

Tasting Teaching Flavors: A Group of Student-Teachers' Experiences in their Practicum

Saboreando el gusto de la enseñanza: Experiencias de un grupo de estudiantes-maestros en su práctica

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Student-teachers expect their experience in the practicum to show them what teaching truly involves. Most of them are willing to put into practice all the theories and concepts they have learned and to find out if these actually work. This article reports on a study conducted on the experiences of four primary school student-teachers. The study led to the identification of their difficulties, to looking at how they felt about those difficulties, and to how they dealt with them. Instruments for data collection were the journals and group conferences used by the practice counselor and a semi-structured interview. The study revealed that a constant reflective practice allows practitioners to deal with all the different situations they have to face, and more so, to go beyond them.

Key words: Teacher preparation, teaching practice, student-teachers, difficulties

Los estudiantes-maestros esperan que la práctica docente les muestre lo que es realmente la enseñanza. La mayoría de ellos están deseosos de poner en práctica todas las teorías y conceptos aprendidos y averiguar si verdaderamente funcionan. Este artículo da cuenta de un estudio en el que se describe la experiencia de cuatro estudiantes-practicantes. El objetivo principal del estudio fue identificar las dificultades que enfrentan, examinar qué actitudes tuvieron frente a esas dificultades y cómo las superaron. Los instrumentos utilizados para la recolección de datos incluyeron diarios, charlas en grupo e individuales realizadas por el director de práctica y una entrevista semi-estructurada. El estudio reveló que una constante reflexión permite que los practicantes superen las dificultades y vayan más allá de las mismas.

Palabras claves: Formación de maestros, práctica docente, estudiantes-practicantes, dificultades

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing interest in preparing students to become effective teachers. Therefore, some teacher preparation and teacher education programs have been developed in order to enhance this process. The principles of some of these programs for pre-service teachers state that "student-teachers need the opportunity to experience how to teach concepts at first hand. They also need the time to reflect on how new concepts affect their own thinking and principles within their own teaching situation. In addition, they need time to put them into practice in their own classrooms" (Vale and Feunteun, 1995).

Bearing in mind this interest in achieving effective preparation and development during the first teaching experience, we saw the importance of observing a specific aspect perceived during the practicum, namely, difficulties faced and solutions applied by student-teachers in order to overcome them. As a result of this reflection, we decided to inquire into the experiences a group of primary school student-teachers had during their practicum, and to describe those so that future student-teachers could review this study, and, also, discover alternatives for dealing with their practicum experiences. This was possible thanks to the collaboration of the counselor who monitored the process by collecting data and sharing it with us to fulfil our goals. It should be clarified that we got permission from the participants to use the data their counselor had collected as well as to interview them in order to explore certain aspects in more detail.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We started by making a distinction between teacher preparation and teacher education approaches. After that, we presented the models for professional teacher education, but we focused on the reflective model. This was due to the fact that our participants were involved in this approach throughout their teaching practice experience. Then, we presented the perspectives on teacher preparation and finally, the importance of the

practicum in the preparation and development of student-teachers.

Distinction between Teacher Preparation and Teacher Education

Teacher preparation or pre-service teacher education should establish the bases for professionals to engage in ongoing development. There is a process of preparation towards the achievement of a range of results, which is specified in advance (Widdowson, 1990). It means the practicum provides the opportunity to observe some difficulties and find possible solutions which could be applied in many other teaching settings. In other words, it is the teaching experience that helps teachers to gain awareness of their performances, and gives them tools to become effective managers of their classrooms. Thus, future teachers acquire the "practical knowledge" that is defined as the knowledge that teachers generate as a result of their experiences as teachers and their reflections on these experiences (Fenstermacher, 1994. In Chiou-hui, 2001).

On the other hand, *teacher education* provides for situations which cannot be accommodated into preconceived patterns of response but which require a reformulation of ideas and the modification of established formulae (Widdowson, 1990). So, each teacher should make use of the preconceived patterns taking into account his or her own situation and making the necessary changes so that those patterns work.

Nonetheless, we cannot assert that we have precise divisions between one and another. For instance, from our experience in our teaching preparation program, we could mention that we acquired some theory-based knowledge and some tools we could use when we did our teaching practice. However, we found that those tools were not enough to deal with the teaching situations observed in the practicum because the context varied depending on students' needs and the classroom. Therefore, these situations required a reformulation of previous knowledge and tools in order to identify what we

had to change or improve in order to achieve effectiveness in teaching.

Models for Professional Preparation

Wallace (1990) describes three models of professional development, the craft model, the applied-science model and the reflective model. In the following paragraphs we briefly describe the first two models as the latter was the main approach followed by the counselor in the teaching practice.

