted the self-direction discourse only at a surface level while rejecting the rationale behind it. Moreover, instead of seeing the SAC as a welcome innovation, most counselors felt that the structure and purpose of the SAC was imposed upon them without being consulted about the decision. And, in fact, being assigned to work at the SAC had increased their work load. To make things worse, they also believed that the SAC users lacked all the attributes of good language learners: being self-motivated, organized, independent and assertive and taking risks (Clemente, 2001).

Thus, after several years of on-the-job experience, we were not even sure about the proper discourse for counselors to use in order to promote learner autonomy, but we were sure that our counseling sessions were a failure and that we were performing our roles contrary to what we had hoped for. Now we were distrustful of students, we rejected the idea of the SAC as an innovation, and we felt anxious about the competence of our everyday work at the SAC (Clemente, 2001). To attain some level of understanding of all these conflicting dynamics, I chose to carry out my PhD research on learner autonomy, focusing on the issues of self-direction in language learning. This research made me realize that a SAC counselor, in order to make sense of what users are saying and doing, needs to have his/her own theory of learning and needs to know how that theory can be operationalized in order to address the everyday concerns of the students. In a broad sense, my conclusion was that the creation of a learning culture in self-direction could be possible only when there is a process of mutual understanding and negotiation among all social actors involved in the endeavor (Clemente, 1998). Furthermore, in the case of Oaxaca, this 'understanding and negotiation' would also involve consideration of the complex social history of Oaxaca's multilingual and multicultural context. Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in Mexico in terms of economy but the richest in terms of indigenous cultures. It is also ranked as one of the lowest in educational level. Therefore, in the case of the SAC-UABJO, it means taking into account the background knowledge learners bring to the SAC and finding or inventing ways to help learners move towards self-direction. Counselors may need to determine the most effective ways to help learners acquire new knowledge, adapt their counseling to the learners so that they are able to promote self-direction, and help learners confront new academic demands.

In 1998, when I returned to Oaxaca after my doctoral studies, I sadly realized that, for administrative reasons (full-time professors needed to spend more hours teaching, and SAC hours were not considered teaching hours), I was not going to work in the SAC anymore. That was 10 years ago, and the rest of my story is from an outsider point of view, though still personal. The SAC has undergone several administrative changes, all of them with the objective of making it work better. The first one was a change in its function, which meant that the SAC was declared a practice center and no longer a learning center for all students taking language courses at the university. In accordance with this change, a strong attempt was made to create supporting materials for each level of the courses at the LC. In fact, several universities in Mexico have decided to make SAC work compulsory. An example is when language students are required to spend 40 hours of independent work at the SAC per term. What was decided in UABJO, instead, was that the teacher of each course was supposed to take his/her class to the SAC and tell them what to work

on, or orient them to SAC materials related to their respective language course. After trying this out for several terms, most teachers decided not to work at the SAC because it took away time they would rather use in the classroom.

In 2005 the *Facultad de Idiomas* moved into its new location on the main university campus, on the outskirts of the city limits. This meant that the students in the BA program were now physically distant from the SAC, which remained at the original downtown location. However, this was not the only reason for the SAC to be almost empty at this time. By now, it was common knowledge that the only faithful SAC users were students who spent hours watching new films that were downloaded from the satellite dish. However, this service stopped when the company went out-of-service and nothing was done to replace the signal. Moreover, the SAC had also been closed for long periods of time, during which the CI realized tasks such as building maintenance, classification of materials, and redesign of learning spaces.

In 2006, as part of an institutional evaluation project of the *Facultad de Idiomas*, (the CI had been re-designated as '*Facultad*' in December 2004 with the opening of our masters program in TEFL), the SAC was evaluated and the results were somewhat negative. Both language teachers and students consistently complained just about everything—the materials, the equipment, the counseling service, and even the reception desk. The only ones that did not seem to share this view were the SAC counselors and coordinator, who said that the SAC was working well.

Actually, these complaints, made in the evaluation of 2006, were foreshadowed in 1994. Back then, Henri Holec was happy with our SAC project. However, he warned: "A self-access center that is not taken care of and updated once it has been set up, is bound to be abandoned and die" (in Clemente & Kissinger, 1994: 8).

In an attempt to re-imagine a new learning community for the SAC, last year (2007) we invited Joan Rubin to the SAC for three months to give us her professional advice on how we could provide more effective training for the SAC counselors and begin to create a new community of teachers and learners.

The Training of SAC Counselors (Joan Rubin)

My point of view follows from the now accepted view that a SAC is much more than a place that has many different kinds of the latest equipment and books and programs that are well organized. Most SAC managers and researchers recognize that the great majority of learners are not able to begin to work on their own and to take advantage of these materials, without considerable training and support (Gardner et al., 1999; Holec,

1996; Kelly, 1996; Mozzon-McPherson and Vismans, 2001). Such training as Rubin (2007: 1) states: "...involves helping learners acquire the knowledge and skills to manage their own learning (see also Rubin, 2001; Rubin, 2005, for a description of Learner Self-management)".

Furthermore, in order to promote more independent learning, the counselor's focus needs to be on the facilitation of learning rather than on giving the "right" answers. To do this, the counselor also has to have the knowledge and skills to help the learner acquire the knowledge and skills to manage his/her own learning. Being a counselor requires a major change in orientation from one that focuses on teaching to one that focuses on learning and learner independence (Clemente, 2003; Pemberton et al., 2001). In order to become an effective counselor, most people require reorientation and extensive training.

Several SACs around the world have developed a range of Counselor Training Practices to provide sufficient level of expertise and to change the paradigm from one of "telling" to one of "suggesting" (Rubin, 2007: 2-3). These include: mock advisory sessions, peer feedback sessions, mentoring, action research to facilitate reflective counseling and learning, reading key books and articles on counseling, and techniques to build a professional community of counselors. The University of Hull now offers a professional certificate in language advising which is a recognition that there is a broad range of skills and knowledge required to become an effective counselor. After years of researching language learner strategies (see Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Griffiths, 2008, for reviews of this research), the importance of managing one's learning has become even more critical. One of the models used to suggest the relationship between knowledge and skills is Learner Self-management (Rubin, 2001; Rubin, 2005). This model includes planning, monitoring, evaluating and problem-solving; while knowledge and beliefs include task knowledge, self-knowledge, beliefs about learning and language learning, prior knowledge and strategy knowledge.

Training Counselors at UBAJO

I was invited to Oaxaca to provide training for the counselors at the UBAJO-SAC. The training consisted of two parts: 1) a twenty-hour workshop which presented the concepts of LSM, provided practice opportunities to assimilate the concepts and was—followed by the presentation of teaching strategies to promote aspects of LSM and 2) most importantly, practice sessions for counselors to work with students on their language problems with my modelling effective counseling and suggesting ways to apply LSM. The following observations were for the final report to the UABJO.

Two major results came from the workshop. The first was the counselor's recognition that LSM could be very useful and that for the first time, the counselors acquired some practical tools and knowledge they could use to help learners self-manage their learning. Furthermore, they understood how to implement the often-stated suggestion that the role of a counselor was not that of telling learners where to find materials or correcting their assignments but actually helping learners develop an understanding of what they could do to manage their learning. The second was that all the counselor-participants in the workshop felt that although they now had some initial understanding of the underlying knowledge required to become an effective counselor, all agreed they wanted more application opportunities to develop their skills as a counselor.

Another conclusion that came from the workshop was that the SAC could serve both the UABJO university community (mainly the BA TEFL students) and the general community if it focused on the professional language needs of these two communities. In the case of the university community, one emerging need is presented by a new university requirement that all TEFL students pass the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) with a score of 550 by their fourth year of their BA studies. This requirement requires learners to spend a lot of time on their own to reach this goal. For the general community, given the prominence of Oaxaca as a tourist destination, there is a continual demand for help from hotel personnel, tour guides, and cooking school teachers. They require targeted ESP (English for Specific Purposes) materials and training to continue learning on their own.

Practice Sessions

Each of the workshop participants had an opportunity to work as a counselor with one or more students. Below I report on two counseling encounters that illustrate how counseling can help learners define or redefine their goals, establish a realistic time-line, establish criteria to measure performance, and identify any problems. The description also illustrates my role as a coach for the counselors-in-training. For both descriptions I have used pseudonyms instead of the students' real names.

Student 1: Antonio

Antonio came in with concerns about passing the new TOEFL requirement. When asked what he specifically wanted help with, he mentioned listening and speaking. This was his goal, although it was not very specific. When questioned further, the two counselors-in-training realized that this student really did not have a clear idea of what the test consisted of, nor what his real weaknesses were. It was determined that the learner needed more information concerning his skill level and what the test required of him. The counselors decided to give the student a sample

TOEFL test. His results on the sample TOEFL test indicated that his language level was that of a beginner. Having these results increased his self-knowledge. The test also helped Antonio realize that unless he had 40 hours a week to spend for the next 4 months he would not be able to pass the test. It should be noticed that this helped Antonio recognize that his goal was not realistic given the time-frame.

Antonio then decided to work on the listening part of the TOEFL since he found it to be the hardest section of the exam. Antonio modified his goal based on the information that he obtained from the counseling session. I then suggested that the counselors-in-training consider discussing with Antonio the kinds of genres used in the TOEFL test (i.e. that they use task classification to narrow down the task) ⁽³⁾. The counselors-in-training said that the most recurrent genre types in the exam were *conversations* and *lectures*. I then asked the counselors-in-training to consider the structure of these genres and how this information might help the student listen in a more effective way. By doing this, it would narrow down Antonio's expectations of what might happen and perhaps lower his anxiety. I also discussed with the counselors-in-training what the usual topics covered in the TOEFL listening section were. This is also using task classification to help narrow down the task.

The counselors-in-training then called Antonio's attention to the structure of the test which consists of what form questions might be in (multiple choice, yes/no, fill in the blank). This refers to a form of task classification. Just recognizing this format improved Antonio's performance immensely. The first time Antonio took the TOEFL he got 10% but after doing a little task classification, the next time he took the test he got 48%. One can imagine how motivating that must have been for this student.

My approach in working with the counselors was to suggest how they could use aspects of the LSM model to orient this particular learner with specific concerns and to educate him about what he might focus on. In a sense, I was helping them use LSM to understand practical student problems. In the future, the counselors themselves would ask their own students the same questions concerning genre, format, and other possible topics in order to help the students develop the skills to learn on their own.

Student 2: Maria

This was a Mexican student with a clear goal. Maria wanted to apply for a job with an American factory in Mexico. The student had worked before for a similar kind of factory and now wanted to do so again. She said she needed to learn how to behave in a job interview. After discussion, Maria decided her first goal was to identify what questions an interviewer might

ask her. The learner was asked to do what may be called *task classification*. She also decided that the best place to carry out the task was by using the Internet. This represents an example of *task demands* or *strategy*. After establishing the questions that might be asked of her in an interview, Maria began to work on the answers. The counselor-in-training and I worked with Maria to settle on several criteria that would indicate if she had adequate interview answers. Her criteria included: good grammar and spelling, appropriate vocabulary, logic, and a good attitude (honesty, confidence and interest in the business, understanding of the culture of the business, etc.). To help Maria identify whether she met some of these criteria, we suggested that she use an English language spell-check and grammar. Since Maria would need to be able to do this on the job, this would also provide her with tools she could use on her own.

Once Maria brought in her written answers to the questions she thought would be asked in a job interview and checked them using her own criteria, it became apparent that she had no clear way to notice appropriate vocabulary or collocation issues. When we looked at how she was selecting vocabulary, Maria showed us her very basic dictionary that only gave glosses. In order to get a better handle on collocation, we strongly suggested that she buy a larger dictionary that would give her a more complete understanding of word usage. Since this learner often did not have the knowledge to recognize "appropriate vocabulary", the acquisition of a better dictionary would at least begin to allow her to select vocabulary more effectively.

Another problem we worked on was finding appropriate responses that would reflect well on her (for example, why she left her last factory job). The way in which we worked on this was by asking her questions about how she could show continuity of employment. This clearly was not a criterion she had thought of, but once she understood the concept she was able to identify a rationale and include it in her response.

This seemed to be a highly motivated learner with a clear goal. The counselor-in-training was very impressed with how much the learner was able to improve her answers through coaching and how much she would be able to accomplish on her own in the future.

In conclusion, all three counselors-in-training (two with Antonio and one with Maria) found my coaching helpful because they could see how one could apply LSM to individual cases and promote more learner independence. Although the counselors-in-training had been exposed to knowledge of the LSM framework and some of the counseling functions and discourse, spending time actually developing it with students was a very important part of their learning process.

Next Steps (Angeles Clemente and Joan Rubin)

As we stated at the beginning of this article, the SAC has failed in its purpose. It is definitively not working the way we, the UABJO faculty, had imagined almost two decades ago. One of the most salient problems, and the one that Joan Rubin decided to address was the training of counselors. As stated earlier, the counselors that were initially trained and had gotten experience in the SAC are not there anymore. Based on an administrative decision, SAC hours are no longer considered part of fulltime teachers' obligations. And even if this faculty had continued working at UABJO, they probably would not have received the ongoing necessary training to become successful counselors. The language teachers currently working at the SAC are not skilled in language learning counseling. Hence, it does not matter how long they have been working there; their role has essentially been reduced to either answering language questions or attempting to help to solve equipment problems.

For us, it is clear that Joan Rubin's approach was the appropriate one. Making use of recent research, she introduced the basics of the LSM model and, most importantly, helped the counselors-in-training put them into practice, working with actual language learners to define and solve concrete language learning problems. The questions are now: How can we assure that all the counselors keep working in the same way? How will we extend this experience to the hundreds of students at UABJO and the Oaxacan community that use the SAC to learn English? How can the hundreds of users that have experienced nothing but frustration at the SAC have some expectation that things will now be better there?

Since we have raised the level of awareness among the counselors, we can now suggest several further steps to move the SAC-UABJO toward being a more effective academic center. Below we list a number of broad areas of development. First and foremost, the counselors-in-training will need more practical experience to understand how to apply their knowledge. It is clear from the literature and our experience that the process of becoming an effective counselor requires extensive practice, coaching, and a *community of counselors*.

Then, it would be very helpful to develop a set of forms/tools to encourage the following learner skills: assessment, awareness, and LSM. Assessment would include assessment of emotions, language skills, beliefs, learning styles, and self-efficacy. Awareness would involve reading excerpts about learning and learning strategies, thinking aloud, journaling, and focus groups. LSM (or learning to learn) would require forms to promote the ability to do the following: set goals with a time-frame, establish criteria, set task purposes, do task classification and task

demands, determine action plans , and do monitoring, evaluating, problem-identification and problem-solving.

