



Developing teaching skills through UVD

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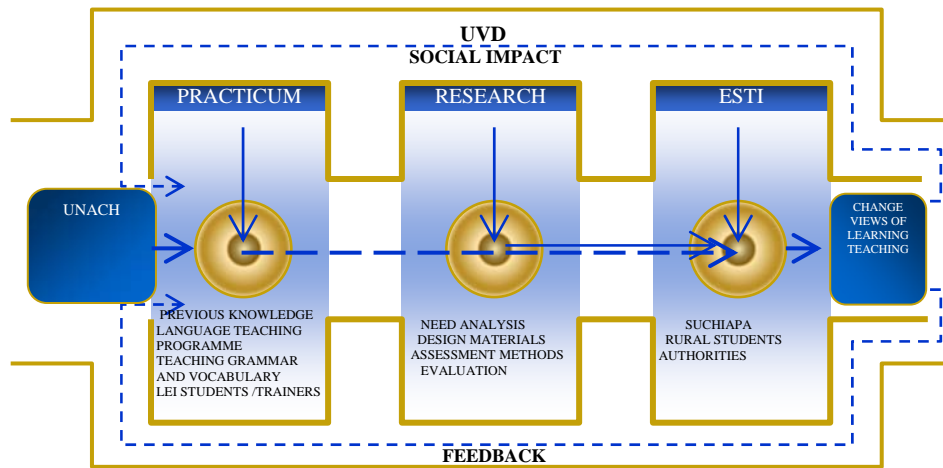
Abstract

The aim of this study is to highlight the importance of giving students the opportunity to develop their teaching skills in real contexts through Unidades de Vinculación Docente (UVD). UVDs are intended to bridge the gap between practice and theory in real contexts involving three basic elements: teaching, research and social impact. In the first section of this paper we describe the context in which the study was carried out at The Language School in Chiapas. In the second section we explain the methodology used to gather data. In the third section we analyze the data and provide comments on the findings. Finally some conclusions are drawn.

1. What are UVDs?

UVDs are considered to be a model which consists of three basic elements: teaching, research and social impact. They are the gear for professional development and a good source for getting feedback on the different courses taught at the different faculties and schools at the University of Chiapas. This model involves the participation of teachers, students, authorities, curriculum and society as agents of change. UVDs enable students to acquire, develop and use cognitive tools in authentic contexts. Learning, both outside and inside school, advances through collaborative social construction of knowledge. Next, the different parties involved in the UVD project will be described.

FIG.1: SITUATED LEARNING



1.1 UNACH Participants

In this study we linked the UVD project with the Teaching Grammar and Vocabulary course taught in the fourth semester of the Language Teaching Programme (LTP) at The Language School. A group of 17 LTP student teachers were invited to participate in the UVD project, but only 12 of them accepted the invitation. The students have already taken courses such as Introduction to Teaching, Methods and Approaches in Teaching and Observation. Therefore, they already have some theoretical knowledge about teaching and methodology. It is important to mention that none of the students had any teaching experience before enrolling in the project. In this UVD project social interaction is a vital component, students become involved in a real context which embodies certain beliefs and behaviors to be acquired. Therefore, they become more active and engaged within the culture and hence assume the role of experts.

1.2 SUCHIAPA Community

Suchiapa is situated in the north of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, 30 minutes away from the city. We contacted the authorities of the Escuela Secundaria Técnica Industrial No.74 (ESTI 74) and talked about the UVD project. We agreed to carry out the



UVD project in this particular rural high school and invite students to attend English classes in the afternoon. One of the purposes of the UVD project was to prevent students from failing their English course. Moreover, we aimed to build up in students the desire to learn English and to teach them the English culture. First, second and third grade students were involved in the project, their ages vary between 12 to 17 years old. Parents of high school students were also invited to a talk given by the UVD team about the importance of English nowadays. In the talk a play called “Peter and the Wolf” was presented by fourth semester LTP students, the aim of this was to show parents what their children could be able to do if they attended English classes in the afternoon. The high school facilitated five different classrooms for the English classes.