1. Craft Model

According to this model, the practitioner is supposed to learn by imitating all the teaching techniques used by experienced teachers. The most relevant strategies are those provided by experts, thus the student-teachers play a passive role.

2. Applied Science Model

In this model, student-teachers in their different situations put into practice the findings of scientific knowledge. Changes at the practical level applied by practitioners are not taken into account; therefore, their value is underestimated, thereby creating a separation between research and professional practice.

3. Reflective Model

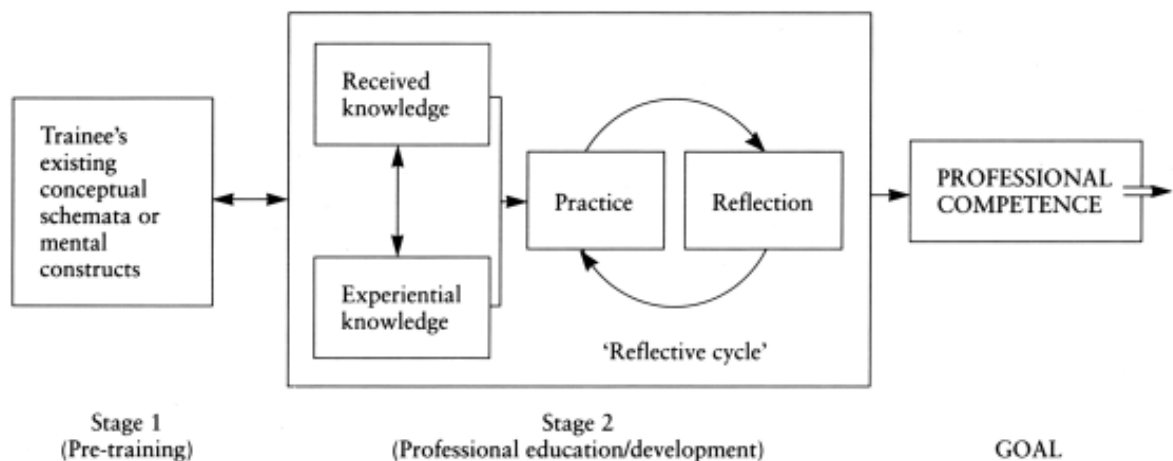
This model consists of two kinds of knowledge development. *Received knowledge*, that is related

to all the theories, concepts and skills that are studied during the student-teacher's ELT methodology lessons, and, *experiential knowledge* which is developed by the trainees throughout their teaching practice.

Wallace (1990), presents the reflective model as a cyclical process (see Figure 1) in which the trainees are involved throughout their teaching experience. There is an assumption that they already have some knowledge that they acquired as students and during the development of their English program. Once student-teachers have the opportunity to enter the classroom environment, they discover the actual framework of teaching and become aware of the different classroom situations. Thus, they start thinking about their performance during the teaching practice, how some experienced teachers deal with those situations, and also, how they themselves could manage them. So, they make some decisions and think about possible actions they could apply to their context.

We consider the craft and the applied-science models somewhat limited as they do not foster student-teachers' self-development or awareness of their role not only as teachers but as teacher-researchers in their classrooms, which is a very important issue of professional development as expressed by Camargo (2003), who states that research in the ELT education field has become an important aspect which has contributed to reflection and action to qualify teacher education processes.

Figure 1. Reflective practice model of professional education/development (Wallace, 1990, p. 49).



Wallace (1990) puts forward the three current models for professional preparation in language teacher preparation. He states that all three are necessary, particularly the reciprocity between the applied science and the reflective model. Due to the limitations of the former, what most teachers have always felt is confirmed: that their pre-service preparation has not fully equipped them for teaching and that the real business of being a teacher is bound up with the classroom (Houten, M., in McLean, A.C., 1997). In addition, Huberman (1996) says that education at the university level provides some methodological procedures that are supposed to deal with theory and practice, but in the real context of the practicum, student-teachers find some difficulties related to teaching that they have to solve by themselves.

We agree that pre-service training should provide student-teachers with the necessary tools to refine their abilities in order to create their own teaching style. However, we can say from our teaching experience in the practicum that this is not totally accomplished because we had to face different situations we were not prepared for. We believe there is a gap between theory and practice and we did not acquire strong theoretical knowledge that helped us to successfully develop, deal with a particular topic or with a particular group of students at a particular time and place (Johnson, 1996). As said by Frodden and López (1998), the disconnection between theory and practice is a consequence of the isolated use of the applied science model which causes some difficulties for the student-teachers when solving problems in a real professional context.

