



## A reflective teaching practice experience: a case study

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### Abstract

This paper aims to share an experience of how students, future teachers of English from the BA in English Language Teaching (ELT) at the Universidad Autónoma de Hidalgo carry out their “teaching practice”. Teachers were interviewed as well as the Coordinator of the English Department at ICSHu (Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades) The results reveal that the teaching practice process needs to be modified in order to achieve its aim.

### INTRODUCTION

The BA in ELT is a four year –eight semesters-, full time undergraduate degree programme offered by the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo (UAEH) at the Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades.

This degree programme is designed to help meet the growing demand for English language teachers at the State of Hidalgo. The English Language Teaching programme content will provide future teachers of English the knowledge and understanding of the various theoretical and practical issues that impact upon the field of language learning and teaching. Due to the nature of the programme a strong emphasis is given to the Teaching Practice Courses which start in the second year of the ELT pathway. The student practitioner (SP) learns how to plan a lesson and to put it into practice by means of microteaching sessions. Microteaching is a technique used in the training of teachers, in which different teaching skills are practiced under carefully controlled conditions (Richards et al: 1992). These sessions are closely supervised and assessed by the course tutor. However in the seventh semester SP must teach a 50 min. lesson to *real students*.



This means that they have to *borrow a group*; feedback is provided by the teacher in charge of the borrowed group; who becomes a lesson observer. This teaching practice can either be carried out at the same university, since 1993 English is a compulsory subject that has to be included in all the undergraduate taught programmes at the UAEH, or at any prestigious school/university/language centre as long as they are recognized by the UAEH. Due to practical reasons the majority of the SPs decide to carry out their teaching practices at ICSHU. That is to say, students' practitioners must teach students from the other BA programmes; as it can be predicted not always students like to be taught by other students, and it is precisely a last semester experience that will be described in this paper.

## BACKGROUND

El Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades offers eight undergraduate degree programmes including the BA in ELT:

- Derecho –Law-
- Ciencias Políticas -Political Science-
- Comunicación -Communication-
- Educación -Education-
- Sociología -Sociology-
- Trabajo Social -Social Work-
- Historia de México -Distance Programme-

Last semester a rumor was spread among a group of students from a BA who felt that the lesson/s taught by the students' practitioners was not benefiting them in their learning process; a claim hard to believe as SP must teach a maximum of two lessons per semester.

One of the main concerns of ICSHU's authorities is to maintain its educational quality, as a result the head of the Educational Board at ICSHU conjointly with the Curriculum Administrators involved, appointed a committee in

order to find out what was really happening; my colleague and I formed part of the committee. Due to time constraints and informal investigation was carried out. We believe that further study has to be done in order to find out to what extent the teaching practices benefit students from the other BAs as well as to the SP.

## PROCEDURE

The first step was to set up a meeting with all the members of the committee, in fact it was an informative meeting to inform the parts involved about the aims, learning outcomes, principles and the criteria under which the seventh semester teaching practice operates.

### ***The aims of the Teaching Practice seventh semester course are***

- To allow students' practitioners approach a real teaching situation under supervision
- To provide them with an opportunity to try out teaching techniques
- To provide them with an opportunity to have their teaching evaluated and constructively criticized
- To provide them with an opportunity to reflect on the taught lesson.

### ***Learning outcomes***

- To be aware of the factors that aid and impede learning in the classroom
- To be in control of basic classroom management skills
- To be able to plan a lesson
- To be able to use activities and materials that develop language skills
- To be able to think critically and reflectively about their own lessons

***The principles*** that underline this course follow the *experiential learning cycle*. According to various authors, among them Scrivener J. (2003) the process of learning often involves five steps:

1. Do
2. Recall



3. Reflect
4. Conclude
5. Prepare

Under this scheme (1) stands for *doing something*; (2) *recalling what happened* (3) *reflecting on that*; (4) *drawing conclusions* (5) *using those conclusions to inform and prepare for future practical experience*. In other words the experiential learning cycle offers SP the opportunity not only to teach a lesson but also to reflect on what happened and to be able to come up with some kind of conclusions in order to make changes or innovations if necessary to the initial lesson plan.