1.3 The Course: Teaching Grammar and Vocabulary

The aim of the course is to draw student’s attention to the importance of teaching grammar and vocabulary effectively in the language classroom and to expose LTP students to different approaches and techniques to teaching grammar and vocabulary. In order to fulfil this objective it is important to place student teachers in real situations. Knowledge, to be meaningful, needs to be presented in authentic contexts, situations which would normally involve that knowledge.

1.4 Authorities and Staff

One of the primary purposes of this UVD project was to stimulate student teachers, students and school staff to conduct short-term teacher education activities. Therefore, teachers and authorities from the University of Chiapas and from the ESTI 74 were involved in the planning of the UVD project. Some changes were done based on the rural high school needs and finally an agreement was signed by the two different parties. The UVD team consisting of 20 participants, 12 LTP student teachers, 2 LTP teachers and 6 staff members from the ESTI 74 started working twice a week (Tuesdays and Thursdays) from January to July 2008.



2. Methodology

This study is based on three stages: a pre-test, treatment and a post-test. The pre-test consisted of a semi-structured interview to get information about LTP students' reasons for participating in the UVD project. Moreover, LTP students were asked to decide on the teaching skills they would have liked to develop. During the treatment a variety of activities were carried out, these activities consisted of carrying out needs analysis, lesson planning, material design, small group discussions, practicum, dialogue journals and self-reflection sessions. The post-test consisted of a questionnaire for student teachers to verify if they had developed the skills they had proposed in the pre-test stage. Moreover, student teachers were asked to share their proposals for improving the UVD project and how these improvements could help them develop their teaching skills. The data gathered was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The aims that we intended to achieve are as follows:

2.1 Aims

- To let student teachers integrate the theory taught through the course into practice in real contexts
- To develop or improve their teaching skills through practicum
- To motivate rural high school students in attending English classes and learning English.

Student teachers were in charge of promoting the UVD classes by doing the following activities: the first action taken was the visit of student teachers to every classroom at the ESTI 74 to invite students to attend the English classes every Tuesdays and Thursdays. The second action was to design a flyer and go downtown Suchiapa to promote the UVD classes. The final step consisted of talking to the high school parents, in a meeting, about the importance of learning English. In the same meeting LTP students also presented a play called "Peter and the Wolf."

Student teachers carried out the needs analysis to find out high school students' level of English and needs, to design didactic and authentic material, to



design the English course, to design assessment methods and to organize cultural events with the school community. Student teachers designed a diagnostic exam to know students level of English and to identify problematic areas. They also talked to the academic coordinator and to the teachers who teach English at the high school to get information about the typical problems students face. Finally, student teachers revised the secondary school official programmes and write final versions.

In this study student teachers were also asked to keep a dialogue journal and to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in teaching. In the first entry they selected areas for improvement, since they were going to teach high school students *in situ* it was important to focus on the areas they wanted to improve. Dialogue journal served as a means of communication between LTP teachers and student teachers, a way to check on their performance and provide feedback.

Student teachers wrote informal lesson plans, they had to spend some time planning their lessons and designing material for the classes given, according to their students needs. All the lesson plans were supervised by the teacher who was teaching the course. The lesson plans resemble the issues learned in the Teaching Grammar and Vocabulary Course. Moreover, student teachers were also observed while carrying out their lesson and some feedback was provided.

Here are some of the activities that student teachers had to carry out:

- Promote the UVD classes
- Select areas for improvement in their teaching and work on them
- Carried out needs analysis
- Wrote an English program
- Write lesson plans
- Design material
- Write a dialogue journal
- Use of assessment method
- Reflect on their teaching



Throughout the seven months of study we could find many benefits for all participants involved and the UVD project proved to be a successful way to develop teaching skills.