Also, we can cite a study carried out in a university in Colombia concerning student-teachers' perceptions about their teaching experiences. In this study, the researcher mentioned that one of the main problems that the student-teachers had was the inability to integrate theory and practice. "They did not find a clear way to articulate the theory they had learned at university to the reality of their classrooms"

(Camargo, 2003, p. 7).

In short, the reflective model is considered the most appropriate approach because it integrates the strengths of the other two models, and emphasizes the process of reflection in order to improve teaching practice. It is supported by studies conducted in our country. For instance, a study developed in order to update the B.A. program at the Universidad Tecnológica del Chocó (Kalil, 2003) highlights the importance of adopting the reflective model in the curriculum in order to avoid the gap between what is taught in the methodological component and what is practiced in the language classroom. As a result of the study, the university staff concluded that they should apply the reflective method to their program and make some changes in the student-teachers' and supervisor's roles such as from recipients to demanding and challenging ones. Thus, the reflective model is considered to be a means of professional development which involves the need to become a reflective practitioner and to develop abilities in learning how to teach.

Perspectives in Teacher Preparation

The main purpose of teacher preparation is to prepare students to become effective language teachers. Richards and Nunan (1990) propose general principles that account for effective teaching, the variables that can appear in language teaching and how they are interrelated. They mention that it is important to study the teaching process achieved by the micro and macro approaches. The former defines the effective teacher as one who commands a set of intellectual abilities that contribute to improving the teaching practice. It also examines the teacher's characteristics such as interests, attitudes, judgment, self-control, enthusiasm, adaptability, personality, and how these factors influence learning outcomes. The macro approach is the examination of the total context of classroom teaching and learning in an attempt to understand how the interactions among the teacher, learners and classroom tasks affect learning.

In short, the aim of these approaches is to provide opportunities for student-teachers to acquire skills and competencies for effective teaching as well as to discover by themselves how experienced teachers manage their classes.

On the other hand, Vale and Feunteun (1995) share Wallace's point of view about teacher preparation and the importance of reflecting. They agree that student-teachers need the opportunity to experience how to teach concepts first hand and that they also require time to reflect on how new concepts affect their own thinking and principles within their own teaching situations. In addition, student-teachers need time to put those concepts into practice in their own classrooms, and it is strongly recommended that they regularly set aside time for the purposes of reflection and assessment, in particular for teachers to consider how the course content may affect their own teaching.

The Practicum

The importance of the practicum in the practitioners' development as future teachers is recognized by teacher educators, who add every day to what has already been said about this, and propose new approaches to preparation programs as well as to the teaching practice itself.

Wallace (1990) states that the practicum gives student-teachers the chance to apply knowledge and skills gained elsewhere or to develop strategies for handling the different dimensions of the language lesson. Practitioners are expected to develop a critical view of the teaching situation and to implement their previous knowledge in order to create new strategies for becoming effective teachers.

In this teaching practice, student-teachers face and respond to difficult situations (Woodward, 1992), but they have many possible actions, reactions and strategies to choose from. Therefore, it is necessary to place first-time teachers in situations where they can listen to students, find out about them as human beings, find out their level, and get used to being with them in a classroom and come out unscathed. Thus,

the practicum would become a relevant teaching experience in which students apply their received knowledge and learn by themselves how to handle daily situations in the classroom.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We intended to inquire into the experiences a group of primary school student-teachers had during their practicum. Therefore, our main question was: How do primary school student-teachers react to difficulties they face during their practicum? And our sub-questions were: What are the most frequent difficulties primary school student-teachers find in the teaching practice? What are their attitudes towards difficulties? and What kind of strategies do they use to overcome difficulties in the practicum?

RESEARCH DESIGN

A case study describes what happens in a specific context with a specific group of individuals (Wallace, 1998). This research method gave us the opportunity to have a very detailed contextual analysis of the events (Yin, 1984) that took place during the practicum and the professional processes in which student-teachers got involved throughout it. In addition, we believe that the results of our study could be a reference for future practitioners, to help them to clarify some doubts related to the teaching practice.

Context

In the B. Ed. in philology and languages English program at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, students are required to do their teaching practice in the 7th or 8th semester after having studied some theoretical components of the program. The students must have taken and passed the following: Teaching Principles (Fundamentos de la Educación), Psychology and Language, the sixth level of the Basic English Courses, and ELT Methodology I and II (Guidelines for the teaching practice, 2003).

The practicum is considered one of the basic components of the academic curriculum whose

main goal is to enhance teaching-research. It takes place over a period of six months (one semester), in which the practitioners' role is to design the syllabus and the different lesson plans which will be taught during the classes. It can be developed in primary, high-school, university classes (electives) or courses for university employees under the supervision of a counselor in charge of guiding, assessing and evaluating the student-teachers and helping them during the entire process.