### ***Criteria for carrying out the teaching practice***

Prior to teaching a *real class* the tutor of the teaching practice course, the student practitioner, conjointly with the head of the English Department at ICSHU and the teacher whose group will be taught by the SP carry out a pre-observation meeting. The aim of this pre-observation meeting is to agree on the date and content of the lesson to be taught. We would like to point out that the content of the lesson is the same as the one the teacher has planned at the beginning of the English course and the teacher has the right to tell the SP what skill to practice or what to do. In other words, SP must not interfere or alter the syllabus content of the English course.

As a second step the SP prior to teaching the *real class* puts into practice the content of the lesson he/she has planned by means of a peer teaching session (Gower et al: 1995). The SP must write a detailed lesson plan which has to include:

- The aim/aims of the lesson, a description of what is to be achieved at the end of the lesson;
- The activities and procedures to be used to achieve the aim/s of the lesson and the order and procedure to be followed and
- The materials and resources to be used



The teaching practice tutor provides corrective feedback and grades this teaching session. Once this procedure is carried out, the SP is ready to teach the *real class*. The SP teaches the same class to the *real students* taking into consideration the feedback as well as the lesson plan adjustments, if necessary recommended by the Teaching Practice Course Tutor. This teacher preparation practice falls under the category of *experiential practice* (Ellis quoted in Richards:1990). That is to say, this practice occurs when student teachers are required to teach students in real classrooms.

Under this scheme, the teacher in charge of the group assumes the role of lesson observer. The observer sits in during the entire lesson, taking notes of the goals set at the pre-observation meeting. In order to record the lesson events, the observer makes use of an observation scheme provided during the pre-observation meeting (Appendix 1). The observer does not intervene during the lesson, unless he/she considers the need to do so. In other words the observer has the freedom to intervene at any stage of the lesson.

The observer and the SP hold a post-observation meeting immediately after the lesson is over. Feedback is provided in the most objective manner as possible; the observer tries not to be judgmental. The observer written comments are included in the classroom observation scheme -checklist- (Appendix 1).

The SP has to submit to the course tutor a written report subsequently to the taught lesson. This report is mainly a *reflection report*, (Richards and Lockhart: 2006) that is to say SP perception of the taught lesson.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to gather data for the investigation, the following research techniques were made use of:

- Interviews. Semi-structured interviews (Appendix 2)
- Classroom observation scheme –checklist- (Appendix 1)



- Written reports

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to collect data from school authorities and teachers' involved in the Teaching Practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted because we wanted to know their perceptions and learn from their experiences of having SPs in their classrooms; as a result we wanted to encourage the interviewees to freely express their opinions. An interview schedule was prepared (Appendix 2) (Wallace: 1998).

### ***Classroom Observation scheme***

The classroom observation scheme (Appendix 1) was used in order to gather data with regard to the taught lesson in terms of its cohesion, pacing of activities, transitions, group organization and so on. Data was also collected from the observation comments written by the lesson observer. That is to say the teacher whose group was taught by the student practitioner.

### ***Written Reports***

The main aim of looking into the reports written by the student/s practitioners was to know their perceptions in terms of their beliefs and methodology as well as to compare them with the comments made by the teacher observer contained in the classroom observation scheme (Appendix 1).

## ***ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION***

Due to time constrains from the five teachers involved in this Teaching Practice, only three of them and the head of the English Department at ICSHU were interviewed; the other two teachers could not be reached.

### ***Interview schedule questions analysis***

With regard to question one related to the aims of the Teaching Practice Course; it can be concluded that the head of the English Department as well as the



teachers are partially familiar with the aims of the course. That is to say they could not fully answer question one. In addition, except for the head of the Department the interviewees have never seen the seventh semester Teaching Practice programme.

- The answers to the second question in terms of interviewees' opinions to the course aims, their comments did not throw any light to this study. It seemed to us that their responses were made in terms of their beliefs, guesses and experience as they were not familiar with the course aims.
- The procedure for carrying out the Teaching Practice Course –question 3– should be modified. The head of the English department as well as the teachers interviewed consider that they should be more involved in the complete process: *we don't feel as part of the process, only as outsiders...* (Excerpt taken from the researchers' notes).
- With regard to question four, related to the classroom observation scheme, all the interviewees concur in modifying the checklist used as classroom observation scheme. Their proposal is *that it should be more detailed as it is too open and sometimes we get lost and do not know what to record* (excerpt taken from the researchers' notes).
- The answer to question five was *No*; none of them make use of a special format to write their classroom observation report. In fact, they only write comments in the checklist (Appendix 1) provided.
- Respondents' answers to question 6 related to the criteria used for grading SP performance were very vague: *I see that's a huge problem...I see well...what I do...* (Excerpts taken from researchers' notes). Interviewees do not fully understand what is implied under the categories of: *Excellent, Very Good, Good, Enough, Not Enough and it didn't happen*. Therefore, it is difficult to grade SP performance.
- All the interviewees' answers to question seven were positive. That is to say, they all like having SPs in their classrooms



