

Teacher learning: dialogues between concepts and practices

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to examine the epistemological and methodological principles of the Practicum component in an initial teacher education programme and their practical realisation in the day-to-day decisions made by student-teachers. Our perspectives on language, learning, teaching and assessment are taken as a point of departure for the presentation of specific didactic projects, sequences and materials that seek to embody them. All the teaching experiences presented in the paper took place at urban state secondary schools.

Keywords: practicum account; language as social practice; learning as an intersubjective process; teaching as mediation; assessment as dialogue.

RESUMEN

El presente relato se propone comunicar los principios de corte epistemológico y metodológico que sustentan el espacio de Práctica en una propuesta de formación docente inicial y su materialización en las decisiones que cotidianamente toman las/los estudiantes practicantes. Las perspectivas acerca de la lengua, el aprendizaje, la enseñanza y la evaluación que compartimos son tomadas como punto de partida para la presentación de proyectos, secuencias y materiales didácticos que intentan otorgarles corporeidad. Las experiencias de enseñanza que se incluyen tuvieron lugar en escuelas secundarias públicas urbanas.

Palabras clave: relatos de práctica; lengua como práctica social; aprendizaje como proceso intersubjetivo; enseñanza como mediación; evaluación como diálogo.

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WHAT FOLLOWS IS a combination of three classroom reports that are part of a larger story, a fourth reports. The three student-teachers authoring this article share some of their first professional experiences within the context of Teaching Workshop IV - the Practicum component of their teacher education programme. Each of their narratives, didactic sequences and teaching materials are representative of both the theoretical underpinnings of this subject and the day-to-day choices made by student-teachers and their tutors. Even though most of these decisions are contextually bounded, they are shaped by the pedagogical, institutional and political needs of our region, the principles upon which they rest are probably common ground for most EFL teachers around the world.

We set out to characterise Teaching Workshop IV and then present the student-teachers' accounts by organising them in four different sections: language as social practice, learning as an intersubjective process, teaching as mediation and assessment as dialogue. In each of these sections the student-teachers' experiences are described alongside the principles which guide them.

Teaching Workshop IV

The Practicum has always been recognised as a vital part of teacher education; it has, however, adopted different formats, names (field experience, practice teaching, etc.) and purposes, depending mostly on socio-historical conditions and the prevailing view of teacher development (Gebhard, 2009). In our English Teacher Education Programme, the Practicum is conceived as a track extending from the first to the fourth year. This track is realised in the curriculum as four teaching workshops - one every year - and a teacher research seminar in the last year. The main purpose of this organisational scheme is to offer student-teachers a gradual approximation to schools and to the teaching profession. It can be argued that this scheme is coherent with a sociocultural perspective of teacher learning: "(...) teacher cognition originates in and is fundamentally shaped by the specific social activities in which teachers engage" (Johnson, 2009, p. 17).

In the framework of the Practicum track, Teaching Workshop IV represents the closest approach to schools and schooling student-teachers experience while still being part of initial teacher education. In our institution, this workshop encompasses tasks such as:

- observing a class and keeping narrative records,
- analysing the syllabus and materials the class teacher follows,
- developing a didactic project and planning the corresponding lessons to carry it out,
- designing compatible teaching materials,
- implementing those plans and materials,
- assessing students' comprehension and production practices,
- participating in self, peer and tutor assessment sessions.

The use of forums, wiki texts and glossaries - among other tools - in a Moodle virtual classroom compensates for time constraints, facilitates interaction between student-teachers

and tutors/peers and promotes collaboration among peers. The integration of technology in this workshop can be described as informal (Reinders, 2009) since it stems from the individual tutors' needs and interests and no explicit training is offered. It can be argued, however, that participation in the virtual classroom is likely to result in incidental learning about the educational uses of technology for the student-teachers. Similar endeavours in the national context, addressing the role of ICT tools in teacher education, have been explored by Braun (2012) and Banegas and Manzur Busleimán (2014).

The classes where the teaching projects are implemented belong all to urban state secondary schools. Secondary education is compulsory in Argentina as from 2006 and in our province, Santa Fe, it lasts five years; most secondary school students receive English instruction during that period of time. Even though institutional cultures, and thus English lessons, may vary a great deal, our teaching context shares several of the TESEP contexts features (Holliday, 1994; Wedell & Malderez, 2013): large classes, restricted access to resources and materials and students who do the subject because it is part of the curriculum.

