

How Can a Process of Reflection Enhance Teacher-Trainees' Practicum Experience?

¿Cómo ayuda un proceso de reflexión a docentes en formación durante su práctica docente?

Diana Zulimay Camacho Rico

zulimaycamacho@gmail.com

Lucy Durán Becerra

lduran@unipamplona.edu.co

Judith C. Albarracin Trujillo

jualtru@hotmail.com

Marjorie Verónica Arciniegas Vera

varciniegas@unipamplona.edu.co

Magdaleidy Martínez Cáceres

martinezmagdaleidy@unipamplona.edu.co

Gabriel Eduardo Cote Parra

gcote@unipamplona.edu.co

Universidad de Pamplona, Colombia

The present study was an attempt to understand how a process of reflection helped five foreign language student teachers throughout their first teaching experience. This study was conducted in the classrooms of five public schools in Colombia where English was taught to high school students. Data were collected through classroom observations, students' reflective journals, lesson plans and semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that reflection is a way to help foreign language student teachers to improve their first teaching practice. The analysis was based on the light of two theories, reflection *in action* and reflection *on action* from Schön (1987) and Van Manen's (1977) three levels of reflection.

Key words: Practicum, reflection, reflection in action, reflection on action, student teacher

El presente estudio fue un intento para comprender cómo un proceso de reflexión ayudó a cinco estudiantes profesores de lenguas extranjeras en su primera experiencia de enseñanza. Se llevó a cabo en las aulas de cinco escuelas públicas en Colombia, donde se enseña inglés a estudiantes de secundaria. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de observaciones, diarios de reflexión, planes y entrevistas. Los resultados revelaron que la reflexión es una manera de ayudar a los estudiantes a mejorar su primera práctica docente. El análisis se basó en dos teorías, reflexiones sobre la acción y en la acción de Schön (1987), y los tres niveles de reflexión de Van Manen (1977).

Palabras clave: estudiante practicante, práctica, reflexión, reflexión en la acción, reflexión sobre la acción

Introduction

The Foreign Language (FL) program in which this research took place seeks to educate an effective and reflective teacher who is able to face realities, challenges and problems related to the educational settings in which learning and teaching a foreign language occur. This study focuses on the FL practicum, developed in the classrooms of four public high schools, in which the student teacher is required to put theory into practice as well as develop a project on teaching, research, administrative skills, and community engagement. This is aligned with what The Ministry of National Education in Colombia expects from schools of education in that they should provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to interact with pre-school, primary, or high school students from different contexts to facilitate the development of professional competences.¹

Therefore, this study allowed teacher-trainees to be engaged in a process of reflection as a way of giving them the opportunity to identify problematic situations and look for ways to improve their first practicum experience. In other words, teacher-trainees embarked upon a process in which they were able to identify critical instances in the classroom, and to consider actions that responded to the identified situations.

Theoretical Framework

Taking into account that the focus of this study is reflection and the teaching practicum, we felt it necessary to establish some theoretical foundations that contextualize this study. According to Dewey (1933), reflective thinking “involves a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty in which thinking originates and an act of searching, hunting and inquiring to find material that will resolve the doubt and settle and dispose of the perplexity” (p. 12). In a more recent concept, Richards and Lockhart (2005) stated that reflection “involves examining teaching experiences as a basis for evaluation and decision making and as a source for change” (p. 4). These concepts allowed the researchers to be aware of the importance of reflection for teacher-trainees facing their first teaching experience as a way to increase their success and maximize the benefits of the practicum for them.

The researchers adopted Schön's (1987) and Van Manen's (1977) notions and levels of reflection through the different stages in the development of the project. The researchers used Schön's (1987) concepts of *reflection in action* and *reflection on action* in order to identify the type of reflection student teachers went through during their first teaching experience. According to

1 Ministry of Education Colombia, Resolution 6966, August 6th, 2010.

Schön (1987) “we may reflect in the midst of action without interrupting it” (p. 26). This type of reflection is defined as *reflection in action* as we reflect while actions are taking place. “Our thinking serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it” (p. 26). On the other hand, “we may reflect *on action* to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an expected outcome” (p. 26). This reflection takes place after actions are carried out.

