

An EFL Teacher Candidates Teaching Experience from Action Research and Intercultural Communicative Competence

Una experiencia con los candidatos a profesores de EFL en ámbitos de la investigación acción y la competencia comunicativa intercultural

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Abstract

Language teacher candidates have been experiencing their practicum through action research as a supportive path for teacher reflective practice. They are also using intercultural communicative competence lenses through art in their EFL

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classrooms in order to address diversity and make their pedagogy relevant to their school students. This paper presents an advance on a collaborative action research that addresses the questions: how can collaborative action research support teaching first experiences?, and how do teacher candidates address diversity and cultural issues in their classrooms?

Key words: action research, teacher candidates, intercultural communicative competence, teaching English as foreign language.

Resumen

Los docentes en formación han estado experimentando su práctica pedagógica a través de la investigación-acción como vía de apoyo a su desarrollo de ejercicio docente. También han usado matices de la competencia comunicativa intercultural a través del arte en sus clases de inglés con el fin de abordar la diversidad y de hacer el aprendizaje de este idioma relevante para sus estudiantes. Este artículo presenta un avance de la experiencia desde la investigación-acción. Entre las preguntas que orientan el trabajo de investigación se encuentran: ¿cómo puede la investigación-acción apoyar las primeras experiencias de enseñanza de los docentes en formación?, ¿cómo los docentes en formación abordan la diversidad y aspectos culturales en sus aulas?

Palabras clave: investigación-acción, competencia comunicativa intercultural, docentes en formación, inglés como lengua extranjera.

Introduction

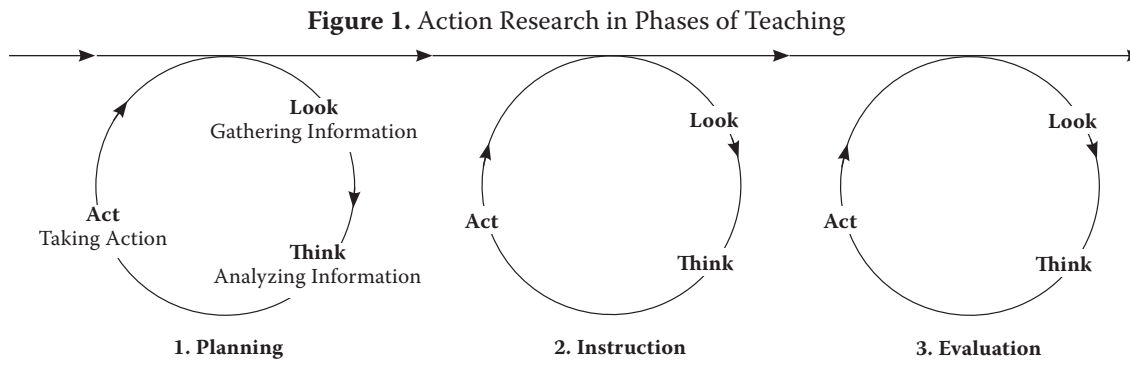
In this study is considered action research as a powerful professional development tool, one that can empower teachers to take control of their own professional development (Nunan, 2006). The main reason of the study is to strengthen the teaching skills in teacher candidates, supporting their ideas and practicum experience with processes of reflection and collaborative dynamics which empower their professional growth.

Besides, in order to support school students to increase tolerance attitudes, EFL teacher candidates from Antonio Nariño University sought to incorporate aspects of Colombian cultures and cultures from around the world into their English teaching through specific expressions of art. Thus, teacher candidates planned to play the role of intercultural mediator. According to Byram (2008), an intercultural mediator is someone who is

aware of cultural similarities and differences, and is able to act as mediator between two or more cultures, two or more sets of beliefs, values and behaviors.

This document will present the preliminary results of the experience taking into account the perspectives of the teacher candidates, their secondary school students, practicum supervisor and critical friends involved in this program. Firstly, it will be presented how teacher candidates, practicum supervisor and school students have been worked collaboratively based on action research and how it is incorporated intercultural communicative competence through art in teaching English. Secondly, it will present specific examples about how teacher candidates used students' cultural knowledge and their prior experiences to make learning more relevant to them (Gay, 2000).

Action research and lesson planning experience



Action research in Phases of Teaching

Source: taken from Stringer (2008, p. 1).