3. Interpretation of Data

In this section, we analyzed three stages through the process of the study: pre-test which is measured through an interview, treatment which measured through peer-teaching, observation, group discussions and a reflective dialogue journal and the use of dialogue journal, finally the post-test stage which is measured through a questionnaire administered.

3.1 Pre-test

Twelve students were interviewed individually to know about the teaching skills that they wanted to develop through practicum. During the interview, each student wrote in a piece of paper their weaknesses in teaching and explained why they needed to improve those skills. In the following chart, we describe those teaching skills:

TEACHING SKILLS	TIMES MENTIONED BY STUDENTS
Designing or using visual aids	11
Organizing students in group work	1
Experimenting with new approaches	5
Identifying students' interests and problems, ability to improvise	10
Fostering learning environment, inspiring trust, encouraging students	12
Explaining difficult concepts and giving instructions	4
Timing and monitoring	5

FIG 2: Skills given by student teachers

Most of the students wanted to develop skills related to lesson planning or classroom management. In the chart 12 students said that they wanted to foster learning environment, establishing rapport to encourage students. 11 students mentioned that they wanted to develop how to design and use visual aids in class. 10 students said that they wanted to identify students' needs and how to improvise in the classroom. 5 students wanted to work on timing and monitoring activities as



well as experimenting with new approaches, 4 students said that they wanted to learn how to explain difficult concepts and how to give instructions.

According to Wright (2005:277) *“Learning to manage classroom is a major challenge for beginning teachers, and incorporates emotional /affective, cognitive and social demands. It may also involve a struggle between the notions of classroom management accumulated through experience and those advanced by teacher education programme.”* Even though that in our Language Teaching Programme students teachers have learnt how to manage a classroom, they were aware that managing classroom with rural teenagers was going to be a challenge. Similarly, Tsui (2003:23) states that “planning is considered the most important thinking process in which teachers engage.” We agree with this author because teaching and learning are based on teachers’ beliefs of what and how to teach the lesson.

3.2 Treatment

Students were organized in pairs to work together (peer-teaching) so that they could help each other planning lesson, designing or adapting material, teaching and reflecting about their lessons. Students were supervised by two trainers who helped them do needs analysis. The information was helpful to know students’ interests, level of English, and their needs. One of the main advantages of working collaborative LTP students and trainers was to help and learn each other. According to Wajnryb (1992:11):

“In the place of the more traditional role of ‘helper’ and ‘recipient’, we are seeking a role relationship that is collaborative and consultative. The teacher is considered a co-investigator or co-explorer in the language classroom”.

In the language classroom both student teachers had to take decisions to know if the class was good or they had to change the activities. They shared their feelings and attitudes and they learned to work together.

We also agree with Menges (1985:181) who says:

“Collaborative work probably should include opportunities for faculty to learn how to teach more effectively, to practice new teaching techniques and approaches, to get regular feedback on the classroom performance, and to receive coaching from colleagues” (Menges, 1985:181).



As it was mentioned before, the lessons were coached by two trainers who helped with materials, tips to use in class and solved unexpected problems. During practicum, LTP students were observed twice through seven months to ensure that they were working on the skills that had decided or they needed to improve other skills. As Kagan (1992) has put it novice teachers become aware that their knowledge and beliefs about classroom are changing. Through teaching in real classes they could reflect if what they learnt in their Language Teaching Programme was useful in real life bringing the gap between theory and practice, confronting their beliefs in teaching and learning and making sense of what they are doing.

3.3 Dialogue journal

Student teacher were asked to write after each class an entry reflecting on what they liked about their class, if they faced any problem, how the problem was solved or what actions they were going to take for improving the lesson.