The didactic choices made by the student-teachers when devising their teaching projects are underpinned by a set of principles that constitute the epistemological and methodological stance of Teaching Workshop IV. The following sections are devoted to the presentation of these principles and their actual implementation in the student-teachers' lessons.

Language as Social Practice

In close agreement with internationally recognised language teaching guidelines, such as the CEFR, and with the national and jurisdictional curricula, in Teaching Workshop IV language is conceived as social practice: "(...) meaning resides not in the grammar of the language, or in its vocabulary, or in the head of an individual, but in the everyday activities that individuals engage in." (Johnson, 2009, p. 44). According to Moon (2012), social activities are actually language events in which a written or oral text becomes central. These events do not start and progress unpredictably; they emerge from and are shaped by conventional social practices. This perspective reminds us of the inextricable connection between the practices and events that regulate language use, the individual meanings that are conveyed in the context of these events and the linguistic resources participants resort to so as to share their ideas and be part of the social activity in question.

When we teach a language, we are teaching students how to participate in social practices; thus, all of the student-teachers' teaching projects involve the accomplishment of task which implies producing an oral or written text in the context of a language event that pertains to certain social conventions.

Teaching Project 1: Picturing Daily Life

This project was carried out by a 3rd Year class in a state urban secondary school. The expected outcome was a photography exhibition showing everyday life moments through the students' own perceptions. To accomplish the final task, students engaged in reflection about the characteristics concerning the particular social event, the photography exhibition; they also discussed the generic features of photography exhibition captions: their purpose and form. This proposal was prompted by the analysis of Frida Kahlo's photographs and artwork.

Students had to take or choose a meaningful photograph showing people doing something, an everyday activity, and write an exhibition caption describing it. They thus had the opportunity to use the language in a meaningful way, by resorting to the linguistic content they had learned (present simple and progressive) and explore a variety of texts, the caption and the photograph itself. The teacher-designed materials approached writing as a process, requesting students to engage in drafting and editing tasks, in order to help them express not only what the photos showed, but also the personal message they wanted to share: what the picture meant to them (see Appendices A and B).

Teaching Project 2: Ingenious Inventions

This project was developed for a 5th Year class in a state urban secondary school. As a final task, students were asked to advertise something that they had invented to make their daily lives easier. Students were first presented with different samples of what they were supposed to do. Then, they were gradually guided into creating something that did not exist and describing this invention in terms of name, materials, purpose and instructions for use.

Once they had a good idea of what their innovative product was going to be, they transformed that description into an advertisement: they agreed on a price, selected relevant information to show, and chose pictures, sounds, font type, colour and size. In the last lesson, students presented their advertisements using posters or PowerPoint presentations and tried to sell their inventions to their peers. Each student voted for their favourite invention and the winner received a certificate of recognition (see Appendix C).

Teaching Project 3: The cinema: interesting facts about our favourite movies

This project was implemented in a 3rd Year class in a state urban secondary school. Students created an interactive quiz about their favourite films. In the interim stages, students explored different texts related to the film industry such as technical data sheets and synopses; they recognized their purposes as language events and used them as a resource to obtain information for their quizzes. Students turned the data they had gathered into questions and challenged the rest of the class to see how much they knew about those films. Consequently, they used the foreign language in the context of social practices that are common among them, playing games, watching films, browsing websites, and they learned the assigned grammatical content, the past simple, in an incidental way.

Learning a Foreign Language as an Intersubjective Process

Bordenave (in Barboni, 2012, p. 64) maintains that interaction is central to learning: “(...) more specifically, an engagement with other learners and teachers in joint activities that focus on matters of shared interest (...)”. This position is coherent with a sociocultural perspective of learning which emphasizes the role of supportive dialogue, or scaffolding, in the process of promoting self-regulation and autonomy in learners (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). In this respect, the teaching projects developed in Workshop IV aim at fostering collaborative dialogue in several ways:

- most of the proposed tasks involve group work, either during the whole process or at some of its stages,
- student-teachers are encouraged to become a member of those groups, or a supporting peer for the individual student, when they consider that their intervention might be necessary to keep the task going and thus promote language learning, and
- student-teachers are generally the authors of the teaching materials they use, which are tailored to the specific learning needs of their students - they are meant to operate within the learners’ Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978 in Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

Picturing Daily Life

In the spirit of this perspective, one of the interim tasks involved a whole group analysis of Frida Kahlo’s everyday life photographs and their captions. Not only could students learn about the artist but they were also able to identify the conventional characteristics of captions, and they did so in the context of supportive dialogue. A further step required students to work in pairs and write a photo caption for one of Kahlo’s controversial paintings; they later shared their ideas to enrich everyone’s interpretations.