Participants' Profile

Our project was focused on four primary school student-teachers whose teaching practice was developed at the IPARM (Instituto Pedagógico Arturo Ramírez Montúfar). The participants did their practicum in 4th and 5th grades. They were students in 8th semester majoring in English. They were four females between the ages of 20-23 years old. Three of the student-teachers had not taught before. The counselor in charge of the practicum was a teacher of the English program at the university. He implemented the reflective method and developed some specific tools to promote student-teachers' self-assessment and reflection. These instruments were journals, class observation sheets and one-on-one/group conferences.

Data Gathering Procedures

- Student-teachers and practice counselor's journals:

These were "a written exercise in which teaching practitioners describe their routine and conscious actions in the classroom for later reflection" (Richards & Lockhart, 1994).

- Student-teachers and practice counselor's conferences:

According to the practice counselor's reflective approach, the conferences were key tools that helped student-teachers to develop themselves as teachers and be critical about their teaching performance. These conferences were audio-recorded by the practice counselor and took place in group and individual sessions which were held

once a week throughout the teaching practice.

- Student-teachers and practice counselor's audio-recorded semi-structured interviews:

Our interview was designed in order to validate the information we had examined through the journals and conferences. We decided to use individual interviews in order to create a confidential atmosphere for the participants to express their feelings about the practicum and the whole process during that experience.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first stage of our data analysis was carried out individually. This procedure is called teaming (Stake, 2000) and its main goal is to compare different perceptions regarding a particular aspect in order to validate and enrich its analysis. We considered teaming and multiple methods of data collection and analysis to accomplish triangulation, the process of using multiple perceptions, so it helped us to clarify meaning by identifying the different ways in which the phenomenon was observed by each one of us (Stake, 2000). In addition, we understand triangulation strengthens reliability as well as internal validity (as said by Merriam, 1988).

We carried out the process of triangulation in the following way: First, we gathered the information from the student-teachers' journals, then compared it with the recorded conferences. We compared our findings after an individual analysis of the data, and finally, we related these previous findings to the information gathered from the interviews.

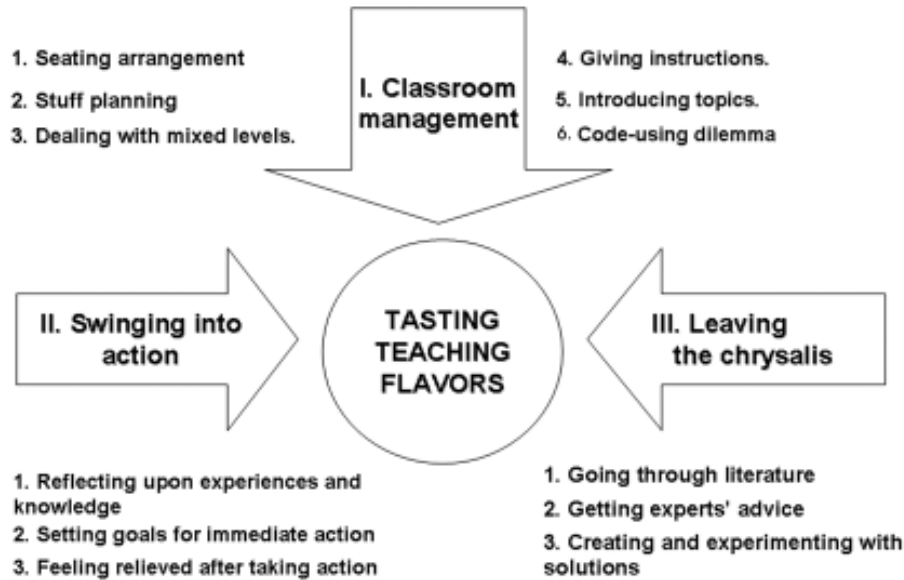
Categories and Sub-Categories

The process of categorization was followed by a constant revision and re-organization of the categories, but after that work, we classified the findings (see Figure 2).

TASTING TEACHING FLAVORS

We consider this to be similar to the experience of tasting different types of food, you like some, but you might not like some others; it is part of life and you learn from it. Student-teachers lived in a

Figure 2. Emerging categories and sub-categories.



new world, the classroom, and learnt how to deal with all the new situations they had to confront in it. In our study, through examining the frequency of our data, we found situations that were “new flavors” for the student-teachers. These were related to language use, how to organize children in the classroom, materials choice and organization, management of mixed ability groups, how to give instructions, and topic introduction; aspects belonging to classroom management, what is considered to be the effective way in which the student-teachers develop their classes in order to ensure that children work and learn in a comfortable and productive environment.