In order to evaluate the extent to which students were engaged in reflection, data were also analyzed using Van Manen’s (1977) model. According to this model, reflections can be organized into three levels: technical, practical, and critical. (1) Technical reflection, the lowest level of reflection, concerns the effective application of skills and technical knowledge in the classroom setting. In other words, it focuses on reflecting on how effective the means are in order to achieve a specific objective. (2) Practical reflection involves reflections on assumptions that support teachers’ actions and the consequences of such practices. According to Van Manen (1977), practical reflection facilitates “an interpretative understanding both of the nature and quality of the educational experience, and of making practical choices” (p. 226). (3) Critical reflection, the highest level of reflection, incorporates moral and ethical issues. It may also include aspects from the two lower levels of reflection.

Several studies have been published in this particular field in Colombia. Most research conducted on FL pre-service teachers has focused on language learning and use Farias and Obilinovic (2009). Some studies have focused on the strengths and weaknesses that practicum supervisors have identified in their trainees (Quintero, Zuluaga, & López, 2003); the use of blogs and journals when reflecting (Insuasty & Zambrano, 2010); the use of the counselor’s notes to support students’ preparation (Viáfara, 2005), and the design of reflective tasks to prepare pre-service teachers (Viáfara, 2004).

Participants and Setting

The participants, who ranged in age from 21 to 26, were five undergraduate pre-service teachers: Marcia, David, Alice, Martin, and Caroline (pseudonyms) and belonged to the Foreign Language Program at Universidad de Pamplona, where they were educated to become effective and reflective teachers able to face realities, challenges and problems related to learning and teaching a foreign language. These participants were chosen on a voluntary basis after having expressed their willingness to participate in the project. All of them did their practicum in English at five public high schools, and their language proficiency ranged between B1 and B2.² This field experience took place in the final semester of the

2 Proficiency level of the participants was based on the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency, (MTELP).

undergraduate program just before students face teaching at a professional level. Prior to their practicum, the students participating in this project had only sixty hours of teaching with no experience on reflective activities.

Method

This research involved the study of an issue through five cases limited in time and space (Creswell, 2005). In other words, this study was conducted over 16 weeks and focused on the first teaching experiences of Marcia, David, Alice, Martin, and Caroline in order to better understand how a process of reflection could help them to improve their teaching practice.

During the study, researchers collected qualitative data from several instruments: classroom observations, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. Data—gathered mainly through the participants' journals, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews—provided the participants' perspectives and reflections as they went through their first teaching experience. Lesson plans complemented the information gathered from the other instruments. Participants' reflections were guided through a specific questionnaire (see Appendix 1). Researchers conducted three classroom observations per participant that allowed them “to record information as it occurs in a setting...” (Creswell, 2005, p. 211). For example, during these observations, two researchers were seated at the back of the classroom taking notes. At the end of the study, researchers interviewed participants for 30 minutes using a semi-structured questionnaire (see Appendix 2).

With regard to data analysis, each case was analyzed separately by coding and identifying salient themes. The cases were then compared and contrasted to elicit relevant information in order to understand how student-teachers reflected and which their main concerns were. This analysis allowed the researchers to identify several categories that resulted in a narrowed number of themes.

Findings

The researchers evaluated the information gathered from (a) participants' journals, (b) classroom observations, (c) semi-structured interviews, and (d) lesson plans. Several themes emerged from this analysis and were mostly associated with the process of reflection, when and how it took place, the novice teacher's main concerns, and the changes implemented as a result of participants' reflective process. The following section presents the way the researchers categorized those findings according to Schön's (1987) concepts of *reflection in action* and *reflection on action*; and Van Manen's (1977) hierarchical model.

Reflection in Action

Taking into account that when reflecting *in* action, “we may reflect in the midst of action without interrupting it” (Schön, 1987, p. 26), participants found themselves making sudden changes in the middle of an activity in order to overcome difficult situations. For example, the researchers found that the student teachers decided to change the way a class activity had been planned in order to catch their students’ responsive attitude and actively engage them throughout the class. Making these on-the-spot decisions allowed practitioners to find a solution in order to keep the class organized and working. Only two participants reflected while engaged in teaching. It seemed that they sorted out difficult situations by means of reflecting in action. For example, in her journal, Alice described when her students showed a lack of preparation and interest in participating in a specific task or when they were not able to participate because of a lack of preparation for the assigned task; she thought of a plan B in order to overcome this situation without interrupting the activity itself.