There is also a need to establish a *community of counselors*. This community would be a learning community (for more detail on how to establish and maintain such a community see Karlsson et al., 2007) that would provide more hands-on experience as well as sharing, reading and discussing important books and articles on the topic, peer coaching, sharing successes and addressing solutions for problems and developing a set of tools to self-evaluate their own counseling. Further, we suggest that the hands-on experience be supplemented by a trained coach who could provide additional information and experience.

There has to be a realization of the importance of developing a *community of learners* as well. Just because learners are more independent and know how to manage their own learning does not mean that they have to work in isolation. Many learners find it extremely helpful to share problems and solutions and discuss task analysis and goal clarification. Counselors will need to brainstorm ways to create this community. Some that are used in other SACs include: learner workshops on specific topics (i.e. setting goals, task analysis, improving listening comprehension) and conversation groups.

This exercise in counseling has opened the door for more effective use of the SAC-UABJO. Right now, the counselors who took part in this workshop are willing to offer counseling sessions and are enthusiastic to create this new type of community. Furthermore, we need to make sure: 1) that all the SAC counselors have a strong commitment to the SAC and the principles of learner independence, 2) that they are trained in SAC counseling and 3) that they have many opportunities to improve their skills through constant reflection of their practice. In order to build a strong community of counselors, we need ongoing planning and evaluation of counselor formation and training programs, and continuous evaluation of the process and results of counseling. It is essential that the institution realize the importance of the SAC and assign it more resources, both financial and human, and specifically, allowing full-timers to work in the SAC with appropriate compensation.

Last, but not least, there is the issue of material resources. We need to provide the counselors and the learners with adequate tools to attain their counseling and learning goals. In the SAC-UABJO they have hardly been adequately updated. Although different administrations have added/repared/replaced resources, the effort has not been sufficient. In the times we are living, equipment is soon outdated. We have sadly realized that the electronic and computing devices that we were very proud of when we opened the SAC are now useless. The word processors,

for instance, were useless within the first two years, since regular computers were far more complex. Again, institutional authorities have to realize that a functional SAC has to have an annual budget to update material resources. We think that by working on these areas we will move towards the learning culture in self-direction that we imagine for Oaxaca: a community of counselors and learners working together to address the linguistic needs of Oaxaca. Finally, the authors of this article believe that the value of this experience lies in the constant communication that we had in order to understand each other's perspective and to make the most of this encounter.

NOTES:

- a. This training was continued with the help of the British Council, which was commissioned by the Mexican Ministry of Education to take over the openings of most of the SAC in public universities all over the country. The British Council also donated many materials to the English section of the SACs.
- b. SAC-UABJO was equipped with 50 tape recorders, 20 of which were interactive, 20 VHS players with their respective TV monitors, 8 computers (of which three had CD-ROM units), a mega-screen TV connected to a satellite dish, a laser CD player and a video recorder. For reproducing materials, we had a sound system for CDs, cassettes and long-play records, computers for word processing, a multi-system video converter, a photocopier, a double-deck video recorder, and a regular video recorder, with close caption feature, connected to the satellite dish.
- c. See Rubin and McCoy, 2008 for an example of Task Analysis Instruction.

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Instructional Strategies for Using Problem-based Learning with English Language Learners¹

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Abstract

Problem-based learning (PBL) has been accepted for instruction in many fields of study since it was first introduced in the medical field during the 1960s. However, there is one area where it is underutilized: in English language learning. Problem-based learning provides a platform for authentic English as a second language instruction, and as a result, can foster English language use while promoting skills such as critical thinking, interactive communication, and self-reflection. English language learners (ELLs), in particular, may benefit from PBL instruction as it helps English Language Learners develop cultural constructs along with language arts skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Introduction

Problem-based learning (PBL) was first introduced in the 1960s by a Canadian medical educator, Howard Barrows (Delisle, 1997). Since that time, problem-based learning has moved into mainstream education in most content areas in K-12 and, more reluctantly, into higher education as well (Kaminskiene & Janulienė, 2006; Savin-Baden, 2000). Although problem-based learning has successfully moved from the medical field into other fields of study, one final frontier for instruction is using problem-based learning with English language learners (ELLs).

As an instructional strategy, problem-based learning can be defined by its processes. Problem-based instruction is primarily built around a problem scenario, or in problem-based language, a case. Students are presented with a case and are charged with the task of working together in collaborative groups to generate ideas or hypotheses to reach a resolution to the problem introduced in the case. A well written case, or the information students will learn in order to solve the case, is germane to the curriculum content being taught. Students must become self-directed as they work individually to gather ideas and information to share with the group. A further characteristic of the problem is that it is loosely

¹ This is a refereed article.

structured to allow for several interpretations, and therefore, several feasible solutions. The teacher serves as a facilitator to this process, scaffolding instruction as needed, monitoring students' abilities to work in groups, providing supplemental information when necessary, and intervening in the process only when a gentle nudge is needed to help the learners refocus. The ultimate goal of problem-based learning is to foster development of critical thinking skills through problem solving.

In public school classrooms in the United States, students who speak languages other than English or who come from homes where another language is spoken are tested to determine their levels of English ability. English language learners are then placed in classes which support the acquisition of academic English. Problem-based learning provides an active strategy for language acquisition as well as cognitive engagement in the content area being taught. English as a second language (ESL) teachers are often challenged to bring stimulating opportunities for higher order thinking and authentic learning experiences into the English language classroom. Problem-based learning provides the opportunity to promote language learning in ELL classrooms while promoting areas of critical instruction: primarily increased communication skills, vocabulary, and culture constructs. Based on John Dewey's (1938) paradigm of thinking and reflection, problem-based methods promise an in-depth, close-to-life learning experience that will help ELL students integrate knowledge from various disciplines and make cultural connections.

In language acquisition classrooms, there are many ways that problem-based learning can be used effectively. Generally, there are five main components of the problem-based approach: case writing, case presentation, facilitation, structuring, and assessment/reflection (Delisle, 1997; Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence, 2007). Cases are fundamental to the problem-based learning process, and as a result, a well written, purposeful case is the essential first step on which to base successful problem-based strategies. Cases are concisely written scenarios that contain problems that do not have specific or well-defined solutions. Case-related content matter indicates the knowledge base students will be required to learn during the PBL process. The variety of cases is infinite; however, they all have the common element of being grounded in the real world. Each case is followed by open-ended questions used to provide direction for discussions and eventual resolutions of the problem (Duch, 2001). English language learners employ their problem-solving abilities as they interact with others to achieve a satisfactory response to the particular problem situation presented in the case; at the same time, the investigation of authentic information sources used to solve each case helps develop academic English.

Problem-based Learning vs Task-based Instruction and Role Playing

Problem-based learning is not to be confused with task-based instruction (TBI) which began its popularity in second language acquisition pedagogy in the 1970s. Task-based instruction is commonly viewed as a communicative approach since task-based methodologies have the learning outcome of a communicative activity, mainly speech (Skehan, 2003). Consequently, although the definition of "task" changes with the purpose of each task-based instructional strategy, there is an assumption in language teaching contexts that the desired outcome of each task will be directed at oral speaking skills (Ellis, 2003). Tasks are often procedural in nature and often share a quality also represented in PBL by being grounded in real life events.

There are several fundamental differences between task-based instruction and problem-based learning. One of the main differences is that task-based instruction does not focus on cognitive processes, but rather on productive language goals (Ellis, 2003). During problem-based instruction, students are given a problem to solve, not a task or goal to accomplish as in task-based instruction. The problem, unlike a task that has one correct procedural process, has multiple outcomes depending on the student's cognitive focus. And although speech may be a natural result of PBL, it is not the focus. Instead, the critical thinking that is required to solve the problem is the focus.

Role playing, another communicative approach which became popular in the 1980s, is also not to be confused with problem-based learning. Role playing also differs from PBL in many distinct ways. Role playing, for example, is frequently scripted with students playing the role of characters in a set scenario. One fundamental difference then is that role playing may be fantasy while PBL is grounded in real life. Although there is room for individual student dramatizations during role playing exercises, there is usually a preset conclusion to the scenario. As with task-based instruction, the focus is not on the cognitive aspects as with PBL, but rather on the language production. For students to dramatize their roles correctly, the teacher needs to act directly as a group facilitator (Cunningsworth & Horner, 1985; Livingstone, 1983). For ELLs, role playing is essentially a practice situation with students repeating social and situation specific language within the boundaries of the scenario.

Case Writing for English Language Learners

Since cases are as varied as the real world situations they mirror, there is no one correct method for writing a case; however, the mechanics of case writing is still a daunting task for teachers new to problem-based learning. Beginning case writers are encouraged to have colleagues read and

respond to new cases before they are implemented in the classroom for the first time. Cases, and the problems they contain, may have alternate interpretations that the writer has not predicted due to cultural considerations (Duek, 2000). This may be especially true for ELLs. For example, a case concerning property ownership would be approached quite differently by a student from a country such as China, where individual ownership is not possible, and even the idea of it, improbable. If using this type of case, the teacher would want to understand each interpretation of the case and its possible solutions in order to provide appropriate supplementary reading and proper guidance.

Novice practitioners should first consider students' motivation and interest when deciding on the context of the problem. When writing cases for English language learning students, the context needs to include aspects that have a strain of familiarity, and therefore, allow students to work through the problem from as common a perspective as possible. The case should be complex, yet not so unfathomable as to lose students in their quest for a solution. And finally, content objectives and curriculum standards may have a broader application to the case content than in traditional coursework (Duch, 2001).

Experienced language teachers have a treasure trove of stories they could relate to situations that students have experienced. This makes good material for case studies, and can be embellished, changed, updated, or reconstructed to more directly address the curriculum and meet curriculum standards. Newspaper articles about situations that newcomers have experienced will make good idea nuggets for constructing problem-based texts for the English language class. Likewise, advice columns from current newspapers or magazines supply ideas for cases, as do past controversial situations. And although it is a departure from the traditional use of PBL case writing, ultimately, students may want to write their own cases and seek responses from their peers (Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence, 2007).

Case Presentation for English Language Learners

The case text is a stimulus which unites the material (the case itself and supplemental reading), the method (connecting experiences, knowledge, and skills), and the mode (group interaction and systematic inquiry) of learning into one experience as illustrated below in Figure 1.

PBL Environment

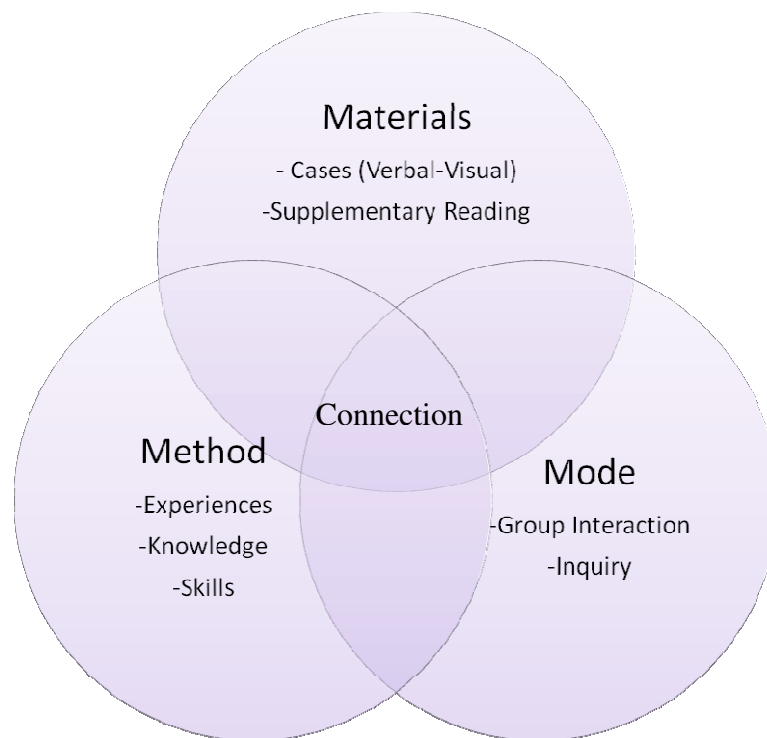


Figure 1. PBL Environment and Language Arts

As the case is discussed, the English language learner enlarges his or her constructs of related cultural experiences, integrates the ideas and experiences of other group members into his or her cultural schemata, and discusses various aspects and solutions to the case in the target language. The use of problem-based learning brings engagement and immediacy into the classroom and compels the use of language arts—speaking, listening, viewing, thinking, reading, and writing—as students grapple with and analyze the problem.

Cases are presented to students in a variety of ways: handed out on paper, presented on PowerPoint or overhead projector, read out loud by teacher or student, or through general class discussion facilitated by the teacher (Lambros, 2002). An effective technique of case presentation to English language learners is to present the case both verbally and on paper to increase initial comprehension of the problem (Curtin, 2005). The discussion that follows the case presentation will differ broadly in scope depending on the complexity of the problem. Some cases require only a brief clarifying discussion while others require a longer, in-depth analysis of the problem.

A chart such as the one presented below (see Figure 2) can be used to help structure the discussion (Delisle, 1997). Column one reflects a brainstorming session. All of the potential ideas for a solution mentioned during the class-wide discussion should be listed so that each idea can be investigated. The instructor should not evaluate the ideas, nor should he or she allow students to judge them in any way at this point in the PBL process. In column two, all of the known facts that come up in the discussion will be listed. Some of these facts may originate from the problem statement itself. This aspect of the discussion provides an opportunity for students to learn how to discern facts from opinions. The next column, *Needed Information*, will list information that is required and questions that should be answered during the inquiry phase of the problem-based project. Finally, column four will be a *To-Do List*, or processes which need to take place in order to find the information needed to solve the problem. Using such a chart guides and focuses the initial discussion and will provide a reference to anchor the inquiry process.

First Thoughts	Facts We Know	Needed Information	To-Do List

Figure 2. Discussion Chart

Examples of Cases

The authors offer the following example cases written in the context of one theme, the development of a world monetary system, in order to illustrate how the scope, product, and language components of the case expand to match the appropriate levels of language ability. The cases have been developed through interaction and feedback from peers and colleagues (K-12 and college level) attempting to use PBL in their language learning classrooms. As a result, these sample cases are intended for those language learning classes which are leveled for language ability in their composition. However, leveling may also occur not only within the class as a whole, but should be considered carefully for the small problem-solving groups which consist of students with varied ability. For example, in a beginner class, the group might consist of pre-production beginners, low beginners, and high beginners in order to provide language models for the lower ability students. According to Vygotsky's sociolinguistic theory (1978, 1986), students with different strengths will learn from social interaction with each other as they interact together in groups.