- However when we asked them: *Why do you like having a SP in your classroom?* -Question 8- They mainly hesitated and nodded but no clear answers were provided. Only one interviewee answered *that: it was a school regulation and there was nothing they could do about it.* (Excerpt taken from researchers' notes). We would like to point out that from previous experiences we have learned that some teachers do not like having SPs because they feel to a certain extent exposed to outsiders' criticisms; even if this is not the role of SPs.
- All the respondents agreed on the fact that changes should be made to the Teaching Practice Course –Questions 9 and 10. However, no proposals were made as they feel *that is one of the Programme administrator functions.* (Excerpts taken from Researchers notes).

### ***Classroom Observation Scheme (Appendix 1)***

We expected to gather data from the complete Students Practitioners population. However, we could only look into 15 Classroom Observation schemes (Appendix 1) from a group of 35 students; that is to say 45% of the whole population. The rest of the Checklists (Appendix 1) were not available due to various reasons among them, the Course Tutor told us that those Checklists were part of a portfolio to grade the students but apparently she could not find them.

We will start the analysis of this Research technique by looking at the Classroom observation scheme itself firstly and secondly by looking into the data gathered from the Checklist:

- We believe that the Checklist format (Appendix 1) should be modified in terms of the general areas of teacher concern and specific examples of concern as they are too general and do not serve as a clear guidance to the teacher observer.
- The categories used to rank SPs performance should be modified. These categories do not reflect what they mean. In addition the lack of rubrics stating what the SPs are expected to achieve as well as a clear set of grading criteria hinders both the SPs and the teacher observer from focusing on the parameters and specific issues on which the SPs will be graded.



- From the 15 Checklists analyzed under the Category of Personal Qualities just 2 of the SPs equivalent to 13% got an excellent mark; 3 out of 15 20% very good 7 good 46% and 3 20% enough.
- Under the Category of Command of Language 2 out of the 15 SPs 13% got an excellent mark; 2 very good 13% 4 good 26% and 7 46% enough.
- Under the Category of *Execution* none of the SPs got an excellent mark, 4 out of 15 26% very good, 5 good 33% and 7 enough 46%.
- With regard to the section of *Comments* the majority of the teacher observers did not write any comments. The few comments were in terms of: *Did not provide enough examples, the explanation was not clear, the activities were nice, more activities were needed* (excerpts taken from the Checklist Appendix 1). However a clear explanation was not provided.

### **Written Reports:**

The fifteen written reports analyzed follow a similar pattern:

All the SPs reports start by stating how they felt at the beginning of the lesson: *I was feeling so nervous but as the lesson progressed I felt more confident* (excerpt taken from the written reports). In fact, they mainly state their feelings and state of mind during the lesson. Just five out of the fifteen written reports 33% include some comments in terms of the activities or the lesson itself. (Excerpts taken from the written reports)

- *The students liked the activities.*
- *I think I had to provide more examples*
- *They did not understand what I wanted them to do* (2 SPs wrote this comment)
- *I think my explanation was not clear at all*
- *More practice was needed*

However, none of them provided a clear explanation in terms of the type of activities the students liked; the problem with the instructions and so on. In



addition, the reports do not contain a reflection on how the lesson progressed, how it turned out or the changes or innovations that need to be made in a future lesson in order to improve it. We expected to analyze a written reflection in terms of the lesson plan itself: aims, activities, procedure and materials; not only in terms of feelings.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that from this experience there are some key aspects to be taken into consideration so that the Teaching Practice Course Seventh semester can be improved:

- The first lesson to be learned is that sometimes curriculum administrators take for granted that other areas are familiar with each others work. That is to say, the other curriculum administrators, the head of the English Department as well as the Teachers Observers did not know the scheme under which the teaching practice is carried out. Therefore there is a need that all the participants of this process should be informed and more involved in the process itself.
- The checklist format (Appendix 1) should be modified. The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and from the Checklist itself (Appendix 1) indicate that the checklist does not provide a clear guidance to the teacher observer. This committee proposes that except from the categories of *Personal Qualities and Command of Language*, the other categories should be modified; specifying clearly general areas of teacher concern and providing specific examples of concern (Appendix 3).
- The need to come up with a set of rubrics stating what the SPs are expected to achieve as well as clear grading criteria. On the one hand these aspects will serve teacher observers to concentrate on the parameters and specific issues on which the SPs will be graded; on the other hand the SPs will have a clearer




idea of what they are expected to achieve. The rubrics should contain the following three elements:

1. the grading criteria
  2. the scale, and
  3. the descriptions of the criteria
- The Written Report should be modified. The main purpose of writing a reflection paper is to demonstrate what has been learned from the teaching experience. This experience not only involves feelings but also a reflection in terms of the teaching experience itself. Therefore SPs should be trained in order to learn how to write Reflective written reports (Richards and Lockhart 16:2006).



**Appendix 1**  
***Checklist***

*Appendix 1*

	<b>UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA DEL ESTADO DE HIDALGO</b> <b>Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades</b> <b>Licenciatura en Enseñanza de la Lengua Inglesa</b>
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Check list on Practical Teaching

Date: 21-08-07

Tick the cell according to the teacher's performance. Thank you.

Personal Qualities	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Enough	Not Enough	It didn't happen
1. Ability to establish rapport			✓			
2. Voice – Audibility, ability to project			✓			
<b>Command of Language</b>						
3. Knowledge about the subject matter	✓					
4. Correctness of structure			✓			
5. Correctness of vocabulary				✓		
<b>Execution</b>						
6. Suitability of materials for level and type of class				✓		
7. Presentation of materials: meaningful, motivating, contextualized.				✓		
8. Giving Instructions: Clear, organized, specific.				✓		
9. Eliciting techniques: involvement of ss			✓			
10. Techniques of class management.			✓			
11. Use of whiteboard: organization, size of writing		✓				
12. Appropriate organization of the class: grouping arrangement.				✓		
13. Progress through the lesson: changes in activity, pace.			✓			
14. Appropriate monitoring of students			✓			
15. Awareness and correction of errors				✓		
16. Appropriate feedback provided to students				✓		

Comments:

If you have any problem with the check list, feel free to ask

*check!*

Mentor Teacher

*[Signature]*

Teacher's Name

*Rocio Andrea Cruz Hernández*

**Appendix 2**  
**Interview schedule questions**



1. Are you familiar with the aims of the 7<sup>th</sup> semester Teaching Practice Course?
2. What do you think of them?
3. What is your opinion about the Teaching Practice course procedure?
4. What is your opinion about the classroom observation scheme (Appendix 1)  
*Depending on the interviewees' opinion ask for proposals*
5. Do you make use of a special format to write your classroom observation report in addition to the comments included in the classroom observation checklist?
6. What criteria do you make use of for grading SPs' performance in terms of the ranks of *Excellent, Very Good, Good, Enough, Not Enough and It didn't happen?*
7. Do you like having a Student Practitioner in your classroom? *This is a yes/no question which requires a follow up answer*
8. Why? *The interviewee has to support his/her answer*
9. Would you make any changes to this Teaching Practice course?
10. If the answer to this question is affirmative: What changes or innovations would you propose to this Teaching Practice course? Ask for reasons; even if the answer is negative, the interviewees should support their answers

### **Appendix 3**

#### ***Proposal of General Areas to Teacher Concern and Specific Examples of Concern***

In addition to the categories of:

- Personal Qualities and
- SP Command of Language

We believe that from the following repertoire of specific examples of concern, the course tutors should choose the most appropriate ones according to the aims of the course.

#### ***Classroom Management***

- Organization; lesson cohesion; pacing of activities, digressions, transitions from activity to activity, pair/group/class work; exploitation of unexpected or unplanned classroom occurrences.

#### ***Classroom interaction***



- Teacher-student interaction: student-student interaction, student participation, amount of teacher talk  
**Affective factors**
- Student/teacher attitudes; perceived relevance of lesson; confidence building: student attentiveness; classroom atmosphere, student risk taking, teacher encouragement and feedback  
**Use of Resources**
- Blackboard presentation, handouts, textbooks equipment (eg tape recorders and so on)  
**Teaching Techniques**
- Giving instructions, error correction; wait time, eliciting language; providing feedback, asking questions, creating information gaps.  
**Methodology**
- Teaching of reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary, fluency versus accuracy and assessment.

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#### Biodata

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