Similarly, Martin reflected in action when his students misbehaved and when the pace of the lesson became monotonous, as reported in his journal:

I have found myself making some instant decisions in the classroom despite the time spent planning a lesson plan since in the moment things would work better if changed. For instance, something that was not homework became homework; the activity was intended to be worked in pairs but because of bad behavior was individually done.

Reflection on Action

Researchers found that all participants experienced ups and downs during their practicum, and that reflection *on* action allowed them to think back on what they had done while teaching their lessons, the amount of content taught, the strategies used, the pace of their lessons, and some discipline issues. Identifying what went wrong in previous lessons would enable them to avoid making the same mistakes and to modify future actions. The following excerpt from Alice’s journal explains how this reflective process allowed her to assess what she had done during a previous class in order to introduce certain changes to avoid difficult situations.

I have to change some activities in the planning for the next group; the first activity that I have to change is the use of role-plays. I have to give students a sheet of paper with the text because in this way they can follow the performance, the role play, and they will understand the topic if they do not know some kind of vocabulary.

Likewise, after a class, David reflected on the way he made decisions in order to manage the class more effectively, as he noted:

I had to rearrange the classroom and take disciplinary measures like taking notes on the activity that they had to do and call their attention from time to time. Despite this small problem the lesson flowed very well.³

In doing so, David decided to change their original plans in the hopes of catching and retaining the students' responsive attitude throughout the lesson and keeping the class flowing. It can be seen that the student teachers took some distance in time and space from the events to find feasible solutions and make decisions for the subsequent planning.

From Technical to Critical Reflection

Contrary to Schön (1987), who presents reflection as a process in which people may reflect *in* action and *on* action, Van Manen (1977) sees reflection as a hierarchical scale organized into three levels: technical, practical, and critical. This study found that all the participants achieved the technical level of reflection while two of them reached the practical and the critical ones.

Technical Reflection

At a technical level of reflection, student teachers' main concerns were how to develop their lessons and reach the goals set. Therefore, all participants considered the technical application of educational knowledge while reflecting on themes such as class activities, materials, classroom interaction, group arrangement, explanations, delivery of instructions, use of the native or foreign language, and students' correction. For example, from Alice's journal, researchers noticed that she was confident about helping students develop their receptive skills as she worked on grammar.

I used a listening exercise and some visual posters to catch student's attention; the listening exercise was a great tool in the development of the class because with this exercise students were involved in the most important aspect of the class, to remember the structure of continuous tenses, students liked this activity since this kind of exercise is not used in most of their English classes.

In their journals, pre-service teachers reflected on how students responded to the class activities. This helped them to make decisions during planning or when teaching. For example, they admitted being frightened about not having enough activities for their classes, giving less or more time to a specific activity and finding suitable material. In the following quote, Alice described her opinion about the changes she made when reflecting on her actions:

I have to change some activities in the planning for the next group, the first activity that I have to change is the use of role plays. I have to give students a sheet of paper with the text because in this

3 Translation by the authors.

way they can follow the performance, the role play, and they will understand the topic if they do not know some kind of vocabulary.

Aspects concerning the classroom interaction are also explored in the pre-service teachers' journals. At the beginning of their practicums, Carolina, Martin, and Alice asked themselves about the way they were giving instructions or explaining a topic and whether or not students understood what they had taught. They were also concerned about how a specific group arrangement facilitated classroom interaction, as stated by Martin:

In several classes I have used this kind of arrangement; first, by teamwork but it didn't work so well because students kept talking all the time about things different to the class activity; second, in pairs, it seems to be more manageable and makes me conclude that individual work or maximum two people is the advisable limit.

Likewise, the use of both the mother tongue and the target language in the classroom are the most recurring themes among participants. Maybe that is because it is one of the most challenging decisions for them to make as practitioners. Researchers identified planning, teaching, and reflecting as the instances in which they used their L1 and L2 interchangeably. Although planning is done using the target language, the extended use of the foreign language in class was not a commonality among participants. During the classes observed, English was not used for a considerable period of time. Pre-service teachers used L1 for different purposes; for example, to manage the class better, to give instructions, to ask questions or explain the L2 system, to translate a word or a sentence, or to contextualize a topic or an activity.