Regarding these classroom management issues, we found samples like the following: Firstly, “*I changed the organization of the class, but it didn’t work.*” (Andrea, J, p. 7, line 11) shows a concern about *seating arrangement*, as it either facilitated or hindered the learning process; to some extent the development of the class depended on it. According to Gower and Walters (1983), the organization of students in the classroom might determine their attitude toward each other and toward the teacher, the teacher’s attitude toward them, how students interact and the

types of activities they can complete. “*...half of my class was o.k. and the other was a disaster. First, I asked children to arrange desks in a U shape. With this organization children can see everybody’s faces and I avoid the children’s talking too much or giggling or just bothering all around the room*” (Camila, J, p. 4, line 1).

Sometimes student-teachers complained about their own materials design or when the children forget to bring their materials to complete certain activities. A student-teacher said: “*The material was wrong, they could not see anything from the back of the room*” (Camila, J, p. 2, line 20). We called this *stuff planning*, which we defined as the importance of working with the necessary and appropriate materials. Also, student-teachers experienced difficulties when managing different kinds of activities and appropriating time in order to get good results during the lessons. As a matter of fact, the student-teachers noted that careless materials planning and organization affected the development of their lessons. “*The main problem here is that I only have one copy per group, and it makes the work with some students difficult*” (Andrea, J, p. 3, line 20); “*I had a terrible problem*

with some activities because I did not bring enough copies for all the children" (Sandra, J, p. 1, line 3). The previous samples evidence how materials selected by the student-teacher, their design, shape and size could help to develop a good lesson or to cause disruption and suddenly cause the children to lose interest.

Our participants were concerned about the way they could handle the lessons when there were students with different abilities: *"My class was not good today, kids are very active and heterogeneous" (Camila, J, p. 2, line 2). They wondered about possible ways to facilitate dealing with mixed levels and being able to help those students who seemed to work at a different pace or level than the majority of the children in the course. "Some kids finished quickly and I had to give them an extra activity. Others took a lot of time to finish, so I had to collect the papers" (Andrea, J, p. 15, line 6).*

Handling mixed-levels represented a challenge for the student-teachers. However, it led them to maximize class participation, try to increase the children's confidence, and help in their learning process.

Even though the student-teachers tried to make their words and expressions full of meaning but uncomplicated in order to establish effective communication in the lessons, the kids sometimes did not understand or did the opposite. *"I asked them to bring clocks and make the cards there, problems came...they didn't understand what they had to do. I had to explain again and again. (Camila, J, p. 2, line 12) and "I noticed they even didn't know what to do and when I tried to explain, they didn't understand me" (Sandra, J, p. 18, line 8).*

These two samples show the relevant aspects that classroom management theory states about *giving instructions*. The teacher's instructions must be precise and clear in order to avoid wasting time and uncertainty (Gower and Walters, 1983). Actually, one sample from our data confirmed this tenet. *"...I was thinking about yesterday in that meeting but I can't complain about my kids because they're noisy. It's because I don't give instructions at the right time..." (Camila, Conf-01: p. 3, line 132).*

Introducing topics became another difficulty the student-teachers had to face. *"Introducing a topic is very difficult for me" (Camila, J, p. 12, line 10). Some of the student-teachers believed that they should work hard on this in order to capture the students' attention from the beginning of the lesson. "I tried to explain some habits but some of them did not pay attention" (Andrea, J, p. 19, line 2). They also mentioned that it was very important to introduce the different topics in a very creative way. Children like colorful things and visual aids that help them to understand what is going on in the class and what the teacher wants them to do. "I brought different visual aids in order to make the topic more comprehensible" (Sandra, J, p. 12, line 1).*

Misbehavior commonly took place in the classroom when the students were not really engaged in the learning activity or when they did not understand the tasks they had been assigned, as we interpreted from our data. Student-teachers faced difficult situations which caused a lack of discipline and did not allow them to achieve the goals set for each class. This was one of their main concerns.

On the other hand, according to our findings, *code-using dilemma* was another student-teachers' concern. It referred to the use of the second language during the lessons. The participants expressed the necessity to use the mother tongue most of the time in order to avoid misunderstanding and make students feel at ease. *"I used the mother tongue in order to avoid misunderstanding, to diminish students' affective filter and to feel closer to them" (Alejandra, J, p. 1, line 7). Moreover, other examples arose regarding using Spanish and English during the lessons. "I have problems about talking in Spanish and English. That constant code switching makes me mad..." (Camila, J, p. 3, line 13) and "In this class, I spoke in English, but I used Spanish many times" (Andrea, J, p. 1, line 4).*