Action research has been a systematic and relevant path for teacher candidates since it supports their practice. As Elliot (1991a) states, action research improves practice practitioner’s ability to discriminate and judge complex human situations.

According to Stringer (2008), “this path, called action research, is presented as a cyclical, repetitive process of inquiry that guides the teacher preparation and instruction”. The steps presented as guide are: Look, Think, Act.

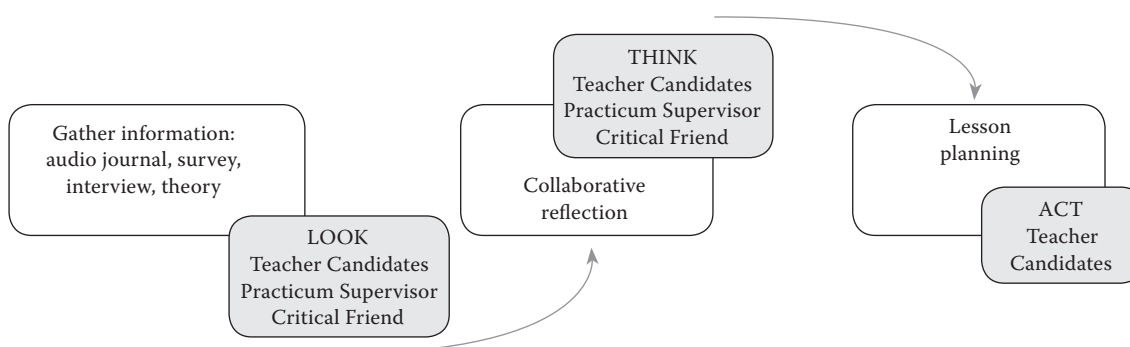
The cycle of action research in phases of teaching suggested by Stringer (2008) has been oriented during the experience by the

practicum supervisor and critical friends who support teacher candidates mainly in the two first stages (look and think).

The cycle of the experience is illustrated below:

The above framework describes how every stage of action research contributes to teacher candidates to formulate lessons and to analyze incomes in order to improve their practicum. Look stage is an individual action focused on observing and registering perceptions, reactions and feelings of school students, teacher candidates, practicum supervisor about lesson. The critical friend plays the role of scholar. In this stage, his function is to share

Figure 2. Experience cycle



Source: taken from Stringer (2008, p. 1).

with the group theories and literature related to intercultural competence. The data collection instruments are audio journals which teacher candidates and the practicum supervisor record during or at the end of every lesson and surveys or interviews applied to the school students.

The surveys and interviews to the school students are quite relevant to the process since with this instrument it was collected evidence about their reactions to the intercultural content, strategies and learning goals achieved.

Think stage is a collaborative action in which teacher candidates are assisted by practicum supervisor in terms of didactics and by a critical friend in terms of theory related to cultural and intercultural aspects. The practicum supervisor and the critical friend guide teacher candidates to analyze data collected from interviews, journals and surveys in order to plan the following lessons.

The main purpose of this collaborative action is to foster in teacher candidates the habit of a reflective practice in which could be taken into account all the aspects implicit in a lesson such as: teacher performance, learning goals, context, policies, curriculum, teaching environment, methods, strategies, resources, pupils' interest, needs, among others.

Moreover, it is required to strengthen the teacher candidates professional development in their practicum. As Burns (2015) states, collaborative action research contributes to teachers' professional development in at least three ways: first, the knowledge construction becomes both personal and collective; second, new teaching and learning practices are scaffolded and supported by others; and finally, professional confidence in ones own efficacy as a teacher is enhanced through affirmation from colleagues (p. 21).

In order to have an effective and frequent communication, teacher candidates, practicum supervisor and critical friend use apps

and virtual tools, such as: Hangouts, Whatsapp, e-mail and Google drive.

Planning lessons involve more than simply selecting a linguistic topic and create some activities based on grammar objectives. Typically, this is what pre-service teachers think before their first class experience. At this point is where action research is worth because "practicing the strategies and skills of teacher action researcher can help aspiring teachers candidates in designing their own meaningful pedagogy, shift the identity of teacher as expert to one of inquirer, and make it more difficult to take the dynamics of the classroom for granted" (Britzman quoted in Pine G. 2009).