Using the L2 seemed to be a dilemma in the practitioners' teaching experience. In spite of these difficulties, during the classes observed, English was spoken to maintain classroom discipline, to give instructions, or to explain some language features. Deciding what language the student teacher used in the class was a key choice that they made at an early stage in their experience. However, it changed while facing the reality of the lesson since using L1 or L2 facilitated or interrupted the classroom interaction. From the classes observed, it can be concluded that when the target language was used students got more involved and were more attentive to the class and their participation increased while the use of L1 resulted in disruptive behavior.

Participants reflecting at a technical level also wrote about correcting students to improve language accuracy. For instance, Alice involved the whole class in correcting mistakes while performing a role-play. David corrected mistakes differently; while the students were reading aloud, he corrected their mispronunciation immediately.

Generally speaking, technical reflection enabled participants to assess what they were doing in the classroom and look for ways of improvement, which resulted in overcoming methodological flaws.

Practical Reflection

When students were developing their practicums, two of them were concerned with how their actions were supported by their theoretical views on language learning and language teaching. Practitioners reflecting at this level examined the relationship between their actions and the theories. In the following journal entry, Martin reached a practical level of reflection because he wanted to support what he did in his classroom with a specific theory, as he stated:

I have tried to use all the information contained in the concepts shared in the theory, for example the role of motivation when using games and class activities, oral ability and vocabulary acquisition. Activities proposed benefit the four skills and the lexicon component.

In addition, David reflected on the way his actions and assumptions about classroom environment were rooted in theory. David always favored a peaceful, comfortable and fun learning environment. As he said: "I like to follow the guide that is considered by Enright and McClosky in their model Integrated Language Teaching."⁴ Moreover, when reflecting on activities David did so in the light of Krashen's Input hypothesis in the sense that he exposed students to quality input through a varied set of listening activities.

Critical Reflection

A further concern that some student teachers implied was the focus on teaching values among their students. These reflections are associated with Van Manen's (1977) third and highest level of reflectivity because they deal with the questioning of moral and ethical issues related directly and indirectly to teaching practices. Martin devoted some time in his classes to cultivating good manners among his students. As he stated, "I contribute the best I have and I am, not only in academic issues but in those aspects of life like respect, discipline and responsibility." This exemplifies that there were nonlinguistic aspects that practitioners kept in mind when teaching. In other words, the student teachers' responsibilities went beyond teaching an FL, encompassing aspects such as moral values and well-being in order to guarantee a safe and respectful environment for the learning process.

David talks about his choices when evaluating and following his own values. He reflected on his responsibility for the grades students had obtained and how the scores were their main interest. He analyzed how the evaluation process might be used to punish students. David wrote this in his journal:

... I just drew the group's attention but I never used grades as a means of punishment. It strikes me that the academic part has nothing to do with the disciplinary one.

4 Translation by the authors.

Questioning one's ethical issues that relate directly to evaluation practices is one example of what Van Manen defines as critical reflectivity.

In addition, the way others perceived pre-service teachers was also regarded as being a factor that shaped their position in the school community.

...from tenth semester on you are already a teacher; then it is different. The change in roles is too drastic as to face it from one moment to the other; to be called teacher here and there when you still are a college student.

Despite the fact that they realized the context in which they were functioning, teachers' taking responsibility for their actions was challenging for them. During the interviews, practitioners talked about assumptions when being a teacher, how they were seen by others and their role at the educational institution. Although only two participants reached this level of reflection, honing this critical posture among all student teachers would be the first step towards understanding not only their classroom realities and school community but also the complexities of the context in which they act.

Conclusion

Participants in this study reflected on important aspects which gave the researchers enough data to draw substantial conclusions as follows: (1) The act of *reflecting on* or *in action* is directly linked to the circumstances or events that occurred during the class; for example, *reflection on action* is sometimes due to a previous analysis which led them to change those actions in future events. On the other hand, *reflection in action* is observed in how they learned to handle situations that are unexpected or got out of hand due to changes given at the time of the class as well as how they changed their routine. (2) All participants reflected in different ways and at different moments; this kind of reflection made them go beyond the simple act of being in front of the class teaching a specific topic or lesson. (3) Reflection gave them the opportunity to analyze how and why they acted as they did and how they could think of changes or new ways of teaching. (4) When reflection took place during teaching, trainee teachers adapted their actions whilst the class was being taught.

