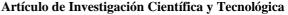


Improving teachers' knowledge of language and pedagogy through loop-input

Mejorar el conocimiento de los profesores sobre lenguaje y pedagogía a través de entradas en espiral

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Palabras Claves: aprendizaje experiencia

experiencial, entradas en espiral, formación docente

Resumen

Introducción. La formación de profesores de idiomas ha sido una preocupación y una prioridad para el gobierno ecuatoriano durante la última década. Una de las iniciativas implementadas fue el programa Go Teacher, una intervención destinada a ayudar a los docentes a mejorar su dominio del idioma y sus habilidades didácticas. Sin embargo, existe una brecha entre lo que se esperaba de los candidatos seleccionados antes y después de su programa de inmersión. Los resultados fueron variados y aún existe una complicación a la hora de determinar si tales iniciativas han sido efectivas. Objetivo. Diseñar un conjunto de sesiones de formación docente basadas en el Aprendizaje Experiencial de Kolb (1984) y entradas en espiral de Woodward (2003), considerando un componente de contenido pedagógico. Metodología. Se realizó una revisión de la literatura, considerando trabajos sobre aprendizaje experiencial, entradas en espiral y las percepciones de los docentes sobre su propio nivel de dominio del idioma. Resultados. Se propone un conjunto de talleres basados en entradas en espiral para el desarrollo docente; el aprendizaje experiencial es un componente clave de cada taller. Conclusiones. Las intervenciones diseñadas para que los docentes mejoren tanto su conocimiento de y sobre un idioma, como su conocimiento pedagógico, deben incluir actividades basadas en la experiencia, ya que esto les permitiría obtener más información sobre su área de práctica y, al mismo tiempo, su nivel de competencia en el idioma.

Keywords:

experiential learning, loopinput, teacher education, teacher training Introduction. Language teacher education has been both a concern and priority for the Ecuadorian Government for the past decade. One of the initiatives implemented was the Go Teacher programmed, an intervention aimed at helping teachers improve their language – command of – and teaching skills. However, there is a gap between what was expected from selected candidates before and after their immersion programmed. Results were varied, and there is still a complication when it comes to determining if such initiatives have been effective. **Objective.** To design a set of teacher training sessions based on Kolb's Experiential Learning (1984) and Woodward's loop-input (2003), considering a component of pedagogical content. **Methodology.** A literature review was performed, considering works on experiential learning, loop-input, and teachers' perceptions on their own level of language





proficiency. **Results.** A set of workshops based on loop-input for teacher development is proposed; experiential learning is a key component of each workshop. **Conclusions.** Interventions designed for teachers to improve both their knowledge of and about a language, as well as their pedagogical knowledge, should include experience-based activities given the fact that this would allow them to gain more insights about their area of practice and, at the same time, their level of competence in the language.

Introduction

Since the year 2012 the Ecuadorian Government, through SENESCYT, the institution in charge of higher education in Ecuador, has implemented different initiatives aimed at offering undergraduate and postgraduate students the opportunity of improving their knowledge in different educational areas. Primarily, this process happened because there is a need for future and in-service professionals to demonstrate that they are ready to be part of a sought-after change in education, which is one of the most important policies applied. One of those initiatives was the Go Teacher programmed, designed specifically for teachers of English, especially those in secondary education, to be able to improve both their level of proficiency in the language and their pedagogical knowledge so that "the teaching of English in the country is strengthened and systematized". The programmed involved sending selected teachers to universities in the USA, where they spent up to nine months studying English intensively and language teaching methodologies. The idea of offering this training as a "complete immersion course" (ibid.) became a unique opportunity for in-service English teachers to develop their professional skills.

To be considered as one of the beneficiaries of the Go Teacher initiative, candidates had to demonstrate a suitable command of English for them to be able to communicate while their training was taking place. Each of the host universities administered an exam to evaluate the teacher's competence in English, which the applicant needed to pass with at least 60% of the overall mark. It was then when a rather complex situation arose as shortlisted candidates, whose pedagogical knowledge may already have been quite good, could not become part of the group of teachers who were sent abroad due to their low level of English.