Then, we concentrated on our second question: What are the student-teachers' attitudes towards

difficulties? So, we gave the name *swinging into action* to this category in order to explain how they reviewed and evaluated their performance as teachers when they had to react to and cope with difficulties. We found in the data that the student-teachers were in a constant process of reflection that made them question their actions regarding solving problems. "...Entonces era un pensar todo el tiempo en qué se iba a hacer, en cómo lo iba a hacer, en qué les llevo y tengo que prepararles esta actividad" (I constantly thought about what to do in class, how to do it, what to take to the class, and also that I had to plan an activity for the student) (Camila, Int.: p. 5, line 145). This process was led by the practice counselor with the different tools he applied. "I used to ask them things like, ah, what would you say for your case? Learn about this or what you have seen is important in this experience, so they come to conclusions; for instance, what might be implied by, what they have learnt, or what they were learning. So, all of this is... is a cycle that I tried to prepare in terms of the students' reflection" (Juan, Int.: p. 2, line 18).

We could see that this process helped them to improve their teaching by themselves and also helped them to be constantly thinking about what should be done to cope with difficulties. In other words, the student-teachers had the opportunity to think deeply about their performance and learn from their own practice how to deal with the new environment they were facing. "Siempre nosotros los estudiantes estamos acostumbrados a que el profesor nos diga qué debemos hacer, y en este caso nadie me dijo que debía hacer, mi asesor fue una guía, fue muy importante, pero él nunca me impuso nada, yo misma tuve que diseñar y tuve como que entender en qué estaba fallando, entonces para mí fue muy interesante porque me di cuenta que siempre voy a tener la respuesta soy yo, pues obviamente uno se tiene que basar en muchas teorías y pedir ciertos consejos, pero básicamente uno mismo puede controlar y puede buscar una solución a esos problemas que se van a encontrar en el aula de clase" (We, students, are

used to having the teacher tell us what to do, but in this case, nobody said it. The counselor was a guide. He played a very important role, but he never imposed anything on us. I had to plan, and I also had to identify by myself what I was doing wrong. Thus, this experience was very interesting for me. I realized that I would always have the answer, based on theory and following some advice obviously, but mainly it is oneself who can take control and can deal with difficulties found in the classroom.) (Andrea, Int.: p.4, line 99). Wallace's reflective cycle (1990) shows this progressive learning as a method student-teachers should apply while carrying out their teaching practice.

Throughout the data analysis, we noticed that student-teachers' attitudes towards difficulties evolved during their teaching experience. They reflected upon their difficult teaching situations, they set objectives in order to deal with those situations, and finally, after the implementation of some strategies, they reflected once more upon the results.

1. Reflecting upon experiences and knowledge

Bearing in mind that the English program at Universidad Nacional states that students-teachers must complete some academic requirements before doing the teaching practice, we can say that, to a certain extent, this previous theoretical knowledge helped them to deal with problems in the practicum.

The student-teachers tried to define the way they were conducting the lessons by means of constant and deep reflection, and they felt confident enough to express their feelings, and to try to find solutions based on their experiences and knowledge. "I think that the last two classes I haven't conclude the topic. I think were very superficial, maybe the parts of the house and this part of my clothes, I think they were very superficial so I need to improve on that this class because sometimes, we have to... o.k. for example, you want to teach something new every class, so I think that sometimes is not good,... it could be a mistake to continue without checking some aspects, some

important aspects" (Andrea 02, Conf.: p. 4, line 205). Once more, we conclude that the reflection process helped student-teachers to appropriately respond to the difficulties related to their actual teaching context and gave them the necessary tools to become very analytical and critical teachers as well.

2. *Setting goals for immediate action*

The student-teachers realized the importance of establishing goals and finding solutions in order to manage problems which emerged in their classrooms. "...*There's one thing that worries me, they are becoming reluctant to the teacher speaking in English, so I think, I will have to monitor them in English*" (Camila, J, p. 10, line 13). They established specific goals to overcome the weaknesses and difficulties they identified in their teaching practice. "...*Next class I'm going to use a U-shape, because I finally noticed that the old group desk arrangement doesn't work during individual activities, but the U-shape does*" (Sandra, J, p. 9, line 9).

After observing and reflecting on the problems that arose, the student-teachers evaluated their work as teachers and noticed what was going wrong in their classrooms and looked for certain strategies to cope with problems. "...*Obviously I have to improve in many aspects; for example, how to catch their attention without screaming, how to organize the class, the organization of topics and the development of those aspects...*" (Andrea, J, p. 3, line 18).

3. *Feeling relieved after taking action*

Overcoming difficulties was a transition similar to a pendulous movement. Student-teachers reflected, set goals and examined if their actions had been successful. We can illustrate this with the next excerpt: "...*They find the rewarding moments because what they plan worked, because students have set certain attitudes, that reveal that they are learning, ah!, because they feel that they have done a lot to help students...*" (Practice Counselor, Int, p. 3, line 23).