Case Series #1

Beginner ELLs:

The first case is written to promote descriptive language production typical of beginner English language learners. The incorporation of artistic expression into the output allows valued participation by all beginners, even those who are not as yet producing verbal output. The art component provides the scaffolding for the verbal and written description required for completion of the assignment. At the beginner level, a silent period is often experienced, and at the initial stages, language output typically consists of a few words or phrases. At this stage, the student may be supported with pattern sentences. For example, to describe the art production required in the solution for the following case, these pattern sentences could be used:

At the center of the coin is _____. On the other side of the coin is _____.

The words _____ are written below/above.

Case for Beginner ELLs:

You have been asked to design a new coin that will be used worldwide.

Assignment: Develop a picture of what the coin will look like.

Intermediate ELLs:

At the intermediate level, ELLs are typically adept at social language which facilitates PBL group interaction. Intermediate ELLs can effectively incorporate outside textual resources such as reference articles, electronic resources, and other databases. Scaffolding in the form of mini-lessons from the instructor can be helpful at this level. These mini-lessons can have a variety of purposes; examples include vocabulary introduction, modeling of group collaboration techniques, and effective use of reference materials. Intermediate ELLs can be expected to produce limited written pieces with some errors. The case below, for example, has been expanded in scope and has incorporated a written product for the intermediate ELL.

Case for Intermediate ELLs:

You are a part of a world delegation charged with the task of creating a new set of world coins.

Assignment: Describe in an essay what processes you went through to develop the money.

Advanced ELLs:

At the advanced level, verbal and written discourse of an evaluative or persuasive bent can be produced by students. Some assistance with academic vocabulary, use of complex databases, and technical aspects of written expression may be necessary. The following case for advanced

ELLs expands the scope and audience of the monetary theme and, because it is intended for use in a multilevel class, has the potential of requiring a formal presentation with a technological component for the most advanced students.

Case for Advanced ELLs:

The universe is running out of resources used to make coins, print paper money, and manufacture credit cards. As a result, the leaders have decided to use an intergalactically-adopted monetary system and abolish coins, paper, and plastic money. Your help is needed for these decisions.

Assignment: You will be presenting your idea to the Intergalactic Council (a panel of teachers).

One consideration for ELLs engaging in the problem-based learning process is that a variety of materials at several reading levels may be necessary for classroom use even within a leveled class of beginners, intermediates, or advanced students. To facilitate scaffolding, a group of appropriate resources suitable for each ELL's language level should be gathered in preparation for the PBL inquiry. These materials will be available to the entire class and will provide a common basis for the inquiry process. The materials may range from picture posters, atlases, almanacs, and picture books, to electronic media. Groups can and should decide to seek additional outside resources if their inquiry questions cannot be answered fully by using teacher-supplied materials. A sample list of resource subjects appropriate for supplemental reading on the topic of the sample cases follows:

- Research on world coins
- History of the Euro
- Ancient and current types of monetary systems
- Natural resources
- Cultural symbolism
- Technology

Case Series #2

A second series of example cases based on ecological issues faced by schools attempting to go "green" provides a realistic, multi-solution series of scenarios.

Case for Beginner ELLs:

You and your classmates have noticed that cans (or bottles) from canned drinks (or bottled drinks) do not get recycled in your school. What suggestions can your group make to the school officials?

Assignment: Make a series of posters for display in the hallway illustrating your best suggestions.

Case for Intermediate ELLs:

After attending a school workshop about reducing waste in your school, you have been asked to share other ideas for making your school less wasteful. What are some of your ideas?

Assignment: Write a letter for the school newsletter describing your program to reduce the waste in your school.

Case for Advanced ELLs:

Your school is trying to be more conservation oriented or more "green." You are on a committee with school personnel, community leaders, and other class members to discover and develop ways to conserve resources inside your school. What ideas will you bring to the table?

Assignment: You will be presenting your idea to the Parent Teacher Committee.

For this case supplemental reading subjects include:

- Research on environmental issues
- Articles about the new term "green"
- Newspaper articles about local environmental concerns

Facilitation of PBL with English Language Learners

After the case is presented to the class, the teacher must begin work as a facilitator or tutor in the process. Becoming a successful facilitator for problem-based learning represents a learning curve as teachers adjust and readjust to allow students to be self-directed, yet maintain the expectation for English language learners to complete an assigned outcome. In problem-based learning, the teacher becomes more the facilitator/tutor and director of the process and less the source of information (Savin-Baden & Major, 2004) as the following figure of the coaching approach illustrates.

FACILITATION

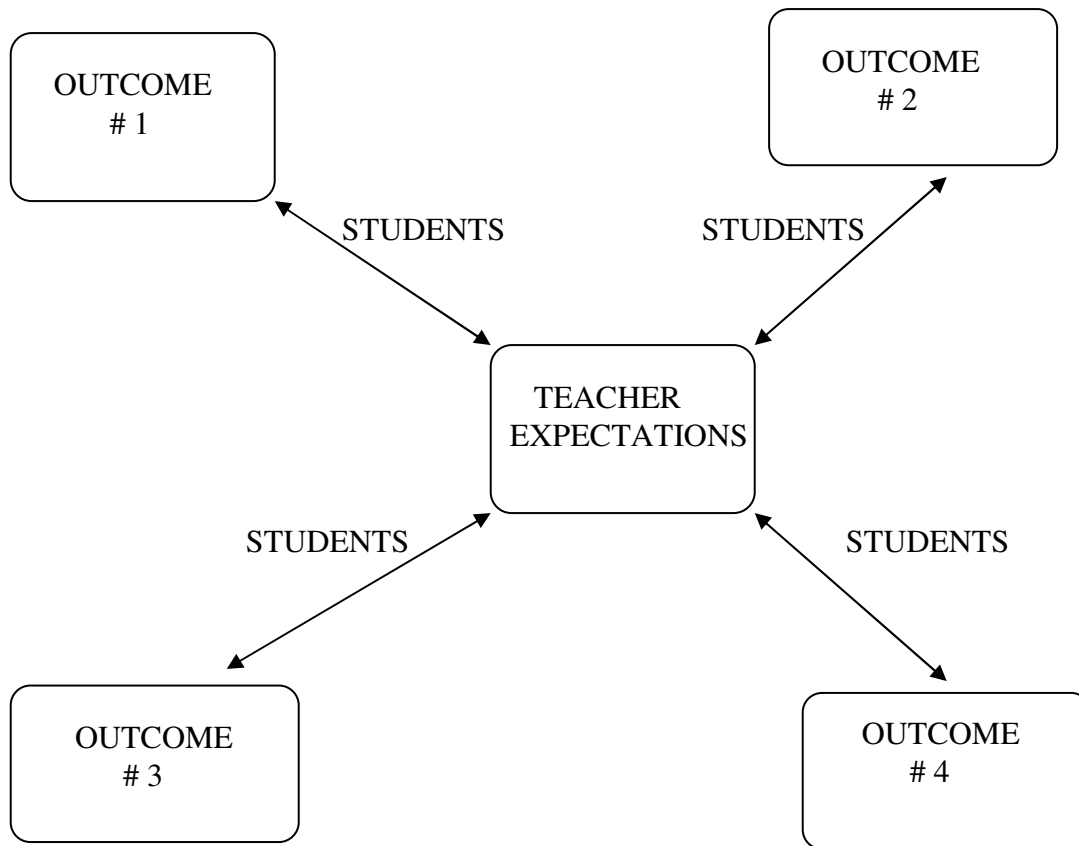


Figure 3. A Coaching Approach

This is especially true during the inquiry phase when most group work is accomplished. In the language learning classroom, the teacher/facilitator faces many language-based challenges. Group interaction, for example, may become problematic as gender and cultural perspectives assert themselves more dramatically (Curtin, 2005; Duek, 2000). Additionally, ESL teachers do not usually allow students to struggle with learning, yet struggling during the learning process is a necessary and productive component in problem-based applications (Kaminskiene & Januliene, 2006). There are advantages to presenting the problem case without previous discussion thus creating a greater cognitive dissonance and a greater urgency for resolution. An unembellished presentation of the case forces language learning students to determine word meanings, intuit cultural context, make inferences, and grapple with the logic and structure of text with no support. However, it is entirely possible that, due to the variety of levels of language proficiency which are represented in many classes, the gap between text and reader may be too great to be bridged if the case is presented in raw form with no support whatsoever. For this

reason, most English language learners will require specific types of scaffolding, at least initially, for problem-based learning to be successful.

In order to provide support in the initial stages, facilitators of the process need to take several steps to build background. The idea that students are expected to engage in a problem, create questions, access information sources of their own choice, and use inquiry techniques to solve a problem having multiple solutions may be entirely unfamiliar to them at this point. Consequently, the first area to be addressed is the nature of the problem-based process itself. Prior to engaging in a specific case, a general outline of the problem-based learning process should be discussed with the class. Problem-solving steps or stages should be listed on a poster or chart so that students can visually access the process at all times. A sample "PBL Directions" poster includes the following: Steps for Problem-based Learning 1) Read the case. 2) Check for understanding. 3) Ask questions. 4) Look for new information. 5) Discuss. 6) Offer solutions. 7) Evaluate. 8) Reflect and revise solutions. Careful attention to the problem-based process helps alleviate students' discomfort, not only with the PBL process itself, but also with the high level of student self-direction which is expected because of the possibility of multiple correct solutions.

Activating prior knowledge and making connections with vocabulary is another integral part of preparing language students for a new case. Limited discussion is one means of achieving this goal. However, as the background discussion unfolds, caution is in order to prevent unintentionally predisposing students towards any particular solution. The realistic nature of cases suggests that many ELLs may have already experienced similar situations or had friends or family who have experienced similar problems. As students offer personal insight, relate examples, and share related experiences, the teacher supports vocabulary development by the creation of a word web for class reference. This graphic representation of the vocabulary, synonyms, antonyms, related words, and examples clarifies the relationships within and among concepts, both those pertinent to background knowledge and those which relate directly to the scenario. Leaving the word web on display throughout the learning process may provide support for struggling learners as an easily available reference for concept associations and spelling.

Concepts introduced in the case scenario should be used to promote systematic inquiry. Students are directed through the teacher's facilitation to find a concrete solution to the open-ended problem presented in the case. The use of systematic inquiry to reach a solution requires students to seek supporting information, another commonality in PBL implementation. As students ask questions and seek clarification of facts and events, supporting documents such as articles, interviews, and

movies will need to be chosen with care by the teacher/facilitator in order for language learning students to achieve maximum understandability. Selecting informative texts with appropriate and varied reading levels, for example, is one aspect of the selection process that is critically important to ELLs. Checking resources for cultural appropriateness is another. These tasks are part of the role of teacher as facilitator to the problem-based learning process (Delisle, 1997; Lambros, 2002).

The introduction of each case will be followed by open-ended questions to guide discussion. These ambiguous questions are designed to deeply engage students in the content objectives. However, for ELLs, response cue questions may also require the application of a particular language curricular objective. For instance, if students need to demonstrate the correct use of quotations and present tense conversation skills, the response cue may be written to shape the form, although not the content, of the student response. An example of such a question follows: "What conversation might ensue as John and his parents discuss his options?" This question requires a response in dialogue form. Open-ended questions for ELLs often differ from those for the general student population in that they are designed with language objectives foremost, rather than the content curriculum objectives foremost.

Structuring PBL for English Language Learners

Problem-solving groups for ELLs should be formed using the principle of heterogeneity. According to Slavin (1990), homogeneous groups have zero affect on academic achievement; therefore, a single group should contain students ranging from the beginner to the advanced levels of language production if possible. Beginner ELL students need to listen and speak to intermediate and advanced learners. Advanced students often have more experience in the target culture and can provide more input, both cultural and informational, to inform the PBL process. Most ELLs, regardless of their level of language proficiency, will have ideas from actual or vicarious experiences and thus bring valuable contributions to the heterogeneously-structured group. Each ELL integrates the ideas and experiences of other group members into his/her cultural schemata as students discuss various aspects and solutions to the case in the target language.

For English language development, one of the most beneficial aspects of the PBL process is purposeful group discussion and question formation that will guide ELLs to seek further information in order to develop thoughtful solutions. The use of inquiry skills to provide additional data to inform solutions will be among the various tasks to be accomplished by the PBL group. Further clarification through facilitation will almost certainly be needed as students analyze the scenario and its cultural

context. At this step of the process, teachers should be prepared to facilitate ELLs in the use of the various types of reference works, websites, and databases that are required. Specific mini-lessons in the use of a particular information source may be designed by the teacher and presented as each group demonstrates a need for a particular data source.

Although PBL methods are accepting of ambiguous problems and solutions, individual or group work must be accomplished through a structured process if it is to be a successful, systematic experience. Structure within the freedom of PBL methods provides the platform or scaffolding for students to ask questions, experiment, make decisions concerning their own learning processes, and take risks with their solutions. Structuring the process also provides the necessary instructional base for upholding both content and language standards and helping students meet the goals and outcomes of the case (Delisle, 1997). Without structure for the learning process of PBL, assessment would be extremely difficult for the ELL student.

Assessment and Reflection with English Language Learners

As with other types of instruction, authentic assessments are accepted as one way to assess problem-based learning. Assessing for multiple activities or outcomes based on engagement may also be part of problem-based specific assessment for ELLs. Since outcomes from cases can be so different, rubrics designed to assess both content and process, as in authentic assessment methods, may be the answer (Lambros, 2004; Savin-Baden, 2003). The formative/summative design of assessment may be applicable as well. Individual performance during group work, for example, may be assessed as formative, and the outcome of the PBL process—the proposed solution—as summative (Savin-Baden, 2004).

As expected in other areas of well-applied pedagogical assessment, problem-based learning may be assessed more authentically through the use of rubrics. This is not an absolute necessity, as individual teachers may want to use other assessment procedures to evaluate the various outputs related to individual cases. The authors have found rubrics beneficial for giving students feedback about how they contributed to the process as well as for assigning a grade for the outcome. One advantage of the use of rubrics is that they can be teacher-written from a general template and then customized to more critically assess the specific case and its final product or the process itself. A rubric such as the example below (see Figure 4) permits authentic assessment of both the problem-based process and its product and allows evaluation of performance both at the individual and group levels.