Dealing with teachers' knowledge of the language – which embodies language proficiency – and about the language, the language system, and how it is learnt (Murray & Christison, 2012) with a component on pedagogical content. As Marpaung &





Hambandima (2018) assert, "both teacher and students are responsible for EFL learning to be successfully founded to achieve the goals of language learning". Hence, for this goal to be achieved, experiential learning is proposed, mainly because of its direct link to reflection, as well as loop-input theory, since it can be considered a more developed approach of experiential learning.

Methodology

For this proposal, a literature review was performed, considering works on experiential learning, loop-input, and teachers' perceptions on their own level of language proficiency. Additionally, for the corresponding section of workshops, an analysis of the contextual needs of the possible beneficiaries was performed as to better establish what to include in the training sessions.

A language component in a teacher training programmed

There is a wide-spread view that most teachers of English whose L1 is not English are, by far, expected to perform in their classrooms with a very high command of the target language. This high expectation may come from supervisors, principals, students, parents, and teachers themselves. Cullen (1994) points out that "[teachers] are also expected to handle authentic or semi-authentic reading texts, often posing cultural as well as linguistic difficulties, and are not likely to be reassured by the bland pronouncements they hear on training courses that "it is not necessary to understand every word". However, for most of those teachers, it would feel rather inappropriate to rely on this latter assumption given the fact that the demands of communicative language teaching, and the materials which focus on it as focus on it as the approach for instruction, require them to use such a method confidently and continuously (ibid.).

In this paper the discussion centers on finding an appropriate way of merging language and pedagogical components so that the trainees improve both aspects of their teaching. Cullen's approach on the linking of methodology and language improvement (1994) represents a good model to pay attention to. In this approach, Cullen suggests making methodology the content of a language improvement programmed. To do so, 'loops' can be created in such a way that content

is passed on through the very same process that is being described. Section two, on experience- based learning and reflection, and particularly section three, on loop-input theory, will describe this process more in detail.

Reflection based on experience

Study opportunities abroad, or exchange programmers, constitute very good examples of learning from experience. As Kolb (1984) establishes "experiential learning is the process





whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience". However, as much as it would be great for other language teachers to engage in similar experiences, for several of them it has been quite a challenge, particularly because of the language aspect mentioned in the introduction to this paper. Therefore, designing an agenda through which these teachers could participate in a more experienced-based training and where they could genuinely make the most of what is offered to them generates a great deal of interest.

To start with Andresen et al. (2000), situate the *ends* of education as the most important criterion to be considered for experience- based learning (EBL) to be achieved. They establish that "the goal of EBL involves learners' own appropriation of something that is to them personally significant or meaningful" (Andresen et al., 2000). If the target group of teachers became involved in a training cycle that from the very beginning considered their constructs, i.e., their ideas, beliefs, attitudes (Wallace & Bau, 1991), expectations, fears, and doubts they could feel the new groundwork as their own. For Mathew et al. (2017), "reflective practice is used at both the pre-service and in-service levels of teaching. Coaching and peer involvement are two aspects of reflective practices seen most often at the pre-service level". Additionally, the role of reflection is emphasised as a key element of EBL when Andresen et al. (2000), state that "leaners analyze their experience by reflecting, evaluating and reconstructing it (sometimes individually, sometimes collectively, sometimes both) to draw meaning from it in the light of prior experience. This review of their experience may lead to further action".

Recognising Bartlett (1990), to become critically reflective practitioners, teachers must ask themselves 'what' and 'why' questions because

In reflecting on 'what' and 'why' questions, we begin to exercise control and open the possibility of transforming our everyday classroom life. The process of control is called critical reflective teaching.

Modelling a relationship between a feeling of ownership of new knowledge and 'new' ways of being in control of what happens in the classroom can be effective as part of a design aimed at helping teachers to better both their level of proficiency in the language and their approach to teaching.