This instrument was used as a dialogue between trainers and LTP teachers. According to Peyton (2000:1) Dialogue Journals are “*written conversations in which a learner and a teacher write regularly (e.g. weekly) in a journal which the teacher responds to.*” Reflection involves analysis of attitudes and beliefs which affect decision-making and actions. We present some excerpts from Student teachers’ dialogue journals below:

“At the beginning of the class ...a little bit nervous because there were only 2 students, but then 2 more students arrived and we did our class with four...”
[unexpected event]

“...I feel worried because students are real beginners...they have much to learn and I have a little time to teach them and cover the program, which is very ambitious...”
[content of syllabus and aims stated]

“As a teacher... I hope to give students enough space o think on their own...”
[autonomy in learning]

“I felt really pleased ...we spoke most of the time in English. Just a brief explanation was done in Spanish.”
[Beliefs in the use of L1 in the classroom]

“I think that we had some problems with the distribution of the space on the board, time settings and lack of participation in the beginning...I am glad that in



the end the students started producing grammatically correct sentences on their own.” [use of board, timing, language accuracy]

“I didn’t have too many problems to get the instructions, but they had difficulty to work as a team.” [organizing teamwork, learning environment]

We wrote in brackets possible categories for the problems that students were facing such as dealing with latecomers, students who miss classes, timing, trying to cover the syllabus, beliefs in the use of Spanish in the classroom, among others. Through discussion face to face and conversations through dialogue journals we noticed what Maynard and Furlong (1993) say about student teachers’ development. The stages will be explained below:

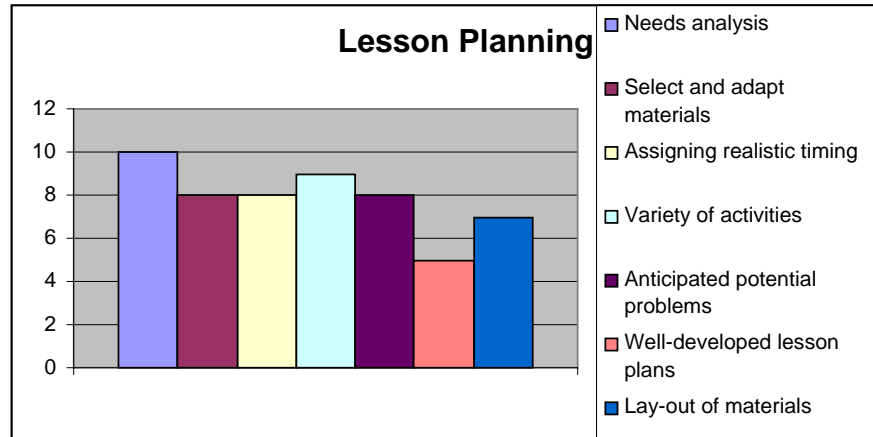
- *Stage 1* (early idealism) strong identification with students; often hostile to class teacher; clear image of themselves as teachers.
- *Stage 2* (survival) Focus on class controls and management, ‘fitting in’ and establishing self as teacher in school; trainee can’t see-tendency to go for tips.
- *Stages 3* (recognizing difficulties) becoming sensitive to multiple demands, keen for assessment -‘How am I doing? Focus on methods and materials often referring to ask of materials and resources.
- *Stages 4* (hitting the Plateu) Novice has found a way of teaching that works.
- *Stage 5* (moving on) experimenting looking at ss needs

We noticed how LTP students were becoming more autonomous in their classes, overcoming at the beginning difficulties, but they were more confident of their teaching at the end.