	Criterion	1 Unsatisfactory	2 Minimal	3 Above Average	4 Excellent
1	Group work	There is no evidence that the group worked together to produce the result.	Some, but not all the group, cooperated to produce the resulting product.	The group worked together and solved its own problems to produce the result.	The group worked together well and produced a product that they are all satisfied with.
2	Final Product	The product does not address the assignment.	The product partly addresses the assignment.	The product clearly meets the requirements of the assignment.	The product meets and exceeds the requirements of the assignment.
3	PBL Process	The group did not follow the PBL process as posted.	The group followed some, but not all, of the PBL steps as posted.	The group followed the PBL process as posted.	The group followed the PBL process and repeated the revision steps as needed to improve its product.
4	Independent Work	The group asked for frequent assistance.	The group asked for occasional assistance.	The group worked on its own with little assistance from the teacher.	The group did not require teacher assistance except for necessary permissions to seek outside information.
5	Higher Order Thinking	No evidence that higher-level thinking skills were used in creating the product.	Little evidence that higher-level thinking skills were used in creating the product.	Some evidence that higher-level thinking skills were used in creating the product.	Clear evidence that higher-level thinking skills were used in creating the product.
6	Inquiry	No evidence of supplementary resources.	Some evidence of supplementary resources.	Adequate selection and use of supplementary resources.	Original, creative selection and use of supplementary resources.

Figure 4. Assessment Rubric

Another type of assessment that is particularly applicable to use with ELLs needs to take place at the conclusion of the PBL case—student self-assessment or reflection (Faidley, Evensen, Salisbury-Glennon, Glenn, & Hmelo, 2000). As students reflect on their performance within the group, the research decisions they make, and other group or individual performances which led to the end solution, the ESL teacher/facilitator will give feedback that may ultimately lead to a student's greater success in the next academic experience. Self-assessment can follow several different models. A more informal type of self-assessment could take place during group discussion at the conclusion of the case as students self-disclose and get group feedback concerning their performances. Written self-assessments can be prompted by specific questions for ELLs to guide their written language production. And finally, students can be instructed to write their own self-assessment rubrics at the beginning of the PBL experience, either individually or as a group, that will later be used to reflect on their performances and the end products required by the case.

Conclusion

To date, PBL has not been used routinely in language learning classrooms; however, the possibilities are limitless as problem-based learning methods represent an authentic learning approach which connects to the English language learner's experience, whether the learner is an immigrant, a

refugee, or a foreign language learner. Cases used in problem-based learning are life-based and finding case solutions requires the student to employ processes which compel the use of all the language arts, especially speaking, thinking, reading, and writing. As ELLs navigate the problem-based process, they grapple with critical reading, higher-order thinking, analysis, and information skills necessary to resolve the case scenarios. A teacher facilitator who is cognizant of both the PBL process and the points of support needed by ELLs can facilitate successful engagement in problem-based learning and effectively implement problem-based learning strategies in ESL settings.

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A Study of the Effect of a Writing Assessment System on Instruction ¹

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Abstract

A Writing Assessment System (WAS) was validated and then implemented in the adult English program at a language center in a small Colombian private university with the intention to foster positive changes in instruction. To evaluate this impact, the teaching and assessment routines of 28 teachers were examined through portfolios gathered in 2006 and 2007. To assess the teachers' perception of the system a survey was also used and results showed that teachers greatly improved their teaching and assessment practices and that their attitude towards the system was mostly positive. However, some resistance to change was perceived regarding the teachers' attitudes towards their own language knowledge and teaching abilities. The study concludes that for meaningful change to occur, teacher educators and reformers need to understand the beliefs that teachers bring to instructional practices. Based upon this, professional development programs oriented towards reflection could be beneficial to foster desired changes.

Introduction

In 2005 a research group of the Language Center (LC) at Universidad EAFIT, Columbia designed and validated a Writing Assessment System with the aim of improving teaching and learning writing practices in an adult English program. Intentional actions towards positive washback² require: congruity between assessment and curriculum related objectives, authenticity of tasks, detailed score reporting, teachers' understanding of the assessment criteria, and learner self-assessment (Bailey, 1996; Hughes, 2003; Messick, 1996; Shohamy, 1996). The WAS design closely followed these requirements. First, each component of the WAS—writing standards per course, rubrics, conventions, and writing tasks for mid-term and final tests—was explicitly connected to each component; second, the writing tasks were designed by considering authenticity requirements such

¹ This is a refereed article.

² Washback refers to the influence of assessment on teaching and learning (Hughes, 2003; Wall & Alderson, 1993)

as parallelism to real life situations, consistency with classroom and curriculum related objectives, and the interaction between tasks and students' background (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Douglas, 2000; O'Malley & Valdez, 1996; Widdowson, 1979); and third, the rubrics were designed to render consistent application ($r > 0.7$) (Muñoz et al., 2006).

The WAS consists of a set of writing rubrics³ aligned with writing standards for each course, writing conventions to check grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling problems, and writing tasks for the tests. The system was implemented during the first academic quarter of 2006 after teachers had received training to familiarize themselves with its appropriate use. A three-module course dealing with theory and practice was offered including: 1) definition of the writing ability, 2) planning and design of writing tasks, and 3) consistent use of the rubrics and conventions. In Module 1, different approaches to the teaching of writing were reviewed and a definition of the writing ability for the LC context was presented and discussed with the teachers. Module 2 dealt with a hands-on practical understanding of writing prompts and their connection to curriculum-related objectives. In Module 3, several calibration meetings were conducted where groups of teachers worked together to score samples and to reach a shared consensus. During these meetings, teachers compared their scorings and discussed any differences of opinions they might have had. In addition to the three-module course, a training course was held to guide teachers on how to teach writing and on how to keep writing portfolios.

In 2006, a preliminary evaluation of the impact of the WAS on teaching was conducted. Results showed that teachers were not using the assessment system as required and that they needed to provide students with more detailed feedback by using the assessment tools appropriately.

In this article, I will first present a brief literature review of writing assessment, contending that meaningful assessment can motivate positive changes in the instruction and learning of writing. I will then describe the method and procedures involved in this study and present the findings and discussion. In the final section, I will offer some conclusions and implications for the classroom and for the implementation of future educational programs.

Review of the literature

The primary purpose of assessment is to interpret and to make decisions about students' language ability. Based upon this, it is essential to define the ability or the construct to be measured because this determines what

³ Scoring scales for different levels of proficiency were used to measure different aspects of writing ability: Coherence and cohesion, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and task completion

aspects of the ability are to be measured and how they are going to be measured. The definition of the construct for the LC includes: 1) the specification of writing standards for each course; 2) the definition of the teaching approach; and 3) the definition of the aspects of language knowledge and ability in the scoring instrument.

The writing standards' specifications at the LC are based on the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001) and on the particular needs of the local context. For instance, students at the elementary level are expected to be able to fill in simple forms where personal information is required, write short simple postcards, describe people, places, jobs or study experiences, write short imaginary biographies, write informal personal letters, and write stories. At intermediate levels students are required to write simple essays on topics of interest, summarise, report and give opinions, write brief reports, write personal letters and write notes asking for or conveying simple information of immediate relevance. Finally, at more advanced levels, students are expected to write clear, detailed descriptions of real or imaginary events and experiences, write a review of a film, book or play, and write an essay or report which develops an argument or presents an argument for or against a given topic.

The teaching of writing at the institution focuses on three basic aspects: 1) the process students go through when writing (prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing); 2) the accuracy, content, and organization of the writing; and 3) the particular genre the students are producing (letters, essays, biographies, reports, etc.). I believe that a focus on these three basic aspects can help students greatly improve their writing skills by considering the personal writing process, the accuracy of the language used, and the purpose of the piece of writing (Badger & White, 2000; Harwood, 2005).

Finally, the definition of language knowledge and ability was based upon aspects such as linguistic competence, discourse competence and sociolinguistic competence taken from the ACTFL (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages) proficiency guidelines and the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) writing descriptors (see Internet sites in the References for more detailed information).

Once the construct was defined, it was necessary to design the assessment tools that would mirror all the components specified in the construct. This implies the design of the assessment tasks and the scoring scales. Designing tasks calls for a specification of the prompt which refers to the written instructions given to students. The prompt consists of the question or statement students will address in their writing and the conditions under which they will write (O'Malley and Valdez, 1996). The

wording of the prompt may vary in its specification. Based on a literature review, the LC considered that the prompts should:

- a. Be connected to the writing standards for the course.
- b. Include the genre or the purpose of the writing (Weigle, 2002).
- c. Include the audience, either implicitly or explicitly (Weigle, 2002).
- d. Include the process or the steps students have to follow when developing a writing piece. That is to say, the organizational plan or form of presentation which specifies how students are to develop the writing piece as well as the number of words, time allotment, sequence, or number of paragraphs (Hale et al., 1996).

In order to reduce teacher bias and increase the value of assessment, teachers have found that well-designed rubrics (or a scoring scale) can provide such a tool to promote accurate, reliable writing assessment (Stansfield & Ross, 1988; Weigle, 1994). Additionally, teachers need to be trained to reliably apply the rubrics. Sufficiently high regularity in scoring can be obtained by means of proper teacher training. Prior to the scoring stage, teachers should understand the principles behind the particular rating scales they must work with, and they should be able to interpret their descriptors consistently (Alderson & Wall, 2001).

It is widely recognized that well-designed assessments in which there are task authenticity, congruence between assessment and educational goals, detailed score reporting, teachers and students' understanding of the assessment criteria, among others, are beneficial for the learning and teaching process (Bailey, 1996; Hughes, 2003; Messick, 1996). Although different studies have been conducted on the reliability and validity of large scale writing assessments (Novak, et al., 1996; Walberg & Ethington, 1991), little has been investigated about the impact of writing assessment on teaching and learning. For instance, Stecher et al. (2004) studied the effects of a test – the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) – and a standards-based system on writing instruction in Washington State schools. The researchers found that although the process writing approach changed little before and after the test was instituted, the curriculum (writing conventions, emphasis on audience, purpose, styles and formats) and instructional methods (greatest emphasis on WASL rubrics for student feedback) did change. The study concluded that the WASL influenced instruction positively.

In another study, Lumley and Yan (2001) examined the impact of the Pennsylvania Assessment Policy on writing instruction and teaching methodology. The findings indicate that even though teachers agreed with the type of scoring and characteristics of effective writing proposed by the Pennsylvania Holistic Scoring Guide, they were reluctant to use the state rubrics, descriptors, and writing samples. The authors concluded that there may have been some deficiencies in the support material, or that

teachers used their own evaluation tools, or that they did not adopt the suggested writing approach.

The aim of this research was to evaluate the impact of writing assessment practices on the teaching of EFL writing. More specifically, following the implementation of the WAS, it was hypothesized that teacher writing instruction would improve and that teacher perception of the WAS would be positive.

Method

Participants

Twenty eight EFL teachers participated in the study. They had taught at the Language Center for at least two years. The teachers received a series of training sessions dealing with the theory and practice of teaching and assessment as well as the presentation of the WAS aims, the definition of writing ability based on the LC writing construct, the planning and design of writing tasks, and the consistent use of the rubrics and conventions among teachers (calibration sessions). In addition, training sessions were held to guide teachers on how to keep writing portfolios and on how to follow the writing approach adopted by the LC.

Data Collection and Analysis

Teachers' improvement in writing instruction was examined by analyzing 28 writing portfolios gathered from March to October, 2007. Improvement was defined considering the LC approach to writing instruction and assessment. This consists of: 1) congruence between task and writing standards for the course, 2) appropriateness of the prompt, 3) explicitness and elaboration of techniques to generate ideas, 4) understanding of writing conventions, and 5) detailed scoring and feedback. The portfolios were distributed at the beginning of the course and steps were specified to guide teachers in the portfolio process. Teachers were expected to submit them at course end and to include the students' first drafts and final texts. Although teachers were to file students' writings, the purpose of the portfolio was to evaluate their own understanding of the writing process and scoring procedures.

The analysis of writing portfolios was conducted using a rubric designed and validated for this purpose⁴. The rubric measured congruence between task and writing standards, prompt design, explicitness and elaboration of techniques to generate ideas, use of writing conventions, and detailed scoring and feedback. Two researchers conducted the portfolio analysis,

⁴ To determine validity, the aspects measured by the rubric were aligned to the writing construct as defined for the Language Center (Muñoz, et al. 2006). Furthermore, the descriptors for each aspect in the rubric were progressively adjusted by evaluating different portfolios used for piloting purposes.

first individually, and then in pairs to reach a consensus if discrepancies arose. The degree of suitability of the different aspects examined in the portfolios was analyzed using percentages for each category of an ordinal scale of: **excellent**, **satisfactory**, and **unsatisfactory**. To compare results from 2006 and 2007, a chi-squared test of homogeneity with 2 d.f. and 5% level of significance was used. In order to examine teacher opinion of the WAS, surveys were given to the 28 teachers and 21 surveys were returned. The surveys contained five questions enquiring about perceived changes in the activities used for teaching and learning writing, teaching methodology, improvements in learning and reasons for using the WAS. For each question, six responses (statements) were provided; teachers had to indicate their opinion about the answers given on an ordinal scale of: **disagree**, **undecided**, and **agree**. The degree of teachers' agreement on the different survey statements was also analyzed using percentages for each category of the ordinal scale of: **disagree**, **undecided**, and **agree**.

Results and discussion

In this section seven themes will be presented based upon the results of the surveys given to the teachers. These themes are concerned with the teachers' perceptions of: improvement in writing instruction, comparison for improvement in writing instruction, reasons for the WAS implementation, teacher changes in teaching and assessment practices, types of extra teacher work required by the WAS, changes in students learning and finally teachers' willingness to implement changes in instructional practices. Each theme is represented by a figure and the results and discussion will follow.