Based on this essentiality of reflection, as part of course design in teacher education, Wallace's Reflective Practice Model of Professional Education/Development (Wallace & Bau, 1991), has become a guide in the development of the workshops which will be introduced.





From EBL to Loop-input

Just by stating that EBL has its groundings in reflection, a teacher trainer cannot make sure that a real reflective process is happening on its own during a training session. How could, then, the trainer and their trainees avoid falling into a line of 'transmission' of knowledge instead of adopting a real reflective approach? When working with a group of trainees a more deeply developed view of EBL could be considered. Such a view has come to be known as loop-input. Woodward (2003) describes loop-input as "a specific type of experiential teacher training process 'that involves an alignment of the process and content of learning". Let's exemplify:

If a teacher wanted to explain a very specific grammatical point, for example, how to use adverbs of manner (quickly, slowly, calmly...) they could simply provide their students with a set of sentences containing those adverbs and resort to explanation of where to place the adverb in the sentence. This last way of explaining does not comply with the mechanics of EBL and even less with those of loop-input. To turn this into a loop-input activity, the teacher would better ask some, if not all of the students, to act out (role-play) the content of the sentences while they dictates them and makes emphasis on the way they should do it: "Now, my students are writing down what I am saying very slowly in their jotters", "They are now passing their papers to the person on their left very quickly!". During this first stage, and without much direct explanation of what the intention behind the activity is, students should start wondering (reflecting on the task) about what is going on by themselves. It is not after the initial step that students are asked to share their opinions on the way the activity took place. They should also be encouraged to individually and/or in groups, find their own explanation to the grammar that is being presented.

In other words, "looping an input" is to make trainees get involved in an experienced-based learning activity in which the topic that is the focus of attention for that activity becomes the 'core' of the whole process. In the example, students experience how to write slowly or how to pass a paper quickly, by performing the "commands". At the same time, and for some of them in a more conscious way, they are listening to information which is both exemplifying and explaining what they are doing. Finally, when they reflect on what they have just done, they come up with individual and combined explanations that would possibly result in a shared understanding of what adverbs of manner are.

According to Woodward (2003), the advantages of loop-input are that

... it is multi-sensory, in just the same way as experiential learning, but with the added advantage of involving self-descriptivity and recursion, both of which can have the effect of fascinating certain people. Some participants thus learn more deeply because of this reverberation between process and content.





There must be a pace of time for participants to debrief their views on the whole of the activity, including how it is paced, the resources it employs, its content, and their direct involvement in the activity (ibid.). This process, applied in teacher education, enables trainees to become aware of the steps that shape the activities in a session, workshop, module, or course based on loop-input theory. The more these types of activities are 'rehearsed', the better the trainees get to understand and apply them as part of their own teaching.

Cullen (1994) propounds the view what loop-input "clearly goes some way towards overcoming [time constrains when using 'loops'], since it seeks to combine language improvement and methodology and make it one component". This argument represents another important reason fer this proposal to be based on loop-input.

After understanding in a better way what EBL and loop-input are, and more importantly, how the latter works, the following design describes a set of workshops destined to help teachers to increase their language proficiency and their knowledge of current pedagogical approaches.

Deciding on the activities/tasks

According to Ellis (1990) "teacher preparation activities can be described by detailing (1) the different ways in which data can be provided and (2) the different kinds of tasks that student teachers can be asked to perform". Starting from this premise, trainers are to decide which activities would best meet the target of presenting a group of tasks which promote language and pedagogical improvement through loop-input.

Ellis (ibid.) establishes that

Just as the teacher needs to draw up a lesson plan for exploiting teaching materials, so the teacher educator needs to draw up a preparation plan incorporating appropriate procedures for exploiting different teacher preparation activities.

