



An innovative teacher training project for Lengua Inglesa students

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Abstract

How can Práctica Docente students begin to teach without experiencing the anxiety and panic which is typical of so many? An excellent answer to this dilemma is to give them the opportunity of spending a semester tutoring students who are studying English and would like individualized attention. The tutoring program at the Universidad de Quintana Roo in Chetumal, Mexico has been highly successful and very well-received. The project has gone through various stages since its inception in 1999. It was first used in a village in a non-formal educational setting with an ESP approach, next at the university as an adjunct to English classes, and most recently in a local secondary school. The program has been very well-received and has strongly contributed to the formation of English teachers in the Lengua Inglesa major. In addition, people throughout the local community, as well as at the university, have benefited greatly through personal exposure to the English language in a comfortable, intimate setting. The article focuses on the organization of the Práctica Docente program, its structure, its successes, as well as some pitfalls encountered. For anyone involved in teacher training, the accounts provided can give them some sound, tested-and-tried ideas of how to proceed with a tutoring program in Práctica Docente classes.

1. Introduction

Finding good practice teaching situations for Práctica Docente I students is a challenge. During the first semester of Práctica Docente, students feel excited about starting teaching, but they are understandably nervous since they are inexperienced and new to the field. In this course, participants have various opportunities to do micro-teaching with their classmates functioning as their “students”, but this is not the same as actually teaching English to someone who is learning the language. As professor of this course, it’s a challenge to find interesting practice teaching opportunities where students can get over their fear of teaching and see that, in fact, they do have a lot of knowledge to share. Plus, they



have the delight of discovering that they really can teach, which is a fantastic self-esteem boost and beginning step for their teaching career.

An excellent answer to this dilemma of finding good early-on teaching opportunities is to have *Práctica Docente I* students spend a semester doing classroom observations, as well as tutoring students who are studying English and would like individualized attention. Observing experienced teachers allows them to pay close attention to the various aspects of classroom teaching.

The tutoring provides them with the chance to practice-teach first in a tutoring situation without having to deal with all the issues inherent in teaching a whole class of students. According to Wajnryb (1994) “an important component of pre-service courses for language teachers is the teaching practice that trainees do either in individual lessons or sometimes in shared classes”.

2. Project History and Objective

The tutoring project began in 1999 and has focused on three different groups: 1) an ESP program for a group of nature guides in a village 2) Lengua Inglesa students at the UQROO who are in the early stages of learning English, as well as students from other majors who are taking English courses in the Centro de Enseñanza 3) a secondary school in Chetumal. The program has been a huge success in all three of these teaching environments.

The original idea behind the tutoring project was to give *Práctica Docente* students the opportunity to teach one person at a time before they had to teach an entire group and deal with classroom issues such as discipline, crowding, and hostile students. This kind of tutoring experience would also prepare them for doing one-on-one teaching which can be a good future employment option to supplement a regular teaching job.

Students have adored this experience because, for many, it is the first time they really feel like teachers. They are able to put their knowledge to work and see the results of their years of university training. They become very excited and motivated to do an excellent job, and they are able to work on development of teaching skills in a safe and comfortable environment.



The tutoring experience provides them with practice opportunities in giving directions more clearly, explaining grammar points better, correcting errors more comfortably, helping students with pronunciation problems, becoming more familiar with books and materials, planning lessons, identifying personal weaknesses, preparing themselves for teaching in front of a classroom, feeling more self-confident, and improving their own English.

The project first began in 1999 with a one-on-one tutoring program for *Práctica Docente* students to work with a group of nature guides in a nearby village, Laguna Guerrero; the goal was for these young villagers to learn ESP (English for Specific Purposes) for tourism. We went out to the village two afternoons a week for a year, and it was a wonderful experience for all involved. The *Práctica Docente* students learned a lot about teaching in a non-formal educational setting, and the group of nature guides learned some basic English and ESP which allowed them to take visitors on nature tours of their lagoon area.

Because of travel difficulties to the village, it was decided the following year that it would be better to have tutoring take place at the UQROO. There was a lot of interest in this idea as there are many students at the university who can benefit from private tutoring. The organization of this tutoring program at the UQROO has been very straightforward. At the beginning of the semester, teachers make their English students aware of this tutoring opportunity, and those who are interested sign up to participate. One tutor (*Práctica Docente* student) is assigned to one or two tutees. The tutors and tutees have an initial meeting at which they make a schedule to work together once a week during the semester.

The work during the tutoring sessions is general support and practice of what the students have been learning in their regular English classes. The sessions are not used for doing homework, but instead are used to teach and reinforce skills where students have been having difficulties. In addition, the sessions are an opportunity for natural conversation in English in a private setting. Many tutees have stated that this was the first time they ever felt comfortable speaking in English.