3.3 Post- test

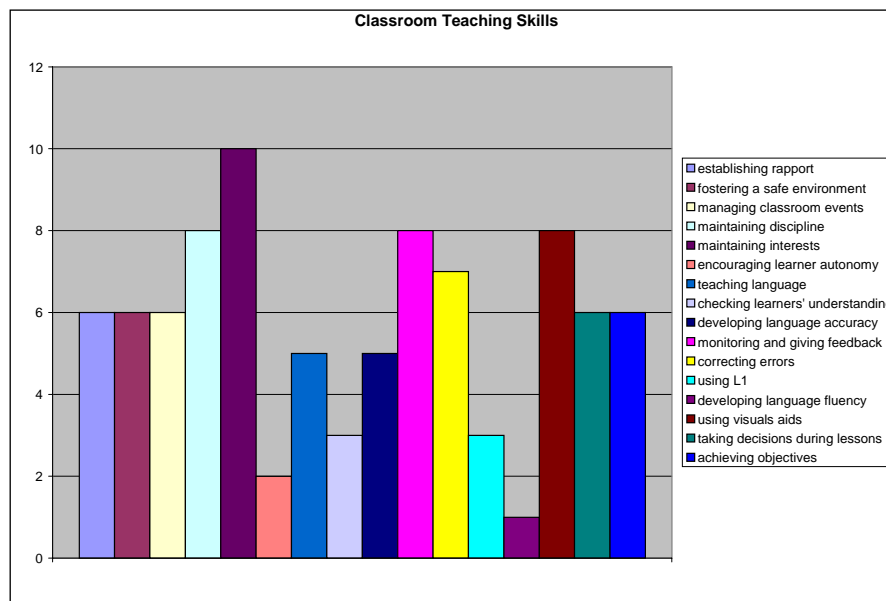
After finishing the course in Suchiapa, students were asked to answer a questionnaire in which they had to mark which skills they though they have developed and how they developed them. The questionnaire also has a question about their experience in teaching in real classes. 12 students said that it was the first time to work with real students. Then, the teaching skills were divided in four categories such as the following: Lesson planning, classroom teaching skills,

evaluating the lesson and use of English. In the following graph 1 we show their answers.



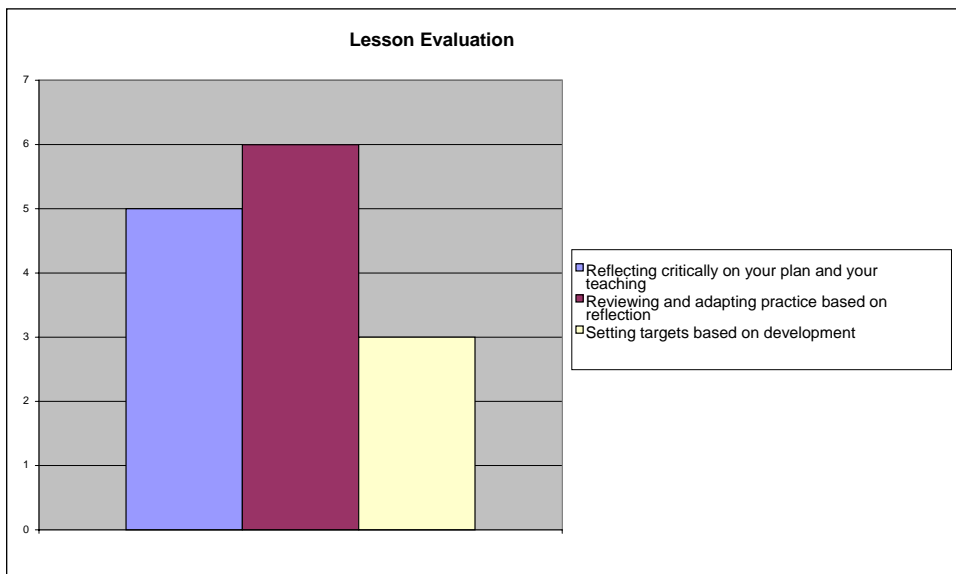
Graph 1: Lesson Planning

10 students said that they learned how to gather information from students' interests and needs. 9 students said that they worked in timing and 8 students they learnt how to use variety of activities and how to design materials as well as they learnt to be aware of anticipated problems in the class and 5 students they learnt to develop lesson plans. According to Tsui (2003:23) "*the decisions that teachers make when planning have to do with mostly activities, teaching strategies, and content. Only a small proportion has to do with objectives.*" Student teachers were aware that their activities needed to be designed or adapted depending of the level of the students and the cultural background since they lived in a rural community in which there are cultural aspects to be respected.