Figure 1 Ellis' outline of teacher preparation practices

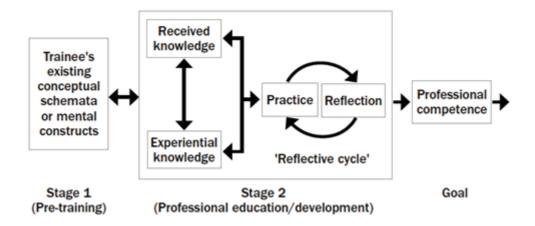






Elli's outline overlaps Wallace's reflective practice model of professional education/development (figure 2) when it comes to the procedures aimed at; in this case, raising trainees' awareness on the type of looped input they will be exposed to.

Figure 2
Wallace's reflective practice model of professional education/development



When procedures are introduced by means of loop-input, teachers are expected to ignite an internal process of reflection. Hence, this makes us realize that any time a procedure is taking place, there should be a space of time for the actions involved to be analyzed and reflected upon. In such a way, the reflective cycle of Wallace's model becomes recurrent. As stated by Downey & Clandinin (2019), "in reflective inquiry, there is a process of trying to frame a problem in order to move through the uncertain situation", which at the same time, leads student-teachers to 'move' through their own thinking to become better at analyzing and deciding how to perform during training sessions.

The following sections will concentrate on the different stages of Wallace's model to describe the activities intended to put into practice during a set of workshops. Each session is designed to apply and comply with each of those stages. A time of two hours should be allocated for each of the workshops.

Results

Pre-training stage

The key point to understand at this stage is that the teachers who will become the trainees already possess their own schemata. Those 'conceptual patterns' include, among others, 'their previous ideas and experiences as language learners, their beliefs related to teaching practice, and even their feelings. Simply, in-service teachers do not join a training course because they do not know anything. They do so because they are willing to improve. The activities chosen for this first workshop are running dictation, pelmanism, and gap







dictation.

Most teachers are familiar with these three types of activities. They may not know them by the names used here, but they surely have resorted to them at least once.

Running dictation

For this activity, a text explaining the mechanics of a running dictation activity is to be used. Depending on the number of trainees, they could be paired up or divided into small groups. One of them will serve as the secretary, and the other(s) will be the runner(s). It will always be appropriate to set a time limit far this activity, as the purpose here is to expose the trainees to their first 'looped' experience. When the allocated time has ended, they will be asked to get together in their groups, read the information they have collected, analyze it, and immediately share their views on what they think about the activity. To tum this activity into an even more collaborative one, a longer text could be used. It can be divided into smaller texts; so that members of the groups have an opportunity to exchange the information they already know and get hold of what they did not rundictated.

Pelmanism

Pelmanism is the name for the activity which involves finding matching pairs among a pack of cards. As Risnawati & Syafei (2018) state "pelmanism is one of the most adaptable games in English teaching and is just as good for adults as it is for children as young as four". The process here would involve all the trainees, divided into two groups. In this case, they will have to take tums to try to match a card that contains a picture of an action to its description. For example, a card showing the picture of a person shuffling a pack of cards could be matched with a card containing the phrase "Make sure you shuffle the cards well". The instruction here will be kept simple: find the pairs. The aim is that during the matching activity they will have to realize what is going on. When all the pairs are found, they Will be then asked to propose an order for the set of sentences so that they become part of a logical sequence. When this final step ends, it will be time for individual and shared reflection.

Gap dictation

To conclude the first workshop, and therefore the trainees 'first encounter' with loop-input, a gap dictation activity will be presented. They will be given a text on what a gap dictation activity is, of which previously several words will be removed. The trainer will read out loud the text without the gaps for the trainees to complete it accordingly. Once again, the activity will be followed by a debriefing task.





For these three activities to be successful the trainer must make sure to look for the right texts.