In this case, teachers analyze how to incorporate students' cultures and foreign cultures in their classes. A successful program of learning requires careful alignment of what is to be learned with the qualities of the learner (Stringer, 2008). Although it seems an easy task, it has been a challenge since teacher candidates, supervisor and critical friend have learnt simultaneously about diverse cultures in order to propose class tasks and appropriate content for the particular teaching context.

This experience addressed the teacher candidates' practicum into a permanent reflection on their teaching performance, which main purpose is the pupils' learning rather than content. Collaborative action research also contributed to improve their practicum experience, taking into account that the main objective of action research is to improve the practice before producing knowledge. The use and production of knowledge is subordinate and conditioned to learning improvement (Elliot, 1991b, p. 50).

Stringer (2008) also remarks that action research and action learning *are parallel processes* that enable teacher and pupils to work in tandem to accomplish effective learning processes.

Art and teaching English

It is necessary to think in a paradigm shift about learning and teaching English as a foreign language, in terms of methodology, in order to acquire more efficient and significant results in the classroom. Also, there is a need to transform educational practices due to the students' needs and their educational contexts. Thus, teachers have been searching how to improve or innovate their practice according to not only the context needs but also their own attitudes in order to develop roles as educators rather than teachers.

Taking this into account, this project proposes using arts as a didactic tool for English Language Teaching (ELT). The manifestation of arts within the classroom represents a new form of carrying out educational practices and also the connection between foreign language learning with some essential components of human beings, such as the senses and the different manifestations of intelligences (Gardner, 1983). The use of arts in ELT can be taken as a new didactic tool which involves cultural aspects (aspects that everybody has thanks to the interaction with the society) and also different students' strengths in terms of management of multiple skills.

Through the use of arts "Students can be motivated to use the four language skills in

response to learning about, looking at and making art; and students should read, write, speak and listen in order to brainstorm, organize thinking and propel creations" (The New York State Education Department Office of Bilingual Education and Foreign Languages Studies, 2010). In addition, arts can be applied in order to attend to multiple students' learning styles. According to Gulay Bedir and Esra Onkuzu (2014), it is suggested that knowing how individuals think, retain knowledge and the factors affecting these processes make the learning and thinking processes easier. In this way, if we take into account how the students learn more easily we can improve our teaching process as well as attend to the students' communicative needs.

Finally, the manifestation of arts within the classroom presents many advantages, such as the easy access that everybody can have to arts (independently of its economic status, social context, etc.); and one of the most important things is that different expressions of arts (music, painting, theater, movies, literature) are part of the daily life, therefore, all the people are connected with at least one of those expressions. If we as teachers can use that connection between arts and people and also introduce the educational practices, it will be a very useful didactic tool for ELT.

Intercultural communicative competence and language teaching

Intercultural communicative competence is conceived as the speaker's ability to interact effectively with people from other cultures that he/she recognizes as being different from his/her own (Gómez, 2011). He also states that the intercultural communicative competence is the ability to cope with one's own cultural background in interaction with others. In language learning this suggests not only talking to others as a speaking exercise but also

cooperating with the others in learning and living situations.

Byram (1997) explains that success of interaction implies not only an effective exchange of information, as was the goal of communicative language teaching, but also the "the ability to decentre and take up the other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behavior" (p. 42). Some scholars

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focus their attention on disseminating intercultural communicative competence in EFL, since language learning implies to deal with their own cultural meanings as well as those from other cultural settings.

In Bogotá, as it is a cosmopolitan city, we can find people from many different Colombian cities. Those cities are part of diverse regions which have particular customs and cultural

Teacher Candidates Experiences

Most of the schools where teacher candidates do their practicum are vulnerable contexts in terms of violence, discrimination, delinquency, drug addiction among other socio-economic problems. As a result classrooms are spots of intolerance. Therefore, EFL teacher candidates decided to incorporate some cultural aspects in their practicum lessons in order to foster intercultural communicative competence and to work on tolerance and diversity awareness. Diversity is the analysis point of their lessons.

Bearing in mind the Wringe's idea (1989) of what "modern language teaching should teach (...) to encourage the welcoming unfamiliarity and accurate information and (...) the forming of balanced judgements on the basis of knowledge rather than prejudice or hostility" (pp.19-20). Thus, teacher candidates proposed the following actions for their classes:

characteristics; thus, classroom is multicultural context.