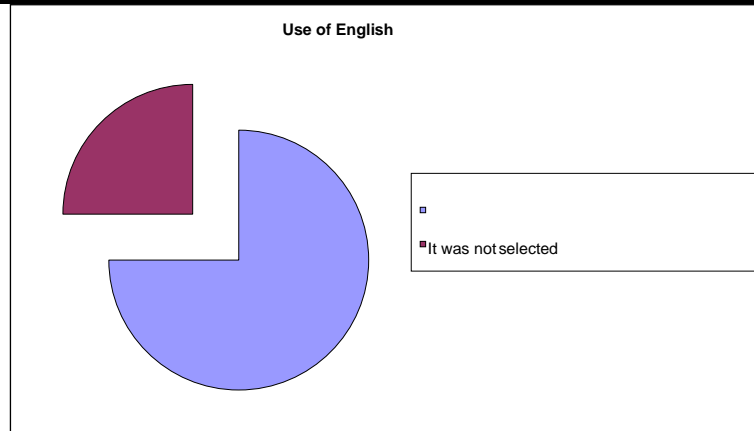
Graph 2: Classroom Teaching Skills

10 students said that they learnt to maintain students' interests, 8 students said that they learnt to maintain discipline, to monitor and give feedback and use visual aids in class. 7 students learnt how to correct errors. 6 students said that they developed how to establish rapport, foster a learning environment and maintain classroom events, similarly they learnt how to take decisions during the lesson and to achieve learning objectives, 5 students said that they also learnt how to teach language and develop accuracy, 3 students said that they checked students' understanding and the use of L1, 2 students said that they encourage learners' autonomy and 1 student said that he developed language fluency. Wright (2005:147) mentioned that *"difficulties in motivating schoolchildren (particularly adolescents) have, however, led to a reappraisal of the relationship between order and care domains in classroom life."* LTP students were aware of the importance of the affective dimension to create a learning environment and solidarity between Suchiapa learners and them.



Graph 3: Lesson Evaluation

6 students said that they reflected critically on their plan and their teaching, 5 students said that they reviewed and adapted practice based on reflection and 3 students said that they set targets based on their development. Tsui (2003:63) states that *"...teachers have their personal conceptions of teaching and learning, which are influenced by their personal life experience, beliefs and values, their disciplinary training, their teaching and learning experiences, and their professional training, if they have any."* Through real classes, LTP students were able to reflect on their beliefs and change their teaching.



Graph 4: Use of English

9 students said that they learnt how to use English in the classroom and 3 students did not mention anything about if they improved their English. Although there are beliefs on the use of Spanish in the classroom, we notice that LTP students use English in the classroom mainly routines language.

4. Conclusions

During the UVD project we faced some obstacles that caused some drawbacks. One of the problems was that the number of students attending English classes in the afternoons lowered due to the lack of money for transportation. Most ESTI students have parents with no permanent jobs and their salary is very low. Therefore, in some occasions students could not commute from their houses to the ESTI School. A second problem was the two different calendars ran by the two parties, on the one hand ESTI had more days off in the term January-July 2008. For instance, two- weeks off in March plus the Fair in Suchiapa gave us a total of one month off. Therefore, some students dropped afternoon English classes. A third problem refers to the lack of communication from the ESTI authorities, this caused that in many occasions high school staff was not available to talk about everyday school matters such as nonattendance of students and tape recorders availability. Working collaboratively is not an easy issue, but in the whole the UVD project proved to be a successful means to develop teaching skills.

Even though there were constraints, we could reach our aims stated. Student teachers are interested in keep participating in UVDs projects. Suchiapa learners want English courses from Monday to Friday and more time, Suchiapa authorities are willing to participate the whole school term, parents are glad that



UNACH offers this kind of projects; Suchiapa students are passing their English subjects at Suchiapa Junior High School.

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Biodata

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