Received and experiential knowledge: working on language skills

This second stage will be divided into four different sessions. These will be destined to work on the development of trainee's methodological constructs on how to teach each of the language skills and sub-skills. Of course, the language improvement focus will not be set aside, since the materials and resources used for this intention will be linked to the proposed activities. One important idea is to be examined: several teachers believe that an ELT program – in most universities offering this degree – does not suffice to improve student teachers' linguistic competence. On the other hand, pre-service teachers think that the pedagogic side of programs needs to be improved (Coskun & Daloglu 2010). This sets a good starting point for this stage of the proposed workshops.

What is this about?

The workshop will begin with the following idea, to activate trainees' schemata.

When you read in a language different than yours, it is not necessary to understand every single word. What really matters is being able to understand the text, and eventually work out the meaning of new words in context.

After they read, they will be asked to reflect on two things; (1) how much they understand when given a quite advanced text in English and (2) how many times they have not finished reading a text because they found new words. Then, the group will share their opinions and will be given a text on skimming and scanning techniques. lit will be a scrambled text, so that they must work in pairs to make sense of the paragraphs and find their correct order. In the next step, they will be asked to answer the following questions

- a. What is the text you have just read about?
- b. What is skimming?
- c. What is scanning?

Up to this point, the trainees should be able to devise the 'loop' that is being used to introduce skimming and scanning techniques. Then, they will be asked to reflect on the way they 'were taught to read during their school years or in their pre-service training. Further discussion on this final reflection will be generated, views shared and towards the end of the session a space of time will be dedicated to confirming that they have understood what skimming and scanning are, and how they could adopt them as part of their teaching practice.

Work on the other skills will be carried out in a similar way, paying close attention to how previous techniques used by the trainees could be enhanced, or to how they could





take advantage of new ones.

Professional competence

When the workshops related to the development of the four skills of the language end, the exposure of the trainees to loop-input will have been quite substantial, meaning that they will have a better understanding of how this approach is applied. The final workshop will be about class observation, a technique that is deemed as an effective way to foster professional growth. This final session of the whole set will concentrate on Day's idea that "one way to... acquire action-system knowledge (information dealing with teaching and learning in general) is through guided, systematic, and focused observation of experienced second language teachers" (Day, 1990).

Why haven't I tried that?

The central activity for this workshop will be designed in such a way that the trainees can observe part of a class directly. For this to happen, a trainee will be asked in advance to volunteer and prepare a quick lesson on the topic of body language and how it influences communication. The other trainees will be divided into 'the pupils' and the observers. The pupils will follow their new teacher instructions, and the observers will be provided with different observation materials/devices. The trainer will need to go through those observation materials quickly to clarify any doubts the observers may have. This group of trainees will complete their observation forms to the best of their understanding.

When the lesson finishes, the observers will be asked to join the pupils and share with them what they were doing, and any relevant information they may have generated until then. The pupils will be encouraged to add their ideas, from a student's perspective to those of the observers. The following step will be related to the generation of feedback after observation. One of the observers will be instructed to think as a supervisor who is going to offer feedback to the observed teacher. Once more, the other trainees will be asked to pay careful attention to the way this other volunteer produces their feedback. They will make notes on any aspects they find in the way the supervisor provides the feedback. After this whole process of observation, the reflection phase will be used to elucidate the principles behind teacher observation and feedback, especially the 'dos and don'ts' that the trainees come up with based on their own experiences when observing a class and being observed.

Conclusions

• The set of workshops that is proposed in this paper is an example of how language improvement can be embedded in methodological development. One of the most important considerations before they can be carried out is that of time availability. As these sessions are destined to in-service teachers, they should happen in a time





frame which is convenient for both the trainer and the trainees. Interventions designed for teachers to improve both their knowledge of and about a language, as well as their pedagogical knowledge, should include experience-based activities given the fact that this would allow them to gain more insights about their area of practice and, at the same time, their level of competence in the language.

• It is claimed that loop-input involves the trainees in an experienced-based framework where reflection becomes crucial to attain any significant outcomes on part of the trainees. For this to happen in a more satisfactory manner, the trainer should possess a well-grounded understanding of loop-input theory.

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