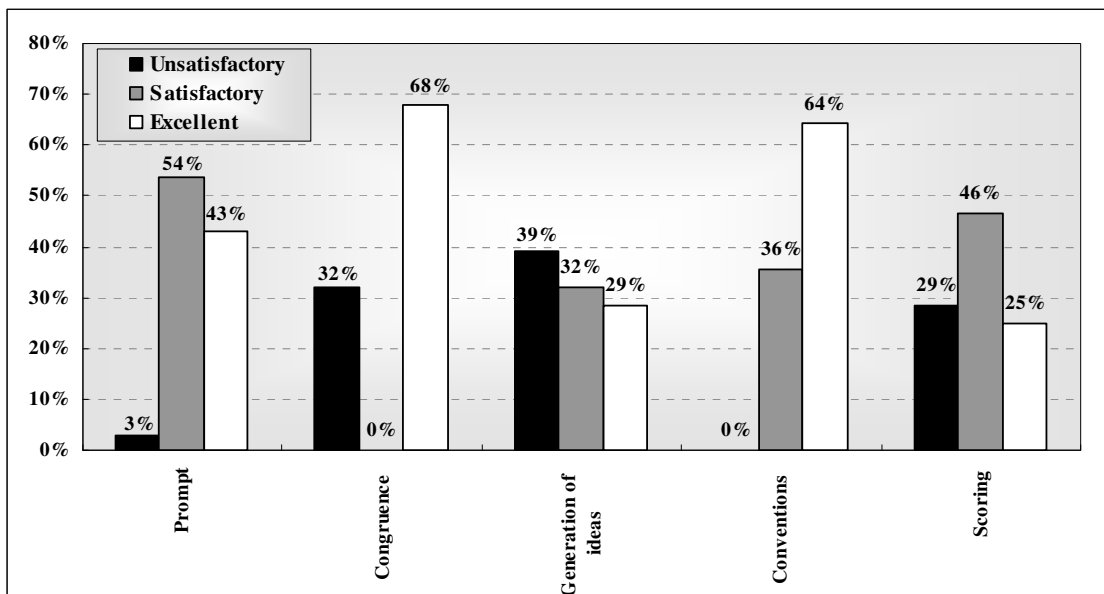


Figure 1. Teachers' improvement of writing instruction

As indicated in Figure 1, 43% of the teachers designed excellent prompts which means that the prompts were consistent with the requirements established by the LC for writing prompts, i.e., specification of genre or discourse mode, audience, and organizational plan. 54% of the teachers did not specify one of the requirements or worded the prompts somewhat awkwardly, but the prompts were considered satisfactory. Finally, 3% of the teachers did not include any of the specifications. With regard to congruence between prompts and writing standards, it was observed that while 68% of the teachers used writing tasks directly related to the writing standards, 32% used activities that had little or no relation to the standard. Even though the writing standards are clearly defined for each course, it seems that some teachers had difficulties in making this connection. This might be due to the preference of some activities given by the teacher or the students without regard to the course objectives.

The analysis further shows that 29% of the teachers were appropriately using techniques to generate ideas, such as brainstorming, listing, mind mapping, etc. These techniques were clearly presented, elaborated, and reflected in students' writings. Although 32% of the teachers clearly indicated the technique used, they did not fully elaborate on it but it was at least partly evidenced in the students' writing; therefore they were considered satisfactory. Still, 39% gave no evidence of a specific technique used. Regarding the revision process, the data revealed that 62% of the teachers made excellent use of the conventions, providing students with precise and appropriate feedback, while 36% used them only satisfactorily perhaps due to their confusion and inconsistent use of some of the correction symbols. When scoring the writings, 25% of the teachers were very specific in assigning scores for each aspect—coherence and cohesion, grammar and vocabulary, and task completion—and descriptors of the rubric and personalized comments to help students understand the score. 46% provided satisfactory scorings, meaning that they assigned scores for each aspect but did not give scores for each descriptor, yet they provided some useful comments for the students. The rest of the teachers, 29%, only assigned global grades and did not comment on the students' writings.

In general, teachers made appropriate use of the WAS, especially in relation to prompt design and the use of conventions. Providing students with well-designed prompts is obviously an important aspect of assessment because students' successful performance greatly depends on how well teachers and test developers design the tasks. Therefore task design is crucial to "allow all candidates to perform to the best of their abilities and to eliminate variations in scoring that can be attributed to the task rather than the candidates' abilities" (Weigle, 2002: 60-61). Similarly, a suitable use of the conventions may affect students' writing in

a positive way because while editing their writing, students need to exercise higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, in order to interpret the symbols and improve their writing. Although students were not formally assessed through the portfolios, the researchers saw how a great emphasis was given to these symbols in order to provide feedback. Very few of the writings contained teachers' comments related to content or style or even praise. In other words, lack of interaction between teacher and students was evident.

In the area of writing standards and tasks, the majority of the teachers utilized tasks that directly measured the standards. However, more awareness needs to be raised regarding the connection between these two aspects. When teachers and students recognize that the writing tasks directly assess the standards and that writing is assessed along clearly articulated levels of performance, teachers will probably be more motivated to change instructional practices to both teach and have students practice around these authentic assessments, and students will be more likely to buy into the value of such work (Natriello & Dornbusch, 1984). With regard to scoring, it seems essential to raise more awareness of the importance of providing detailed scorings. Score reporting may be an influential factor in performance. Several studies confirm that global skills assessments seem to be less reliable than skill specific or behaviour specific descriptors (Chapelle & Brindley, 2002; Strong-Krause, 2000). Furthermore, it is crucial that teachers not simply respond to grammar or content by means of scores but that more personalized comments should be provided so as to maintain a dialogue between the student and teacher. It is also necessary to further encourage the use of pre-writing techniques in order to spark general ideas on the topic.

Comparing the results obtained in 2006 and 2007, it is possible to say that teachers significantly improved writing instruction in most of the evaluated aspects. To determine areas of significant improvement a homogeneity test by chi-square at 5% level of significance was conducted (see Figure 2).

	Excellent		Satisfactory		Unsatisfactory		χ^2_{calc}
	2006	2007	2006	2007	2006	2007	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Prompt	17.5	42.9	42.5	53.6	40.0	3.5	20.38
Congruence	57.5	68.0	-	-	42.5	32	1.31*
Idea generation	15.0	28.6	47.5	32.1	37.5	39.3	5.23*
Convention	22.5	64.3	47.5	35.7	30.0	-	32.59
Scoring	2.5	25.0	40.0	46.4	57.5	28.6	61.06

* Improved, but not significantly

Figure 2. Comparison for improvement in writing instruction

As can be seen in the table, improvement was highly significant in prompt design ($\chi^2 = 20.38$; p-value < 0.05), use of conventions ($\chi^2 = 32.59$; p-value < 0.05), and scoring practices ($\chi^2 = 61.06$; p-value < 0.05). Although there were improvements in using activities connected to the writing standards and in the techniques proposed to generate ideas, they were not highly significant ($\chi^2 = 1.31$; p-value < 5.9 and $\chi^2 = 5.23$; p-value > 0.05 respectively). It is interesting to note that the aspects in which there was more significance have to do with either planning or evaluating the 'product' of writing, whereas aspects where there was less significance, had to do with 'the process.'

Figures 3 to 7 below show the percentages of how teachers responded to the following questions: 1) What are the major reasons for the Adult Program to implement a writing assessment system? 2) What are the major changes that you have perceived in your teaching and assessment practices after the implementation of the WAS? 3) What kind of extra work, if any, do you think the WAS created for you in your teaching? 4) What are the major changes you perceive in students due to the implementation of the WAS? 5) What are the major changes you are willing to make in your teaching in the context of the WAS?

Statements	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
To meet the policies of the LC/University	43	14	43
To improve teachers' language proficiency	42.7	23.8	33.5
To refine assessment practices	4.8	14.2	81
To motivate students to improve writing skills	-	4.8	95.2
To encourage students to self-assess their writing	-	19	81
To encourage teachers to become more aware of their own writing teaching practices	4.8	28.2	67

Figure 3. Reasons for the implementation of the WAS

The majority of the responses (95.2%) indicate that teachers considered the WAS a motivating tool to improve students' writing skills. They also viewed the implementation of the system as a means to refine assessment practices (81%) and foster student self-assessment (81%). Based on these results it is possible to say that teachers strongly agreed with some of the WAS principles, and this agreement, in turn, represents a positive effect on teaching. Two possible circumstances may account for the percentage of undecided answers in the questions concerning teachers' language proficiency (23.8%) and teaching practices (28.2%). First, it is possible that there is a misconception regarding evaluation as exclusively oriented to or developed for students. Upon the implementation of WAS, clarity of the objectives was stressed, in order to improve teaching and learning. However, language proficiency and teaching practices continue to show certain degree of misunderstanding(s) regarding the purposes of this implementation. Second, the uncertainty in

the answers might well be connected to a possible resistance to the proposed changes in teaching and language proficiency. In other words, there seems to be a more positive attitude regarding the activities or instruments that facilitate student change than those which foster teacher change. The uncertainty in the answers did not appear when the responses were related with student improvement or change in any area.

Statements	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
Better planning of lessons	19.1	33.3	47.6
Better understanding of the connection between instruction and writing standards	-	28.6	71.4
More emphasis on writing activities	28.2	4.8	67
More emphasis on the writing process than on the final product	19	14.3	66.7
More emphasis on language accuracy	23.8	23.8	52.4
More effectiveness in teaching and assessing writing	15	-	85

Figure 4. Perceived changes in teaching and assessment practices

The most important change perceived by the teachers was connected to teachers being more effective when teaching and assessing writing (85%). They also perceived that they had a better understanding of the writing standards and instruction (71.4%). However, the 28.6% undecided responses might indicate that there is still a lack of clarity regarding the relationship between standards and instruction. The portfolio results also demonstrated that teachers need to have a better understanding of this connection. It seems that teachers continue to rely more on the pacing rather than on the writing standards which, again, reinforces the idea of a need for a time of transition due to resistance to change, especially on the part of teachers. This is not necessarily a negative aspect but rather a common and expected effect of a process of change in general (Piaget, 1972).

Statements	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
Following the course standards	76.2	14.3	9.5
Doing more lesson preparation	52.4	23.8	23.8
Providing more feedback to students' writings	28.5	9.5	62
Keeping a writing portfolio	14.3	9.5	76.2
Using the assessment tools correctly (rubrics, conventions)	57.1	4.7	38.2
Implementing more writing practices	23.8	23.8	52.4

Figure 5. Type of extra teacher work required by the WAS

Not surprisingly, teachers considered that keeping a writing portfolio added to their teaching workload (76.2%). Likewise providing more feedback was considered extra work (62%). As explained in the data collection procedures, keeping the portfolio implied that teachers had to carefully follow the writing and scoring process. It is important to note that the portfolio was used for the purpose of gathering data and it did not

constitute part of the regular use of WAS. In any case, this represents valuable information that may be considered for future decisions.

In relation to lesson planning and implementing more writing practices, there was no perception that the workload increased significantly. Undecided responses for these statements do not demonstrate an exceptional increase in the workload. If a substantial amount of extra work was required, teachers would surely not have hesitated to answer positively. On the other hand, a response reflecting uncertainty on this respect may, again, represent the teachers' fear of judgement being placed on their skills and their willingness to comply with the WAS requirements. Following the standards did not represent additional effort for most teachers (76.2%), which emphasizes the idea mentioned before that there is a progressive change regarding the understanding of standards and instruction. This progressive change, in turn, may also account for the percentage of undecided responses.

While more than half of the answers did not refer to additional work in using the assessment tools, other teachers perceived that using these tools represented extra work possibly because the WAS requires a thorough understanding of the concepts involved in assessment and a careful application of the instruments. Additionally, it is necessary for teachers to have a high language proficiency in order to correctly identify and measure the possible language problems that need correction and feedback.

Statements	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
More awareness of their writing skills	9.5	4.7	85.8
More willingness to self-assess their writing	19	42.9	38.1
More motivation to write	33.3	28.6	38.1
Improvements in grammar and vocabulary	4.8	23.8	71.4
Improvements in coherence and cohesion	9.5	28.5	62
More understanding of the prompts	9.7	28.3	62

Figure 6. Teachers perceived changes in students' learning

Most of the answers related to changes in students' learning referred to students becoming more aware of their writing skills (85.8%), which is an important positive effect of the system since awareness represents a first step towards change, as mentioned previously. Regarding students' motivation to write, teachers either disagreed (33.3%) or were undecided (28.6%) about this statement. A possible explanation might be related to a perceived lack of intrinsic motivation to learn English associated with the university's bilingualism policy, as expressed by many teachers and students in informal conversations. According to this policy, students need to demonstrate a B2 level of the Common European Framework (2001) in order to graduate from the students' undergraduate degree programs. Students can certify this proficiency through different tests such as the

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), IELTS (International English Language Testing System), CAE (Certificate of Advanced English), CPE (Certificate of Proficiency in English), and MELICET (Michigan English Language Institute College English Test). Their proficiency can also be certified by taking and passing all the courses at the LC. This can obviously represent a source of extrinsic motivation.

Statements	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
To follow all the steps to develop writing	4.8	9.5	85.7
To apply the writing assessment instruments	4.8	9.5	85.7
To foster more students' self assessment	-	19	81
To teach towards the writing standards	9.5	19	71.5
To keep writing portfolios	38	24	38
To improve my own writing skills	14.3	23.7	62

Figure 7. Teachers' willingness to implement changes in instructional practices

In general, teachers' responses revealed a positive attitude towards the use of the WAS with the exception of keeping writing portfolios which, as previously mentioned, is not a permanent part of the WAS. The most significant percentage of undecided responses appeared in the improvement of teachers' writing skills (23.7%), which confirms the idea of a resistance to change when teachers were questioned about their language knowledge and abilities. It is also possible that teachers considered that they had little need for professional improvement. It is not uncommon for people to have certain erroneous beliefs and views about themselves.

Conclusions and implications

Significant improvements were found in most of the areas observed, mainly in prompt design and the use of conventions. First, well-designed prompts may influence student learning positively because the task complexity is reduced and successful task completion is increased. Second, teachers' appropriate use of conventions may help students apply higher-order thinking through the revision and edition of their own writing texts. However, some teachers limited their feedback to the conventions without any further comments. Therefore, awareness needs to be raised on a balanced use of the conventions and on a more informative and formative type of feedback. Students who were given informative feedback that explained their strengths and weaknesses were more likely to demonstrate higher levels of intrinsic motivation towards a task (see Butler, 1988; Elawar & Corno, 1985).

Although less significant, improvements were also present in the use of the rubric(s) and in the implementation of writing tasks directly connected to the standards. Providing detailed scoring is beneficial for learning (see Chappelle & Brindley, 2002; Strong-Krause, 2000) because students can

refer to the rubrics and identify possible areas of further work. Likewise, understanding the relationship between tasks and writing standards allowed teachers to plan lessons in accordance with instructional goals and therefore direct students to the accomplishment of the standards. Multiple research studies show that students who perform better are those familiar with their learning goals (Amigues & Guinard-Andreucci, 1981; Bonniol, 1981; Jorba & Sanmarti, 1994).