With regard to Van Manen's (1977) levels of reflection, this study found that all the participants reflected at a technical level to solve immediate difficulties in the classroom setting. The second level of reflection, practical, was reached by two of the participants who supported their classroom actions on theoretical assumptions. Similarly, two participants engaged in critical reflection as a way to support their actions with their values.

Since the findings of this small scale project identified reflection as a way for the student teachers to restructure their performances, to face problems from a different angle, and to overcome obstacles during their teaching experience, the foreign language program should

provide its students with formal training on the issues of reflection at earlier stages through effective questioning, classroom discussions, workshops and seminars.

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The Authors

Diana Zulimay Camacho Rico holds a BA degree in Foreign Languages from the Universidad de Pamplona. She also completed a Masters in foreign languages teaching and learning at the Universidad de Los Andes, in Mérida, Venezuela. Nowadays, she works at the Universidad de Pamplona as a language and methodology teacher. She is also a researcher member of the GRILEX group.

Lucy Durán Becerra is a part-time professor at the Universidad de Pamplona and has been a French as a Foreign Language Teacher for 5 years. She holds a B.A. in Foreign Languages from Universidad de Pamplona and a Postgraduate Certificate in Pedagogy from the same Institution.

Judith C. Albarracin Trujillo is a researcher and a part-time professor of Applied Linguistics, English II and IV levels and teacher trainer at Universidad de Pamplona. She holds a B.A. in Foreign Languages from Universidad de Pamplona and an M.A. in Education with emphasis on Applied Linguistics from Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga (UNAB) and Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey- México (ITESM).

Marjorie Verónica Arciniegas Vera is a part-time professor and researcher at Universidad de Pamplona and has been an English as a Foreign Language Teacher for 8 years. She holds a B.A. in Foreign Languages from Universidad de Pamplona and a Postgraduate Certificate in Translation from the same Institution. Furthermore, she has a master in teaching English as a foreign language from Universidad de Jaén.

Magdaleidy Martínez Cáceres holds a Masters degree in Foreign Language Teaching Methodology from the Université d'Angers, France. She currently works as a full-time professor at the Universidad de Pamplona, Colombia.

Gabriel Eduardo Cote Parra holds a PhD in Education from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. He is a full-time professor at Universidad de Pamplona and principal investigator of the Group of Research on Foreign Languages (GRILEX).

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Appendix 1: Reflection Questionnaire

Questions about your lesson

1. What strategies did you use to begin and to end the class? Which ones would you use in the next class?
2. Into what sections did you divide the lesson? Describe the sequence of the activities. What type of transitions did you use between the activities?
3. How did you manage the time? Did you accomplish all the activities? Explain. What would you do differently next time?

Questions about your teaching

1. What did you set out to teach?
2. Were you able to accomplish your goals?
3. What teaching materials did you use? How effective were they?
4. What techniques did you use?
5. Was your lesson teacher-dominated?
6. Did you have any problems with the lesson?

Questions about the students

1. What do you think students really learned from the lesson?
2. What did they like most about the lesson?

Questions to ask yourself as a language teacher

1. What are my strengths as a language teacher?
2. What are my limitations at present?

Adapted from: Richards and Lockhart (2005).

Appendix 2: Semi-Structured Interview

1. During the development of your experience, what aspects stood out as the most successful? What difficulties did you have?
2. What procedures did you follow in order to keep a journal? What information was included in the journal? When did you write the journal?
3. What significant changes occurred from the reflections? By revising/reflecting/going over the actions (at a time outside of your classes)? How do you describe what occurred in your classes? Successful, unsuccessful? If you were to redevelop the same classes what changes would you introduce or, on the contrary, what would you develop in the same way?
4. Do you think the process of reflection has allowed a critical position? How?
5. What did the feedback given by your tutor contribute to? Did it help you to overcome some weaknesses during the development of the teaching practice?
6. Within the reflections that you developed, what themes caught your attention?
7. Did you ever reflect on your role as a foreign languages teacher within a broader context, not only in the classroom, but within the institution and/or the community in which it is located?
8. Did you reflect on how the other members of the institution (teaching staff, administrative staff, or parents) perceived their presence in the institution?
9. Within the development of your classes, were there times when you decided to change what you had planned? Why did you do it? Explain in detail how the events occurred and why you decided to change them.