Ingenious Inventions

Multiple group decision making sequences were proposed to students in which each of them could give their opinion, present new ideas and find a way to improve their work; attentive listening, negotiation and respectful attitudes were critical in these sequences.

The first instance of group work students took part in was when they were expected to decide what to invent. They had to think of an object they could use often so as to make their lives a little easier. Each group made a list of several possible objects, which they gradually narrowed down to a single invention.

The cinema: Interesting Facts about our Favourite Movies

Students worked in pairs to accomplish the final task. The first step involved agreeing on a movie they both liked, which implied sharing personal experiences and preferences. In the

process, they had to commit themselves to gathering information about this movie and to try to turn that data into quiz questions. They were not alone in their attempts; they relied on one another, which made students less fearful of making mistakes.

Creating an interactive quiz got learners to think about an audience: they were writing questions to challenge their friends, not to please the teacher, and this made the task even more meaningful and rewarding. All along the process the student-teacher provided the necessary linguistic scaffolding so that learners could identify their mistakes, reflect upon language and improve their texts.

Teaching a Foreign Language: Mediating between Students and Culture

According to Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002, p. 7), in addition to linguistic knowledge, second and foreign language learners do need “the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways”. Moon (2012) points out that the conventions that shape social practices, and thus language events, are affected by variables such as time, place and even the distribution of power among participants, which means that language use in the context of these practices is culturally-bounded and socio-historically constructed.

The assumption that EFL teachers, native or non-native, are familiar with the entire set of cultural conventions attached to the language they teach seems rather unrealistic. Instead, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) focus on certain knowledge, skills, attitudes and values teachers should develop and promote in their students in order to make them genuinely curious about other cultures, the relationships between these cultures and their own, and to foster the ability to “interact with speakers of other languages on equal terms and be aware of their own identities and those of their interlocutors” (2002, p. 7).

Picturing Daily Life

The photography exhibition project included carefully designed instances of intercultural reflection. They involved debates about social identities and how these are expressed through different cultural manifestations, such as art and clothes. Through the analysis of Frida Kahlo's life, students could explore her culture and see how she expressed her ideologies through her paintings and her dressing style. By adopting a critical stance, students reflected on their own preconceived ideas, and thus developed a positive attitude towards differences (see Appendix D).

The Cinema: Interesting facts about our Favourite Movies

In order to trigger discussion about the cinema, the student-teacher chose to show a short fiction film called *Hijab* (2005), by the Spanish director Xavi Sala. It is the story of a teenage girl whose head teacher forces her to take off her hijab, an Islamic veil, on her first day at a new school. After watching this film, students engaged in an oral debate about how that girl might have felt and what the hijab represents for the Islamic culture. It turned out to

be a moment of collective reflection that evidenced the incipient development of empathy and intercultural awareness. Students had the chance to see how identities are expressed through clothes and how people erroneously tend to perceive differences as something to be avoided, instead of valuing the richness of cultural diversity.

Assessment as a Dialogic Enterprise

The assessment component in the student-teachers' projects aims primarily at informing teaching and learning. The student-teachers engage in interaction, observation, record-keeping and interpretation practices that allow them to frame and reframe their didactic options in accordance with what is actually going on in the classroom.

Students' understanding and use of English are typically assessed in the context of the interim tasks proposed in the process of producing the final project. Frequent feedback to students, usually in the form of conversation, is an identifying feature of the stance towards assessment these teaching projects embrace. A stance that seems to be highly compatible with dynamic assessment described by Lantolf and Poehner (2014, p. 170) as

the dialectic integration of assessment with teaching through teacher-learner interactions during which mediation is negotiated for learners to optimally contribute to activities and for mediators to gain insights into learner abilities necessary to guide their efforts to move development forward.

Assessment in the Three Teaching Projects

Unlike what is usually the case with traditional testing, the three projects involved careful observation of what happened in the classrooms both in relation to the subject matter – the understanding and use of the specific linguistic content and to the students' reception, engagement and commitment to the tasks. All along the implementation of the projects student-teachers followed students' individual processes, analysed their teaching outcomes and made didactic decisions based on this data. Thorough records were kept, which allowed student-teachers to arrive at a summative appreciation of their own and their students' performance.