After dealing with the process of overcoming difficulties, the participants felt relieved. It was

difficult for some of them, but that could be associated with the personal construct theory that says: "There is often a difference between espoused theory (theory claimed by a participant) and theory in action (what a participant actually does in the classroom)" (Donaghue, 2003). One of our participants commented that she felt discouraged when she noticed that her strategies had not worked as expected "...*ah, really disappointed... because I imagined I had done a... better job, no...I imagined I had done better, but when I saw the video I felt that I hadn't done my best yet, I felt like... Oh, my God... I felt frustrated*" (Sandra, Conf-01, p. 01, line 38).

However, we consider it of the utmost importance to mention that the student-teachers' attitudes evolved during their teaching practice and that evolution caused them to feel more comfortable and secure with their role as teachers, as shown in this excerpt: "...*he aprendido a organizar, igual preparando clases, yo me acuerdo que era todo un día y por ahí escribí que era frustrante, saber que duraba horas y horas y buscaba información y al final o no la usaba o no era relevante en ese instante, ...ahorita no*" (I have learned to organize. Preparing classes, I remember that I spent all day long, and I wrote that it was frustrating to know that I used to spend hours and hours, and I looked for information, but at the end I did not use it or it was not relevant at that moment, ... Now, it's different) (Alejandra, Conf.01, p. 9, line 408).

We consider that future teachers in their first teaching experience are similar to a caterpillar that has been in a chrysalis for a long time. It grows and changes. Suddenly, it emerges to contemplate the world and tries to survive by implementing different strategies. The student-teachers had theoretical backgrounds, but once they faced the teaching experience, they found a new world waiting for them to experiment and apply what they had learnt previously. Furthermore, they created new strategies for overcoming difficult or unknown situations in their classrooms.

Therefore, we called our third category *leaving the chrysalis*; a category made up of three sub-

categories which helped us identify the kind of strategies student-teachers used to overcome difficulties.

1. Going through literature

We noted the tendency of student-teachers to turn to research published on topics related to the class difficulties that they had. "...I read about *Cooperative Learning* and I was very interested in ...try to enhance students to cooperate among themselves and to work not for the purpose of grading but just for learning" (Alejandra 02, Conf-01, p. 4, line 210).

According to their factual teaching context, they adapted some theory-based methods and strategies. Then, they applied them in their classrooms in order to observe and analyse if they really worked or not. "...Luego lo aplicaba otra vez, ya como más adaptándolo, y luego traía cosas que había leído, entonces era una búsqueda constante de cómo hacer las cosas, ...y me la pasaba leyendo. Ahí estuve en una búsqueda bibliográfica extensiva en eso" (...Then, I implemented it once more trying to adjust it, and I brought some information I had read. So, it was a constant search for understanding how to carry out the class, ...and I used to read a lot. It was an exhaustive literature review.) (Camila, Int. p. 6, line 173).

We could conclude that their wish to learn and to implement strategies that could help them is like the story of "The Very Hungry Caterpillar". They looked for more and more useful literature; sometimes they followed it, other times they adapted it to suit their needs in order to overcome their teaching problems.

2. Getting experts' advice

The student-teachers expected that experienced people like teacher educators, peers, and homeroom teachers would provide them with some strategies and solutions to be applied in their classrooms and specific situations like the following: "...I'm trying to improve this by asking friends who have already taught kids, recycling a lot about

classroom management". (Camila, J, p. 3, line 9) and "...They ended up talking about their personal circumstances, a couple of pieces of advice" (Juan, J, p. 8, line 27).

Additionally, the involvement of the student-teachers in reflective sessions with the practice counselor helped them to get acquainted with some knowledge that they could possibly apply in their lessons. This process was carried out implicitly, by means of their practice counselor's assessment when dealing with classroom management. "*Siempre nosotros los estudiantes estamos acostumbrados a que el profesor nos diga qué debemos hacer, y en este caso nadie me dijo que debía hacer, mi asesor fue una guía, fue muy importante, pero él nunca me impuso nada, yo misma tuve que diseñar y tuve como que entender en qué estaba fallando...*" (Andrea, Int.: p. 4, line 99).

3. Creating and experimenting with solutions

From any sources they could consult such as colleagues, teacher educators and theory from books, the student-teachers chose solutions they thought would work best in each of their contexts. Sources became important tools for received knowledge. This fostered in the student-teachers an interest in sharing concerns with peers and experienced teachers in order to find some solutions already tested in similar contexts. "...Igual frente a situaciones adversas y superar esas situaciones, aprendes muchísimo, y que igual el superarlas te demanda crear estrategias..." (Likewise, when you face difficult situations and then overcome them, you learn a lot, but also, overcoming those situations forces you to create strategies...) (Alejandra, Int: p. 14, line 431).