Teachers also demonstrated a very positive attitude concerning the WAS. They considered the system a useful tool for raising student awareness and for improving writing skills. However, when teachers were asked about improvements in their own language knowledge and abilities, some uncertainty or possible resistance to change appeared. In other words, there was a more positive attitude regarding student change than teacher change.

In any process of change there may appear resistance or opposition. It is likely that the suggested assessment system makes new demands on the teachers' competencies and beliefs as well as the nature and goals of evaluation. The research literature suggests that beliefs and practice are inevitably related, and that teachers may have beliefs that are not compatible with the practices called for in institutional plans (Bliem & Davinroy, 1997; Borko, et al., 1997). It then follows that meaningful change in assessment practices may require changes in teachers' beliefs about such practices. As Fullan (1998: 25) suggests in his innovation theory, "change is a highly personal psychological process." This may require teacher training based upon action research which is defined as a "form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988: 5).

An important change perceived by teachers was that more emphasis was given to language accuracy. While writing texts in terms of accurate structures and lexis is important for learning, the communicative aspect of the language was somewhat ignored. It is then necessary to guide teachers' attention towards aspects such as task completion which calls for the thorough development and elaboration of ideas and the accomplishment of the specific genres and functions measured.

To summarize, the introduction of the WAS proved to be a stimulus or lever for change in some of the areas under research. Continuous efforts need to be made with in-service training and action research programs in order to maintain the system. Moreover, based on the results of this research, the program can be adjusted so that it will be improved for

future use. What is obvious with a program such as this is that communication, training, and teacher involvement are needed for the success and sustainability of new programs.

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CELE's Revamped Teacher Training Course – Contents and Piloting

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Introduction

In this paper the process used to design a new Teacher Training Course is presented—the background which motivated it, the stages it went through, and finally its piloting and on-going evaluation.

The Language Center of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (CELE/UNAM), has been offering a Teacher Training Course for language teachers since 1980. The course has been continuously updated, but it was not until recently that major restructuring took place. The group of teachers involved in the course, approximately 30 from five different foreign languages (English, French, German, Italian and Portuguese) decided to revamp the course in order to fulfill the more recent expectations of participants. First, we started by doing a diagnosis of the course as it was. By means of questionnaires and interviews, we asked for the opinion of the student teachers, former student teachers, teacher trainers (present and former), and employers from private and public institutions. Parallel to this, we carried out a literature review to update the theoretical background and we searched the web to analyze different programs offered at national and international universities in order to have a wider range of comparison. Finally, we invited a well known specialist in curriculum design, Dr. Christian Puren, from the University of St. Etienne in France, to give us a five-week seminar in 2005, and another one-week seminar in 2006.

We arrived at several conclusions, the most relevant of which are the following:

- a. Though there exist various B. A. and M. A. programs on language teaching, the need for a shorter course is still predominant, particularly for teachers already working in the Mexico City metropolitan area and surrounding states who require certification. Moreover, novice teachers doing a B. A. may also be interested in taking it while finishing their major studies.
- b. There is an administrative, pedagogical and practical need, among the faculty of the course, to create a homogeneous program to be taught in all languages (there had been a wide range of variations) so that the students have a very similar profile upon graduation regardless of the language they teach.

- c. The connection between theory and practice needs to be more fully demonstrated.
- d. More practice is required, particularly for novice teachers.
- e. Autonomous learning has to be encouraged.
- f. More emphasis on intercultural communication is definitely needed.
- g. There needs to be more emphasis on internet resources and the pedagogical use of such resources.
- h. According to employers, there is a need to include information on teaching larger groups and younger students.
- i. Last, but not least, employers complained that the command of the language among graduates may vary immensely.

By revamping the course, we hoped to benefit the approximately 70 students we have per year (the average number of students who have made up every generation for the past 25 years), plus all the learners who will become students of these graduates in the future, and the approximately 20 teaching staff members.

In the early stages, there were 30 or more participants involved in this research project, so we decided to work in commissions. Each commission usually consisted of one member per language in order to integrate every area's viewpoint. There were commissions to:

- Write a synthesis of the 100-hour seminar with Dr. Puren in 2005.
- Write the research project itself, calculating the stages, time and resources required.
- Write the entry and exit profiles.
- Decide on the contents of the different modules, their length, relative weight and work load. Here, there was one sub-commission per module.
- Draft and map out the various curricula as the process was progressing.

We also agreed on having periodical meetings for commissions to report on their progress, keeping a record of the whole process, and organizing academic events so as to continue updating. As time went by, and the workload increased, participants started dropping out of the project. After a few months, there were no more than 10 teachers doing the job. Nevertheless, after long working hours, we designed the program which was first piloted from February to December, 2007. At present, the second piloting is taking place.

Theoretical background

Based on Dr. Puren's teachings, our perspectives on Teacher Education were broadened. We included the *Philosophyco-Pedagogical Perspective (Perspectiva 'Didactológica')*, that is, the 'why' of teaching, which allows participants "to reflect upon their own discipline and construct models, as well as to reflect upon their responsibilities towards the learners and

society" (Puren, seminar, 2005). Thus, the two obvious perspectives we used to focus on:

- the *Methodological Perspective (Perspectiva Metodológica)* which deals with questions concerning 'what' to do in the language class, and
- the *Pedagogical Perspective (Perspectiva Didáctica)* which deals with questions related to 'how' to teach, 'how' to learn, and the connection between the two.

Moreover, the *Philosophyco-Pedagogical Perspective (Perspectiva 'Didactológica')* requires time – time to evaluate what we do in class, time to reflect and reason why we do it, and time to decide whether it is worth doing or not, if it benefits the learners, and, in the long run, society. This time requirement affected our course design, as we shall discuss below.

Four basic principles guide the new design:

1. The complexity of the teaching and learning process is to be carefully considered. Its different angles are to be questioned, analyzed, and reflected upon, as well as our responsibility towards learners and society.
2. Language is an integral part of culture, and thus inseparable. A language teacher is, therefore, a teacher of the language and culture.
3. Interlanguage is a continuous learning process which is personal, and starts with the learner's competence in his own language and culture.
4. Professional development is an ongoing learning process which does not end with this course.

Why these four basic principles? The first principle is self explanatory. There are no precise recipes; what at a certain moment in time used to be "the only way to teach" was later questioned and rejected. Language teaching is as complex as doing research or being a doctor. There are no right or wrong answers. There are learners with different characteristics, and abilities. Student teachers must not expect to learn a precise way to teach, but rather to reflect on what they do, analyze it, question it, and react accordingly.

We do believe that language and culture or cultures (there is not one single culture, but many) are inseparable. You cannot learn a language without learning about the culture(s). If you learn Mexican Spanish, for example, you will learn culturally bound mexicanismos which might be used throughout all Mexico or locally, i.e. only in the specific region where you are. Though we had always taken culture into consideration, it had never been explicitly stated. We, thus, included a module in which we have tried to promote awareness, respect and understanding towards the culture(s) of others, and to analyze the relevance, the meaning, and the sense of "otherness".

The concept of the learners' interlanguage, once restricted to psycholinguistics, was analyzed more profoundly. We became conscious of the fact that it exists even in our mother tongue, for L1 competence varies

according to one's background, culture, age and education. We thus agreed on considering it the basis for any language program. You have to keep it in mind when you design a curriculum, a course or even a lesson. We have tried to focus on interlanguage in every module – particularly in those dealing with skills or evaluation – in order for student teachers to bear in mind their students' interlanguage when they plan their lessons or design a test.

The fourth basic principle is also self explanatory – a Teacher Training Course is just the starting point of a long, ongoing learning process which, hopefully, will last for life. We hope graduates will be motivated to continue their teacher education by themselves – through reading, sharing, seeking help among colleagues, and taking part in workshops, conventions, distance learning, on-line projects, B. A. or M. A. programs; whatever is within their reach.

Entry Requirements and Exit Profile

Candidates must be 21 or older, and they must have a *preparatoria* or high school certificate. Based on existing records, it is known that a great number of our candidates have done or are doing B. A. or B. S. studies, even Master's Degrees. However, we agreed not to require such a degree, for it would leave out those teachers already working who know the language they teach, but who do not have a degree, or the possibility of getting one. However, these teachers have a greater need of being certified. These candidates usually want to take the course in the open system for they only have to attend classes once a week (twice during the second semester).

A good command of the language is a top requisite. Besides using selected international certificates as a first filter, we demand that they take our own entrance exam where we evaluate their level of L2 proficiency and specific academic skills which are necessary for the course. As part of the revamping process, we recently revised all our exams. Writing is the most important section. It is through writing a formal essay that candidates demonstrate their actual command of the language. This section is photocopied, and corrected by two independent raters. When there is a discrepancy in the grades, a third rater is consulted. Those candidates who pass this first filter are scheduled for an interview. Again, as with the writing section, two interviewers are involved, and a parallel rating process takes place.

The new Exit Profile corresponds to these principles:

- The graduate will be prepared to successfully carry out his/her duties as a teacher of a foreign language and culture at the high school or university level.

- The teacher acknowledges that professional development will be better achieved through a three dimensional process of initial reflection, teaching practice, and continuous reflection.
- All decisions that are made by the teacher are to be based on two fundamental factors – the complexity of the language item as well as the specific teaching situation and the interlanguage stage of the students

The course itself

In the end, we decided to give quality priority over time factors; therefore the length of two semesters was kept. In fact, the course ended up being even longer – it now lasts more than the 450 hours it used to be. At present, instead of finishing at 7:00 pm every day, participants have classes until 8:30 once a week, and until 8:00 pm twice a week.

Currently there are modules that are compulsory and others that are elective – student teachers can decide which to take depending on personal interest. There are obligatory 24-hour modules which last for the whole semester, and 12-hour modules which are generally elective.

All modules are meant to be interrelated and to emphasize practice over theory – that's why the Observation, Planning and Practice Modules now contemplate practice from the very beginning, and modules like Sociolinguistics and Psycholinguistics, that tended to be more theoretical than practical, became elective. When deciding on the contents of each module, we correlated the module programs in order to confirm module interconnection while at the same time avoiding overlapping. Moreover, teacher trainers are in constant communication with each other. An Internet group, which can only be accessed by members, has been opened so that each teacher knows what the other teachers are doing at a certain point in time and can connect the contents of the classes.

The language system (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexis) is taught in connection with the participants' own learning and teaching experience, either previous or in progress. The language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing), are presented in pairs, when possible. The combinations vary, depending on the language area. French, for example, offers the two comprehension skills (listening and reading) together, while English combines listening and speaking, but not reading and writing. We have given special emphasis to the teaching of writing. A full 24-hour module was designed in order to allow sufficient time and opportunities for participants themselves to practice and improve their own writing, while at the same time learning how to teach it.

Names and main characteristics of the new modules

Pedagogical Theories functions as the axis which gives global coherence to the whole Teacher Training Program. It deals with knowledge which is presented more practically in other modules, and incorporated here into one consistent theoretical module. It lasts two semesters, and is offered in Spanish for the student teachers of all language areas to take together and share common knowledge or contrast differences. The student teachers often work in small groups which have at least one member per language area. Each area receives extra texts and references in its specific language.

The Learning of an Unknown Foreign Language is an obligatory 12-hour module offered for student teachers to reflect upon their own learning process. The sessions are 1½ hours long – one hour to learn the unknown language, and half an hour to reflect upon the learning process. It is worth pointing out that because it is such a brief period of time, only the spoken language is focused on. Besides the foreign language teacher, there are four or five tutors who observe the class, and later lead the reflection process in small groups. Rather than focusing on theoretical psycholinguistic knowledge in language learning, reflection on the participants' learning process, their learning strategies and their own interlanguage is highlighted here. During the first piloting, Russian was the language to be learned; during the second year, 2008, it was Chinese.

The Action Research and Personal Research Project is a very important new module planned to last for two semesters. The goal is for student teachers to experience what action research is like, and to develop a personal research project that will encompass bits of relevant knowledge from all modules, as well as from other outside sources. Student teachers individually decide on what they want to investigate. This project, a formal one, is the main final product of the course. Besides the head teacher of the module, a tutor is assigned to guide every participant throughout the process.

The Pedagogy of Culture is a module where the importance of cultural competence is highlighted. As mentioned above, culture is intrinsic to language; one cannot exist independent of the other. Also, different cultures may co-exist within the same language. Ryan (1996: 572) considers that "the concept of culture is complex, difficult to explain, slippery". Student teachers must become aware of all this, and reflect upon it. They are expected to be able to analyze and assess the treatment of foreign culture(s) in textbooks and materials, as well as to design pedagogical sequences that deal with different aspects of the foreign culture(s). Byram's schema (1989: 34) shown in Figure 1 (where he "conserves the elegance of French terminology in which knowledge, skills

and attitudes can be described as different *savoirs*”) was the basis for the design of the course.

	Skills <i>interpret and relate</i> (savoir comprendre)	
Knowledge <i>of self and other;</i> <i>of interaction;</i> <i>individual and societal</i> (savoirs)	Education <i>political education</i> <i>critical cultural awareness</i> (savoir s'engager)	Attitudes <i>relativising self</i> <i>valuing other</i> (savoir etre)
	Skills <i>discover and/or interact</i> (savoir apprendre/faire)	

Figure 1. Factors in intercultural communication

Observation, Planning and Practice (OPP 1 & 2), another important module, nowadays includes practice a few weeks after starting the first semester. Formerly, the first term only focused on observation and planning. Classroom management, practical teaching techniques, and the like are now experienced earlier, and can be reflected upon sooner. Student teachers, in small groups of four or five, practice twice a week with real learners from different CELE groups. These practice sessions consist of two hours of teaching, and two hours for feedback. It is during the lesson planning and feedback sessions that the *Philosophyco-Pedagogical Perspective (Perspectiva 'Didactológica')* clearly takes place; i.e. the association between practice and theory, and the reflection, analysis, and questioning of “why” this or that was done.

Linguistic Descriptions and Language Pedagogy 1, 2 and 3 deal with the system of the language. Module 1 focuses on phonetics, phonology, and lexis – whatever is specifically related to phonetics and phonology. Module 2 comprises morphology and syntax, while Module 3 focuses extensively on lexis. The programs reflect the practice-theory connection we want to convey. The student teachers are required to design pedagogical sequences which demonstrate their awareness of learning strategies or which are backed by theoretical aspects being discussed at a given moment. We used to have only two modules dedicated to the system of the language, but, after a lot of reading and discussion, we considered that syntax and lexis deserved more attention.