Conclusion

We have intended this article to be yet one more opportunity for student-teachers and tutors to engage in collaborative reflection. On the one hand, reflection aims at constructing pedagogical knowledge that is relevant to each particular classroom in our regional context. At the same time, it contributes to the more global aim of a model of teacher development that is grounded on teachers' experiences. Engagement in the activity of teaching should be necessarily intertwined with theorisation; teacher learning occurs when practices and academic concepts interact symbiotically.

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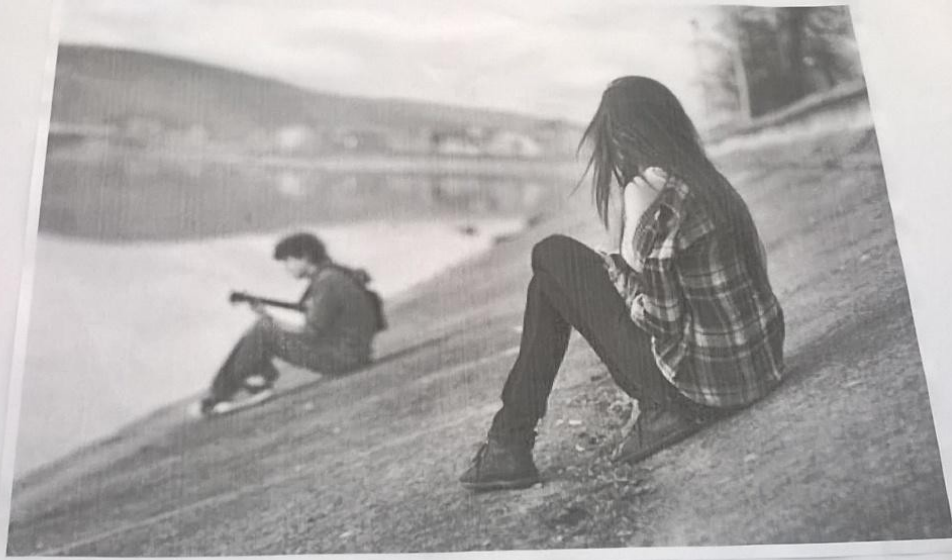
Appendices

APPENDIX A



APPENDIX B

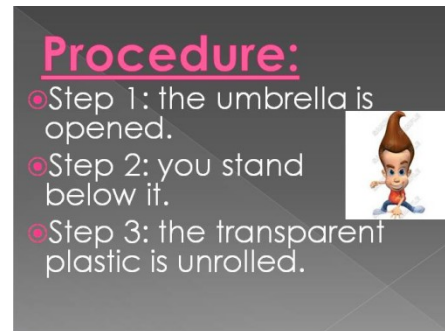
· BEACH SONG ·



In this photograph we can see a girl and a boy. He's playing with his guitar and she stopped her walk when she heard her name on the guys song and sat down to listen.

CARRERISVERA

APPENDIX C



APPENDIX D

Task 3. Recognising and analysing the function of photo exhibition captions.

Think:

1) Where do you read photo exhibition captions?

Your Notes _____

2) Why do you think artists/ photographers include captions next to their photographs on display?

Your Notes _____

3) What information do they include in the captions?

Your Notes _____

4) Identify words or phrases in the following caption that help you understand what the text is about.

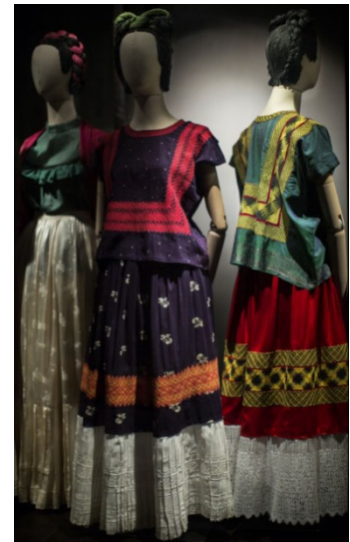
Your Notes _____



The collection on display: Frida's dresses. Casa Azul, Mexico.

Colourful and apparently cheerful, the traditional Mexican clothes show an eclectic combination of textures that enables us to explore the artist personality and life just by examining her wardrobe. Garments on display turn into a way to read through the tragedies Kahlo suffered in her life.

A life in pain, a life in colour



Think: Do you think the clothes we wear help us build our identities?

Source: “*Las Apariencias engañan: Los vestidos de Frida Kahlo*” Museo Frida Kahlo.
Retrieved May 3, 2015 <http://museofridakahlo.org.mx/>.