3. Challenges

In general the program has gone smoothly and has been highly successful. The main problem area has been that of regular attendance with the UQROO tutees. This problem originates from two causes. One cause is related to motivation issues on the part of some individuals, while the other main problem is due to busy schedules and the voluntary nature of the program. These attendance issues present difficulties in terms of continuity of teaching and enthusiasm level on the part of both tutors and tutees. The motivation issue is an important element. The program is intended to be a voluntary one; however, in some cases, teachers have told certain students that they must participate because of low grades or other learning difficulties. As would be expected, some of these individuals were not intrinsically motivated, and as a result did not regularly attend the tutoring sessions. Students who are pushed to partake are not good candidates for this program.

Although the very motivated students generally attended faithfully, even some of these individuals had attendance problems due to their busy schedules and other responsibilities. It was very disappointing for tutors to prepare a great lesson and then have their tutees not show up. Práctica Docente students and I looked closely at this problem in the fall semester of 2006, and we decided to experiment with the concept of using contracts in the hope of improving this problem. Tutees had to sign contracts at the beginning of the semester, obligating them to attend all sessions except in the case of medical or family emergencies. However, the contracts seemed to have no obvious effect as they are not legally binding; in reality they didn't affect commitment level one way or the other.

The majority of tutees did attend sessions regularly, but since others were not as responsible, more rigid rules need to be put into place in the future. In seminar discussions about this issue, Práctica Docente students suggested that perhaps in the future, tutees should lose the tutoring opportunity if they have more than two absences. A waiting list of interested individuals would allow the tutors to immediately work with another person should their tutee fail to adhere to the attendance rule.



4. Public School Community Aspect

During the fall semester of 2007, something very innovative was done: the tutoring project entered the community of Chetumal. The idea came from a former Práctica Docente student who had participated in the first tutoring project in 1999. She is now teaching in a local secondary school, and she inquired to see if we could begin a tutoring project in two of her classes. With over forty students in each group, she wanted to do something special to spice up these large classes, as well as offer remedial help at the same time. She said she was looking for a way to give her students special attention, particularly in the areas of speaking and writing. English is mandatory, but most of her students have no interest in learning the language. This situation seemed like an excellent opportunity to explore various changes in the tutoring program.

One change was the number of tutees assigned to each tutor. In the fall 2007 semester, there were 30 Práctica Docente I students working with a total of 87 secondary school students, with one tutor assigned to two or three tutees. Therefore, in the case of the absence of a tutee, the tutor did not go to the session in vain. This helped to keep the motivation level of the Práctica Docente students high. In addition, because the sessions were held during regular class hours at the secondary school, there was no problem with missed sessions.

Another issue with tutoring at the UQROO has been that students have had trouble finding a good place to do their tutoring. The library is a quiet space, the cafeteria is crowded and noisy, and there are rarely empty classrooms available for use. The issue of location was easy at the secondary school because the sessions took place during the two regular Friday afternoon class times, with half of the groups meeting in the classroom, and the other half in the library.

Extending the tutoring program into the public school system has been an exciting and very well-received challenge. It is gratifying to see the results of offering this service in a secondary school setting where positive seeds of language learning need to be sown. Everyone enjoyed the experience, and the English level of the tutees improved, as was evident by higher test scores and



more positive attitudes towards the language. The teacher at the secondary school reported that the students looked forward to their Friday tutoring sessions with great enthusiasm. They thought it was “cool” to spend an hour every week with a university student. The sessions were fun with a lot of good activities planned so that the teenagers had the opportunity to really enjoy using English. The *Práctica Docente* students appreciated the opportunity to work in a public school, with all the problems inherent in secondary school teaching. They learned a lot, and met the challenge with great enthusiasm. It helped them to recognize their importance not only as teachers of English, but also their significance as role models for young people. As Douglas Brown states (1994), it is important to realize that “you are not merely a language teacher. You are much more than that. You are an agent for change in a world in desperate need of change: change from competition to cooperation, from powerlessness to empowerment, from conflict to resolution, from prejudice to understanding.”

5. Evaluation

All *Práctica Docente* students are required to hand in a reflective journal and lesson plan for each tutoring session. The lesson plans are helpful for them to focus on structuring of lessons, timing of activities, and researching effective activities to supplement the books the students use in their classes. Reflective journals are excellent tools through which the tutors can reflect on what worked well and what didn't, as well as identify areas they need to work on. Through their reflections, many discovered that they had trouble giving clear and concise grammar explanations. As a result, they put a lot of effort into improving this skill and saw great improvements in this regard throughout the course of the semester.

The final tutoring project requires a presentation during the *Práctica Docente* seminar in which tutors outline all aspects of their tutoring work, including students' level and difficulties, types of activities done, resources used, and problems faced. They also summarize areas which they have improved upon and those which they need to continue to work on. This type of experiential sharing in the seminars is extremely useful.



Students have overwhelmingly found the experience to be exciting, gratifying, and fun. They report that not only is it excellent preparation for real-life teaching, but it also is a big self-esteem boost for them. Hopefully the program will continue to expand and grow. All three teaching situations (village, UQROO, and secondary school) have worked out very well. Perhaps the tutoring situations will vary year to year so that different segments of the local and university community can have the opportunity to receive this kind of help in their English learning process. It is obviously a program which benefits all involved.

References

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Biodata

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