Group Dynamics has become a compulsory 12-hour module. In 2007 it was offered in two parts – six hours per semester. *Group Dynamics* is now given a more profound focus than that traditionally expected by participants. The emphasis is not on having fun, but on providing an opportunity for the teachers to identify learners’ personality traits by observing the roles they might play in class. These kinds of activities may also help to speed up the learning process, to review or to diagnose a

problem – the module gives student teachers the chance to experience some of these techniques.

We used to offer this module intensively during the first week of the course. Based on former participants' feedback, who yearned for *Group Dynamics* activities during the second term, we considered that splitting the module and offering the second part at the beginning of the second semester (after student teachers had gained practical teaching experience during the first semester) would be better. However, this did not occur, as we shall discuss below.

Electronic Resources, a hands-on 12-hour module also split between the two semesters, is given in the multimedia lab. Student teachers learn to use the library electronic resources to help them do research, find complementary information, practical teaching tips, and so forth. We planned to split it, for participants to first become acquainted with the library electronic resources, and later with more elaborate resources. Again, this did not work out for reasons which shall also be discussed below.

Elective 12-hour modules are offered to promote participants' autonomy. Student teachers select three courses to be covered during the two semesters, according to their own needs and wants. They may take one or two modules during the first semester, and the rest during the second. They may also take more than three, if they choose to do so. At present, the elective modules offered are: *Psycholinguistics*, *Sociolinguistics*, *The Teaching of Larger Groups*, *The Teaching of Younger Learners*, *An Introduction to Virtual Environments in Pedagogy*, *An Introduction to Self-access Learning*, *Group Dynamics 2*, *ICT* (Information and Communication Technologies), and *Grupo Operativo* which is a different group dynamics technique specifically designed for the French area.

Evaluation Results so far:

In 2007, the course was offered in English, French and Portuguese. There were not sufficient candidates to open it in German or Italian. In 2008, it was opened only in the first two languages. Throughout the piloting process evaluation was continuous. Teacher trainers and student teachers were asked to answer small questionnaires at the end of each module. The latter were also asked to complete a longer one at the end of the entire course. Teacher trainers' meetings were also a fine source of feedback and evaluation. The Students and Teachers' Council (*Consejo de Formación*) whose members are elected by their peers was a forum where opinions and concerns were often expressed. The role of tutors in some modules also provided important feedback. From the analysis of the data we were able to conclude, as expected, that not everything had gone as

planned, and that the student teachers' and teacher trainers' expectations were only partly met, or met in some modules, but not in all.

In *The Learning of an Unknown Foreign Language* module clear guidelines regarding the main goal were not made explicit at the beginning, so the student teachers were more interested in actually learning the Russian language than in considering their own learning process. It was therefore hard for them to reflect upon their learning strategies after each Russian class. Tutors had to stop after the third session, discuss the main objective with participants, and encourage them not only to try to learn the language, but to reflect upon their individual learning process as well. In any case, everybody loved the experience. Since this was only a 12-hour module, participants would have liked to continue with their classes for a longer period of time. This was not possible at that moment, but they were encouraged to enroll in a Russian class during the second semester. In fact, all student teachers at CELE have the right to enroll in a language course while they are doing their own TT course. When this course is over, they may continue with their language courses indefinitely till they finish all the levels. It is an important opportunity for them to learn another foreign language.

In 2008, for the second piloting, the tutors were better able to lead the reflection towards the learning process from the very beginning, and participants focused on the strategies they were using to learn Chinese. According to the student teachers, the learning of Chinese was successful both ways – as the learning of Chinese itself and as a reflection on the learning process. The foreign language teacher did not speak Spanish, so she herself provided communication strategies easily observed by everyone – one was resorting to English when she couldn't convey meaning by other means. Everybody was much more satisfied this time.

The two split-modules, *Group Dynamics* and *Internet Resources*, were too short. Most student teachers complained about this. The main objective of *Group Dynamics*, which used to be to integrate student teachers of all languages when the course started, was definitely not achieved. *Internet Resources* was deficient during the first part because participants had varying previous knowledge of the Internet resources. This was not taken into account and they were all treated as novice users. Also, there were problems with the facilities because the multimedia lab was brand new; however, these problems were overcome during the second part of the module.

For 2008, the two modules were reconsidered and changed accordingly. *Group Dynamics* was offered in its entirety during the first semester, having the integration of the whole group as its covert goal. An elective module that goes deeper into the topics was offered during the second

term; several students took it. The student teachers' evaluations were quite positive.

The *Internet Resources* course continued to be split. However, student teachers were asked before the course started to fill out a questionnaire to know what their pre-existing Internet skills were, and the program was modified accordingly. The majority of the learners were frequent users, and those who weren't were offered individual tutoring either on line or in the library itself in their spare time. Furthermore, this first part was given at the end of the first term, when student teachers already had an idea of what their action research project would be about, so that the use of Internet resources became meaningful. The second half of the module was offered at the beginning of the second semester; again, with better results, thus showing that there was improved continuity.

In 2007 the *Action Research and Personal Research Project* received somewhat negative evaluations from several student teachers and tutors. The first semester was considered too theoretical and dense – it included information on all types of research; the second semester was more practical, useful, and concentrated on action research. The program was therefore modified. In 2008 the first term was shortened – only four sessions were assigned to the introduction of what action research is about, while the second term was kept the same. An important factor that helped was that the teacher trainers of *Action Research and Personal Research Project* and *Internet Resources* were in constant communication. Thus, in 2008, the results of a better *Internet Resources* module were actually reflected in the participants' *action research* drafts for their final projects which they handed in at the end of the first term.

In 2007, the *Grupo Operativo* module did not achieve its goals. Planned exclusively for the student teachers of French, the objective of this module was to deal with participants' feelings, fears, conflicts in human relations, and the like. The very negative evaluation received caused us to eliminate it from the program for the second piloting.

Pedagogical Theories 1 & 2 were the most successful, as was *Writing*. The vast majority of the student teachers were satisfied with the content, the balance between theory and practice, the class dynamics, and the teacher trainers. They reported that both teacher trainers were active, well organized, facilitated exchanges, and promoted learning. In 2008, the results were virtually the same.

Other modules that were well evaluated were *Linguistic Descriptions and Language Pedagogy 1, 2 and 3*, *Linguistic Abilities 1, 2 and 3*, and *OPP 1 and 2*. However, there were variations depending on the language area and the teacher trainer. The students' anonymous feedback was passed

on to the teacher trainers for them to think about individually, and react accordingly.

Other modules required slight adjustments, mostly due to the inexperience of the teacher trainers or the inclusion of excessive theory. The student teachers' evaluations were most useful to detect these aspects, though many times the teacher trainers who had already detected the problems themselves.

Though we had agreed during the design stage on every change that needed to be carried out in the programs, what was most difficult to achieve was, in fact, real change. Habits are difficult to modify, including the teacher trainers' habits. For the teachers who used to focus on one single skill, adapting their programs to give two skills during the same period of time was challenging. They had to decide what the most relevant and practical information was, and avoid expanding too much on either of the two skills. When you believe that everything is relevant, this is a difficult step to take. Student teachers, however, were satisfied with the programs and their teachers, though a few of them wished they had had more practice. It should be noted that this last comment is inconsistent with their complaint that the course overall is too demanding and tiring.

The same happened to other teacher trainers who were used to having 24-hour modules and who commented that the change to 12-hour modules was a laborious one to undertake. This is the case of *Psycholinguistics* and *Sociolinguistics*, and student-teachers also reported in their evaluation questionnaires that there was too much content for the time allotted. Both programs were therefore redesigned for 2008.

The interconnection between modules as well as the intercommunication between module teacher trainers became a practical problem. The Yahoo Group did not work as planned. In 2007; few teacher trainers uploaded information about their courses. The majority were overwhelmed with their own workload and did not find the time to participate. In 2008, the Yahoo group still exists, but again few teacher trainers are profiting from it. It is a pleasure to read what they are doing in *The Pedagogy of Culture* module, for example, but hard to integrate this information into one's own program.

Another problem related to change is homework. Since more time is spent at CELE, we had previously agreed on limiting reading and other homework to the minimum, but this did not actually occur in most modules. In 2007 this was brought up in the *Consejo de Formación* meetings and quickly resolved. The teacher trainers effectively reacted to the learners' concerns. For example, almost every module leader had asked participants to pilot their activities and write a report. It was impossible for every student teacher to pilot their pedagogical sequences,

tests or projects in their *OPP* language group or elsewhere. The assignments were thus negotiated, reformulated, reduced or even eliminated. The amount of reading was reduced too. In the 2008 first semester evaluation forms, there were no complaints.

The second piloting is not yet over, but we hope that the changes already implemented will generate positive results. Though a number of participants (student teachers as well as teacher trainers) complained about having classes till 8:30 pm twice a week, we have not yet reduced the number of class hours. We decided to wait until the second piloting was over because it is a decision which requires deep reflection and discussion.

One possibility we have thought of is to change the course into a specialized course at the graduate level, and design a shorter course for undergraduate students and working teachers without a degree. A second possibility, and most probably our next goal, is to give the course online. Both are challenges ahead of us.

The evaluation process is on-going, and might never end. But that is the point; that is what is expected – continuous reflection, and evaluation, learning and updating. In fact, it is the basic philosophy underlying our course, and what we consider *Teacher Education* and *Curriculum Development* to be all about.

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EFL Practice Teaching Immersions: The Whys and Wherefores

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Abstract

At the Universidad de Quintana Roo (UQROO) in Chetumal, Mexico, students in the course *Práctica Docente II* (Teaching Practice II), have the unique opportunity to be “immersed” in a classroom as part of their teaching practice. What is involved in this immersion experience? To summarize briefly, each student works with one teacher trainer in her classroom for eight hours over the course of four days, first observing, then assisting, and ultimately teaching part, or even all, of a lesson. Being immersed in this way gives Teaching Practice students an inside, realistic view of what is required of a teacher from one day to the next, the variety of teacher roles and responsibilities, and the different kinds of situations teachers regularly encounter. The immersion project has been extremely successful and well-received with positive results on the part of all involved. It is a unique approach providing a real-life, supervised teaching opportunity for students who are in their final semester of the English Language major. This article explains the whys and wherefores of classroom immersions and provides a guide for Teaching Practice professors who may want to include immersions in their course syllabi. Much of the theory underpinning this practical application comes from the work of Ruth Wajnryb, an applied linguist and writer with thirty years of experience in language teaching and education.

Guide to nomenclature

Immersion refers to extensive exposure to the conditions under which students will eventually work.

Student Teacher refers to *Teaching Practice student*

Student refers to *classroom participant*

Trainer refers to *participating teacher*

Teaching Practice professor refers to the professor of Teaching Practice II and author of this article

Introduction and background

How does a student who is training to be a teacher learn how to teach? There are many courses to take, books and articles to read, videos to watch, tutoring opportunities to begin, and observations of classes to do,

but what a student ultimately needs is the chance to be immersed in a classroom for an extended period of time and to be a part of what goes on there. Wajnryb (1992) talked about the need for teacher training to include all aspects of what is involved in the teaching profession, "Training should not be limited to making trainees competent at a survival level, but should prepare them for the sorts of processes that they will encounter as teachers. This means encouraging a spirit of inquiry about the bases of effective teaching" (p. 21).

When I first began teaching the Teaching Practice courses, I could see that students were not getting enough actual teaching practice time in a real classroom. In an ideal world, a student teacher would spend a whole semester working side-by-side with an experienced teacher. This type of in-classroom supervised student teacher training is normally carried out during the last year of university study and is generally referred to as the teaching practicum. Haigh and Tuck (2004) of the Auckland College of Education in New Zealand emphasized the practicum's importance when they stated "Teaching practicum is a central element in most pre-service teacher education programmes". This coincides with Vasconcelos (2007) of the Lisbon School of Education in Portugal who explained that:

The final practicum is a crucial component of the process of teacher education, having as its ultimate goal preparation of students for entrance into the profession of teaching. As an experienced teacher educator, I believe that the final practicum is crucial to a teacher education program (p. 2).

Because a full-semester or full-year teaching internship has never been done before at the UQROO, the short immersions instituted in the spring semester of 2008 were a good first step towards implementing a longer internship program. Each immersion consisted of eight consecutive hours and was done with a teacher in the Language Teaching Center (CEI, in Spanish) or in the English Language major. The courses in the English Language major run two hours a day, four days a week, so an immersion was completed in one week. At the CEI, the courses run two hours a day, three days a week, so the immersion carried over one day into a second week. During the spring semester 2008, each Teaching Practice student did two immersions.

What is the logic behind the concept of immersions? One reason is so that the student teachers can get involved in the flow of a course from one day to the next, to see transitions not only from one activity to the next, but also from one class to the next. This continuity allows the student teachers to see how a teacher reinforces what was done the previous day. Wajnryb (1992) addressed this issue when she stated that, "Trainees need time to adjust to and become familiar and comfortable with the language learning classroom" (p. 21). Although relatively short, immersions do provide time for this familiarization to begin to happen.

The student teachers were required to do two immersions, one in the first half of the semester and the other in the second half. Some of them did both immersions with the same teacher trainer, while others worked with two different trainers. This depended on their schedules. If they worked with two different trainers, they had the opportunity to get to know two different groups and to be exposed to two different teaching styles. If they worked with the same trainer with the same group for both immersions, they were able to get involved with that particular group more deeply.

Organization

What are the steps involved in organizing immersions?

Finding Trainers: First of all, it is important to find appropriate trainers who are interested in participating in the project. A trainer needs to be able to help the student teacher understand what is happening in the classroom as well as be willing to give both positive and negative feedback when the student teacher does his or her teaching. The trainers fill out an evaluation on each student teacher at the end of the immersion (Appendix 1).

It takes a certain type of person to be a teacher trainer. To begin with, the trainer needs to have a passion for teaching and an interest in sharing her knowledge and experience with others. She needs to be an excellent, dynamic teacher as well as a good role model on both a personal and professional basis. Regarding how much work is involved in being a teacher trainer, Wajnryb (1992) noted, "The task of the trainer is to help the trainees understand the various processes involved in the teaching and learning of a language and the complex array of activities that occur in a language classroom" (p. 5). It is a multi-faceted challenge.

In addition, the trainer needs to be able to integrate the student teacher into the class itself. As Wajnryb (1992) stated "the very presence of an 'outsider' among the learning community will affect it in subtle, perhaps imperceptible ways. This is difficult to avoid..." (p. 58). Having a student do an immersion means that the classroom environment will be different than usual; there is no way around this. Fortunately, in this project it has been shown that immersions can be mutually beneficial experiences for students, student teachers and trainers. However, the teacher trainer needs to be aware of the "outsider" status of a student teacher and incorporate him/her into the classroom in a comfortable and productive way.