These multicultural classrooms are ignored in lesson planning by English language teachers because language teaching has been influenced by the study of grammatical forms (Gómez, 2011). Furthermore, lesson materials as ELT textbooks lack of authentic intercultural focus. Most of ELT materials are spotlighted in foreign culture information meanwhile our cultural richness is unnoticed.

The proposal of the five teacher candidates is concentrated in Colombian culture in comparison to foreign countries cultural aspects. One of the objectives is to promote meaningful learning starting from students' cultural origins. As school students tend to criticize each other, and think that foreign countries are better than Colombia, teacher candidates planned to show bizarre customs of foreign cultures in order to make school students reflect on the diversity, respect others' background and tradition.

A teacher candidate showed their students Chinese, Colombian and Italian food and work on the variety of pizzas they find in Colombia, such as Mexican, Creole, Neapolitan and sea fruits between others. She showed the cultural origin of each one and promoted in the students new recipes of pizza. Culinary arts integrate art, culture, and science. Creative culinary artists are usually imaginative, curious, sensitive, passionate, self-confident (Jeou-Shyana, 2007). Students recorded themselves and uploaded their videos on YouTube. In this experience, cooking is consider an art. As the interviews indicate, students were surprised how in Bogotá they are able to experience food traditions from diverse places outside and inside Colombia.

Another teacher candidate, who is doing his practicum with eighth graders, created a

funny roleplay which takes place at a hospital. This proposal was carried out because the students prefer drama to another sort of class activities. The school students in this activity used different regional dialects to perform the roles. Some of them talked as paisas, others as tolimenses and so on. It was interesting for

them to recognize their own dialects while talking in English.

A teacher candidate who loves music, generates for every class a musical environment based on diverse genres. He plays videos and teaches his students about the main musical instruments from diverse cultures.

Teacher candidate lesson excerpt

In the lesson plan applied, I started with a warming up that consisted in the explanation of some feelings in order to make students able to express how they feel. Then, I played some songs of different genres of music from different countries, while music was played I asked the students: "How do you feel with this music?" Students were answering based on the feelings that they learnt before. The next class activity consisted in the use of a short text; its content was about different pastimes made by people from Colombia and China. With this exercise students could learn about typical and cultural actions made by people from other country. Finally, students were working on a dialogue with information about a visit to Colombia made by a Chinese man; they had to talk with their classmates in order to get the rest of the information that they did not have in their part of the dialogue. Using these exercise students could reinforce their knowledge about other cultures around the world.

In the group of teacher candidates we can find a junior writer who loves literature. In his case, he promotes reading in his lessons. In one his lessons, he asked his school students to read Christmas texts from North America and

from Latin America. Then, school students discussed in groups about the differences and similarities of people traditions from different places of the world. In the discussion they included their families tradition at Christmas time. Conversations about issues of identity frequently lead to deeper dialogues about students' own backgrounds and the experiences of others. At the end of the lesson, EFL teacher candidate in struggle with valuing their school students' home cultures while teaching English as a foreign language asked them to write a short Christmas story including their family tradition. For this task it was necessary to clarify the concept of story (narración). As van Dijk affirms in Ferrer interview (2014): "por el contenido, una narración tiene que contar una historia sobre las experiencias personales (pasadas) de una persona". School students wrote their stories and share them with their classmates with an enthusiastic attitude.

The process of planning and implementing has not been finished. Thus, this is a partial presentation of the teaching experience faced by five EFL teacher candidates from the Licenciatura en Lengua Castellana e Inglés de la Universidad Antonio Nariño.

Partial findings

English teacher candidates recognize themselves as cultural mediators from their own experience in a multicultural class with students from different regions of Colombia. But they lack of awareness and understanding

about our own cultural diversity in Colombia.

English teachers in Bogotá deal with multicultural classes since Bogotá is the cosmopolitan and the largest city in Colombia.

School students have expressed how these classes have sparked their curiosity and openness to other cultures.

Action research process promoted teacher candidates the habit of reflective practice in

terms of students' learning. Teacher candidates feel better assisted in lesson planning because pairs and in service professors support and analyze their ideas and objectives.

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