Based on their received knowledge and their experiential knowledge, the student-teachers created strategies. After experimenting with some of them, and redesigning them, the main strategies we identified through our data analysis were the implementation of discipline codes by using color cards, the use of cooperative learning, counting, writing names on the board, and a competitive game.

"...Actually the only strategy that I used was to count and it worked at the beginning, but maybe at the end, it didn't work anymore, and I've tried to do it now, but it is not the same like at the beginning" (Sandra Conf-01, p. 5, line 191).

"...A veces quedaban perdidos, hacían lo contrario, entonces tuve que hacer eh!, muchas ayudas visuales, de pronto repetición eh!, escribir en el tablero, pero tocaba hacer de todo para que entendieran" (Sometimes, the students got lost. They did the exercise the other way around, then I had to make... many visual aids, to repeat, write on the board, but I had to do different things to make them understand.) (Sandra Int, p. 2, line 23). "In this class I introduced a new system of rules related to discipline. I chose three words 'silence', 'warning' and 'game over'. The first one had the purpose of achieving students' silence. 'Warning' is like an "aviso", if they continue talking I showed them 'game over'. The group loses the point related to discipline. I'm also going to give them an extra point if they are quiet in the class" (Andrea, J, p. 24, line 1).

"...Tuve que inventarme un sistema de tarjetas con los niños, de puntos y de certificados al final, de tal modo que los niños estuvieran motivados y haciendo lo que estaban haciendo para que yo pudiera llevar un proceso pedagógico de las actividades" (I had to make up a card system for the kids, using points and certificates at the end, for them to be motivated and work so I could accomplish a pedagogical process through the activities.) (Camila, Int, p. 6, line 191).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings revealed that at the beginning of the practicum the student-teachers had plenty of expectations about the teaching experience and their reactions included anxiety, doubt and stress. However, when they observed a difficulty they took into account what they thought would suit the situations. Also, they tried to search for solutions from different sources. Nonetheless, as they faced this experience, their feelings changed. It was hard at the beginning, but at the end, they were very happy with their results.

Moreover, we found that the reflective approach chosen by the practice counselor helped student-teachers to critically and analytically assess their practice. This approach provided some tools which allowed student-teachers to take a look at their process and become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, so they established objectives in order to change or improve their teaching. It also encouraged them to create their own strategies and search for solutions by themselves in order to overcome classroom difficulties. And not only difficulties as we had thought, but they also created strategies in order to improve their teaching practice and provide children with a better and more productive environment.

We can also conclude that the most frequent difficulties were mainly related to classroom management. It is therefore evident that most of these difficulties were related to an effective way to control how the lessons were carried out. This is, in turn, related to the macro approach to teacher education (Richards & Nunan, 1990) because this model for professional preparation seeks to develop effective teachers by means of applying dimensions (classroom management, structuring, tasks and grouping) in an effective way.

Regarding student-teachers' strategies to overcome problematic situations, we can mention some discipline codes applied through games, symbolic cards and the use of cooperative learning. The use of strategies showed their interest in overcoming situations that were not so easy and their creativity to combine elements from theory, colleagues' advice, and input provided by the practice counselor and peers' reflections made during the conferences. Most of the student-teachers created some strategies not only to get the children to be silent, but to start developing values and reflective attitudes among the children.

IMPLICATIONS

We found that one of the reasons student-teachers faced these problems was that the teacher education program failed to provide them with a

realistic view of teaching that adequately prepared them to cope with the realities of the classroom. We think that a seminar or another subject should be included in the B. Ed. English program. Besides, more attention should be given to classroom management in order to make student-teachers conscious of the classroom environment, to familiarize them with real context and to examine implications of possible courses of action.

Furthermore, an earlier implementation of the research component should be obligatory in our English program. Classroom research would give student-teachers some tools to become autonomous and to raise their awareness. Thus, the B. Ed students from the beginning of the program could learn how to deal with different situations which arise in the classroom.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on our findings, we consider that it would be invaluable to all involved to carry out future research on how the method applied by a practice counselor influences the students-teachers' decisions and attempts to cope with difficult situations throughout the practicum. Along the same line, we could further study how that approach could develop teaching skills and professional competence in student-teachers.

In addition, we find it very interesting to study the impact of the student-teachers' roles in their practicum. Finally, we highlight the relevance of being aware of the student-teachers' transition throughout the teaching practice as well as their beliefs vis-a-vis that experience in order to become effective teachers.

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