Effective teaching involves all elements of teaching, from the pedagogical to the psychological. Wajnryb (1992) emphasized that:

The language classroom is the primary source of information out of which teachers will develop their own personal philosophy of what makes effective teaching and

learning. It is also the domain where they will find out about their professional roles and responsibilities (p.13).

Comprehensive teacher training is not a simple task. Fortunately, six outstanding teachers at the UQROO were willing to participate in the immersion project and provide the student teachers with a holistic outlook regarding what being an EFL teacher really entails.

Scheduling: The Teaching Practice professor must set up the schedule in such a way that student teachers can find time slots to fit their busy schedules. The student teachers are in their last semester at the university; many are working on their theses; and some of them have jobs as well. For this reason, it is important to offer a variety of available time slots.

Identifying the Student Teacher's Role: Each student teacher enters the immersion sessions with a different level of experience; therefore, the trainer needs to first ascertain how much or how little the student teacher can contribute. Some student teachers have already worked as teachers while others have had no prior teaching experience. Wajnryb (1992) mentioned this dimension:

Some trainees begin a pre-service teacher training course with some experience of the classroom.... Others have never before stepped into a classroom in the shoes of a teacher. ...whatever the teaching background of the trainee, all have had educational experience in classrooms and hence they come to training with some expectations. These might be conscious or subconscious, or a blend of the two; they might be positive or negative; they might imbue the trainee with courage and optimism or with nervous apprehension or dread. Whatever the cargo of experiences and expectations that a trainees brings to a training course, one thing is certain – that the classroom has primacy of place in the learning and teaching experiences which lie ahead. It is important that these experiences are used in the process of learning to become a teacher (p. 5)

Obviously, the student teacher who has had previous teaching experience can be in charge of higher level activities than the student teacher who has had no experience. Clearly though, regardless of student teachers' prior experience, all of them learn an enormous amount from their immersion sessions.

Three phases of immersions

Stage 1, Observing

Why are observations crucial to this experience? The experience of being in a classroom as a student or a teacher is very different from that of being there as an observer. Wajnryb (1992) elaborated on this concept when she discussed how much is happening in the classroom at any one moment:

When we teach, we are often so absorbed in the purpose, procedure and logistics of our lesson that we are not able to observe processes of learning and interaction as they occur through the lesson. Being an observer in the classroom, rather than the teacher, releases us from these concerns and affords us the freedom to look at the lesson from a range of different perspectives outside of the actual lesson plan of the teacher. For the trainee teacher, this freedom is particularly important. In a way, this stage in training is akin to the 'silent phase' of a beginning language learner.... Because such a lot happens in the language learning classroom there is a lot to observe: teaching behaviour and learning behaviour, patterns of interaction, different learning styles, concentration spans, patterns of group dynamics, to name some (pp.7-8).

The students do a number of observations in Teaching Practice I in the fall semester, so when they come into their Teaching Practice II immersions they are already familiar with observations. The beauty of immersions is that the student teachers can observe and then utilize the information directly by teaching the particular group they observed. This allows the student-teachers to incorporate information gained during the observation process in a real way in the classroom. Through their observations, the student teachers become more aware of the many roles a teacher has.

Wajnryb (1992) referred to these different roles, as well as the different roles a learner has, when she stated that:

Within the time frame of any one lesson, there is a range of roles that a teacher may adopt, and a range of corresponding learner roles as well. An important aspect of effective teaching is the facility with which a teacher can move in and out of these various roles and enable learners to do likewise (p. 113).

There is a definite difference between just doing observations and doing observations as part of an immersion. With immersions, the student-teachers assist the teacher and then teach the group themselves after they have observed the trainer teaching that particular group. While observing, they are able to assess the students' English level, notice how the teacher deals with management and discipline issues, and become aware of the group dynamics and learning styles. The student teacher has the opportunity to observe all of these aspects and then carry that knowledge over into his or her own work when teaching in that same classroom.

Stage 2, Assisting

Once the observation phase is over, it is time for the student teachers to enter the assisting stage. This assistance can take a variety of forms such as helping with small group activities, monitoring written and oral work, or leading activities. As previously mentioned, what the student teacher can do at this point depends on his or her previous experience. The trainer makes informed decisions about this so that the student teacher's

participation does not impede the flow of the class. She needs to determine how the student teacher can best participate and contribute.

Stage 3, Teaching

The ultimate goal of immersions is for the student teacher to teach the fourth and final lesson. The trainer can help out as much as needed. Again, depending on the student teacher's experience, the trainer decides how much of the lesson the student teacher will actually teach. Some student teachers will be able to teach the entire two-hour lesson while others may do less than this. The student teacher is responsible for developing the lesson plan and creating materials.

Evaluation

Lesson Plans, Observation Reports and Reflective Journals: Throughout the semester, student teachers are required to write a one-page observation report on observation days and a one-page reflective journal on assisting and teaching days. A lesson plan is also required for teaching days. The lesson plans are helpful in many areas as they enhance the student teacher's organizational and planning skills. The plans are also especially useful in terms of guiding student teachers to better predict the time required for activities. As Wajnryb (1992) mentioned, "The most common weakness of lesson plans is unrealistic timing" (p. 65). Through this experience, student-teachers began to gain a better and more realistic understanding of how long activities take.

The student teachers were already accustomed to writing observation reports from Teaching Practice I; they used a checklist to help them identify specific items noted. Having already been trained in proper observation techniques, they are able to make the most out of these immersion observations.

The reflective journals are particularly useful in that student teachers can look at themselves and their lessons and learn from their own thoughts and feelings. The journals are not point-by-point explanations about activities in the classroom. Instead they provide an overview of the class in terms of how it developed, the problems that were encountered, the things they learned, how the student teacher felt, improvements made, and areas which needed more attention.

Trainer Evaluations of student teachers: After the last day of the immersion, each trainer filled out an evaluation form (Appendix 1). Because it was impossible for the Teaching Practice professor to observe all of the student teachers during their immersions, it was important that the participating trainers understand what aspects the Teaching Practice professor was interested in grading the student teachers on. The trust level between the Teaching Practice professor and trainers must be high,

and expectations must be clearly laid out at the beginning of the course. The goal of the evaluation forms is to give the trainers a guide to insure that there is a homogeneous understanding in terms of what aspects are graded. These evaluations by the trainers and the reflective journals written by the student teachers are the means through which the Teaching Practice professor graded each student teacher's immersion.

Student Teacher Evaluations of the Immersion Experience: At the end of the semester, each student teacher filled out an evaluation of the immersion experience (Appendix 2). The results were overwhelmingly positive and indicated how very useful this experience was for the student teachers' professional development (Appendix 2). Of the eight yes/no questions, there were an overwhelming number of positive responses. All of the twenty-one respondents answered positively to questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7. Question 4 (whether doing an immersion helped in different ways more so than other Teaching Practice activities) had three negative replies. Question 8 (whether the student teachers felt that they knew what they were doing when teaching) received two negative responses.

The first open-ended question was about whether or not there was enough time for each immersion and whether two immersions were enough. Eight of the twenty-one student teachers felt that two, one-week immersions was a perfect set-up; four wanted a third immersion during the semester; one wanted two more weeks of immersions; one wanted "more" in general; two wanted three immersions of three days each (one observation class, one assisting class, one teaching class); three wanted each immersion to be two weeks long instead of one week, and one wanted two weeks but the second week to be twelve hours, not eight. From these responses, it seems that although there were some suggestions regarding time changes, the overall time frame was more or less acceptable to most.

With the second open-ended question which was about how specifically the immersions were most helpful, two student teachers said in the area of giving directions; seven in managing the group; two in designing and adapting materials; seven in learning to speak louder; four in developing more confidence; two in having less fear; three in knowing how to prepare a class; two in learning the importance of being punctual; three in being more organized; three in using the blackboard, and four in understanding the importance of classroom energy.

The third question was an open one so that the student teachers could add any additional comments they wanted about the experience (Table 2). These comments are illustrative of how much the student teachers valued their immersions.

Conclusions

Benefits:

Immersion offers a variety of different benefits to students, student teachers and trainers. The most obvious is that student teachers have the opportunity to learn from and be supervised by experienced teachers in a real classroom situation. Student teachers begin the transformation process from student to teacher. All that they have learned in their teacher training courses comes to fruition as they put their book-learning into real practice.

Another benefit is that the trainers have the opportunity to see themselves and their teaching in a clearer light. Wajnryb (1992) reminded us, "Often when we observe someone teaching, the very process of observation stimulates self-reflection, as if observing were a kind of mirror" (p. 121). This is a side benefit for trainers and can stimulate the concept of observations in general. Julian Edge (1993) made a good point when he said:

Teachers work alone. One of the most terrifying words in teaching is observation: it means having someone else in your classroom who is not one of the students. Observation has always been connected with being assessed, and this introduces tension and fear. Because of this fear, teachers do not share experiences with colleagues and seldom really learn from each other (p.12).

Brown (1994) also mentioned this concept of sharing and co-observing among teachers:

One of the most neglected areas of professional growth among teachers is the mutual exchange of classroom observations. Once you get into a teaching routine, it is very difficult to make time to go and see other teachers and to invite the same in return (p. 431).

Perhaps immersion can stimulate teachers in general to remember we have much we can learn from each other.

In addition to the benefits gained by student teachers and trainers, an unexpected outcome of the immersion is that the immersion gives students in the English Language major a true idea of what they will ultimately be required to do in their final semester. This is motivational for them in two ways: one is to take their future teacher training classes more seriously and, second, to try and improve their English language level. Students in classrooms where an immersion was taking place also mentioned that they felt they got some extra practice and attention because it was like having a second teacher in the classroom. Several students made verbal comments about how impressed they were with the work the student teachers were doing and how exciting it was for them to see students a few generations ahead of them acting as real teachers. The student teachers shared information with them about the upper levels of

the English language major and what the expectations and workload required are, and the students really appreciated receiving these insights

Problems:

The immersion project went very smoothly and the only real problem encountered was in the area of scheduling. Because students in the tenth semester are very busy, it was a little difficult to find time for the immersion sessions that fit well with everyone's schedule. Fortunately, this was satisfactorily resolved; however, in the future I can see the need to expand the number of teachers working as trainers so that there are more time-slots available.

In conclusion, the immersion project at the UQROO was a grand success and provided Teaching Practice students with a much-needed real-life teaching experience. Everyone involved in the project came away with a warm feeling because not only was good teacher training accomplished, but there was also a lot of interpersonal caring and sharing that went on. Student teachers now feel more prepared and more confident in taking on an actual teaching job as their understanding and experience were so enriched by their immersion sessions. As the professor of the Teaching Practice course, I feel very happy because of this positive learning and sharing experience.

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Appendix 1. Immersion Evaluation Form

At the end of the immersion session, the trainer filled out the following evaluation form about the student teacher's performance.

Please rate on a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being the highest).

TEACHING PRESENCE AND HABITS Comments

Eye contact (looks around the room at everyone)	_____
Seems confident	_____
Friendly towards students	_____
Good organizational skills	_____
Punctual	_____

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Ability to keep students' attention	_____
Teaches to all students, not just a few	_____
Able to discipline when necessary	_____
Classroom energy	_____

ENGLISH SKILLS

Pronunciation	_____
Good voice range	_____
Appropriate use of vocabulary	_____
Correct grammar and sentence structure	_____

TEACHING SKILLS

Gives clear explanations (grammar, vocab etc)	_____
Gives clear directions for activities	_____
Knowledge of subject matter	_____
Error correction	_____
Evidence of planning and preparation	_____
Board work	_____
Reflective journal	_____

Areas that need improvement:

General comments:

Appendix 2. Immersion Feedback Form

At the end of the semester, each student teacher filled out a feedback form about the immersion experience. A summary of the results is included in this appendix.

	yes	no
1. I enjoyed the immersions.	21	0
2. I learned a lot from the immersions.	21	0
3. My teaching has improved as a result of what I have learned in the immersions.	21	0
4. Doing an immersion helped me in different ways than other Práctica Docente activities.	18	3
5. I think doing immersions is a good idea for Práctica Docente II.	21	0
6. I could see positive advances in my teaching from the first immersion to the second one.	21	0
7. Were the teachers helpful to you?	21	0
8. Did you feel like you knew what you were doing when you were teaching?	19	2

You did two different immersions, each for one week. Do you think that is enough time or would you suggest more time for each immersion?

8 felt it was perfect
 4 wanted a third immersion
 1 wanted two more weeks of immersions
 1 wanted "more" but not specifically in terms of weeks or immersion numbers
 2 wanted 3 immersions of three days each
 3 wanted each immersion to be two weeks long instead of one
 1 wanted two weeks but that the second week be 12 hours, not 8

In what ways were the immersions most helpful to you? Please be specific.

2 giving directions
 7 managing the group
 2 designing and adapting materials
 7 learning to speak louder
 4 developing more confidence
 2 having less fear
 3 knowing how to prepare a classroom
 2 learning the importance of being punctual
 3 being more organized
 3 using the blackboard
 4 understanding the importance of classroom energy

Please write any additional comments you have about this experience.

Now I'm more confident.

I felt as if I were a teacher, and I felt the responsibility that a teacher has.

It was a great experience.

It was a nice experience because I could use all my techniques that I learned in my práctica docente courses.

I learned good tips to help me in the future. People like me who never worked as teachers before could gain a lot of experience. It was a great experience and the teacher advised me on how I can improve my teaching.

I am really thankful with all teachers and students because otherwise I would not have had such a wonderful opportunity. I learned from my mistakes and now I can see that practical experience is something really crucial.

It's good to feel the pressure of being in front of people who are strangers and start teaching.

I loved this experience because I could learn from very nice and experienced teachers and I learned a lot from them.

It was a wonderful experience.

It was fantastic.

Immersion is a good opportunity to meet the real life and to know teachers who can advise you.

I really enjoyed my immersion because you are practicing your teaching in a real classroom, and with real students, and another teacher is helping you if necessary.

It was a very nice experience and it enriched the way I teach and improved it.

It was nice to practice and receive feedback because sometimes we feel that we do things well but we can always improve.

It helped me realize I'd enjoy more teaching young people than children. I really enjoyed it. I loved it.

It was good to work with a real class instead of an imaginary one like with our micro-teaching in *Práctica docente* classes where we are teaching our classmates. They already know the language and you don't notice if you're giving correct directions or not. In the immersion class, you realize if students understand or not.