

El aprendizaje reflexivo en la educación superior. FAREM-Matagalpa, UNAN-Managua

Reflective learning in higher education. FAREM-Matagalpa, UNAN-Managua

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RESUMEN

El siguiente ensayo informa sobre un breve estudio cualitativo exploratorio administrado a profesores de inglés en pre-servicio que tomaban la clase de lingüística. En la clase de lingüística, estudiaron un capítulo relacionado con cómo los adultos aprenden un idioma y las etapas por las que pasan. Dada la importancia de este tema, el instructor pidió a los profesores de inglés en pre-servicio que reflexionaran y examinaran críticamente su propio aprendizaje desde dos puntos de vista diferentes: mi reflexión como aprendiz de un idioma y mi reflexión sobre el aprendizaje. Este ensayo utilizó una serie de preguntas de reflexión abiertas como fuente principal de recopilación de datos y pidió a 20 profesores de inglés en pre-servicio que escribieran un ensayo de reflexión de dos páginas sobre su experiencia personal al aprender inglés. Para el propósito de este ensayo, el análisis de datos se realizó utilizando un enfoque de teoría fundamentada que involucraba la comparación de una parte de datos con otros. Ocho ensayos fueron seleccionados a través de muestreo aleatorio simple. Los resultados muestran los diferentes desafíos y estrategias que los profesores de inglés en pre-servicio han atravesado para aprender el idioma y cómo estas han cambiado a lo largo de los años. El ensayo presenta algunos antecedentes teóricos y desafíos.

Palabras clave: profesores en formación; reflexión; aprendizaje reflexivo; aprendizaje de idiomas; pensamientos.

ABSTRACT

The following essay reports on a short exploratory qualitative study given to pre-service English teachers who were studying the class of linguistics. In the linguistics class, they studied a chapter related to how adults learn a language, and the phases they go through. Due to the relevance of this topic, the instructor asked pre-service English teachers to reflect and examine on their learning critically from two different perspectives - my reflection as a language learner and my reflection on learning. This essay used a series of open and reflective questions as the primary source of data and asked 20 pre-service English teachers to write a two-page reflection paper about their experience learning English. For the purpose of this essay, data analysis was conducted using the grounded theory approach that involved comparing a piece of data with others. Eight essays were selected using random sampling. The results exposed the different challenges and strategies that pre-service English teachers have gone through so as to learn the language and how these have changed along the years. The essay presents both some theoretical background and challenges.

Keywords: pre-service teachers; reflection; reflective learning; language learning; thoughts.

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INTRODUCTION

Countless studies have shown the important role that reflection plays in the language learning. Reflection is considered a crucial tool that provides learners with opportunities to learn and examine themselves. For instance, Farrell (1999) asked a group of pre-service teachers to get in a reflective task and found that teachers could change some of their beliefs about teaching through reflections. Johnson and Golombek (2011) argued that reflection provides teachers with opportunities to rebuild their thoughts and eventually reconnect their experiences with other in order to make many changes.

However, reflection is not always seen positive by educators. Reflections can be perceived negatively and might create some type of insecurity. People rarely share their thoughts and feelings critically. They avoid being exposed to what other people think (Urdang, 2010; Walker et al., 2013). Although reflection can be seen as negative Kolb (1984) suggests that experience may serve as the bridge to the formation of new learning.

Dewey (1988) argues that learners have opportunities to reflect frequently by using reflection as a means to improve their practices. However, reflection alone will not make an improvement or change in the learner's practices. Reflection needs to be accompanied with the proper guide which provides learners with chances to examine what they do in the classroom and reflect on what they do right or wrong.

Teachers need to understand that the process of change begins when they consciously admit that there is a huge need to make changes on the way they do their practice in the classroom. Once, teachers understand the complex process of revising themselves internally, they can incorporate changes and embrace new practices (Ur, 1996).

Unfortunately, many studies have shown that teachers' beliefs do not match with their teaching practices. Namely, the set of beliefs teachers hold on their

previous experiences is not connected on how they present their classes in real learning situations (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Fang, 1996; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1998; Woods, 1996).

Research points out that when learners come to the learning environment they enter with some previous manufactured assumptions that might be a positive, or a negative aspect in their learning or as they teach in the classroom (Abraham and Vann, 1987). Some of these assumptions that learners bring with them may inhibit learners as they see techniques and strategies used in the classroom (Dole & Sinatra, 1994; Horwitz, 1985).

The objective of this essay was to identify pre-service teachers' assumptions of learning through reflection and summarize their learning experiences. This short exploratory qualitative study was conducted at UNAN –Managua, Nicaragua. UNAN – Managua is one of the largest state university in Nicaragua with a student population of 40,000 and 5 faculties in the country. For the purpose of this study, 8 out of 20 pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on a series of open-ended questions and to write a reflective essay. Participants were selected in a simple random sampling.

DEVELOPMENT

At UNAN (National Autonomous University of Nicaragua), students take five years of study to obtain their bachelor degree. These five years do not include their thesis writing. In the TEFL degree, students spend five years and take different classes related to teaching and learning English. In their fifth year, students take the class of linguistics. They study language evolution and how human beings learn languages. This class emphasizes on children and adults learning a language. While taking the linguistics class, I asked students to reflect on their English learning from their experiences as language learners and potential teachers and their viewpoint on learning. I understand students have their cumulative experience and somehow they reflect their actions. To me, students hold different beliefs of how people learn a language. These assumptions

change along their way. I will explore these two points in the following essay and make use of comments by pre-service English teachers in a reflective essay.

First, it is vital to mention that students have experiences and beliefs that they have consolidated during their educational journey from elementary, secondary and university settings. Somehow, they shape their attitudes towards teaching and learning a language. Sometimes, many of the actions, practices, and behaviors we see in the classroom is simply a reflection of what learners went through, and the different learning environments they had to face. Much of what they do in their practice is based on their experience and exposure to learning (Calderhead & Robson's, 1991). For instance, Arcenio Muñoz (preservice teacher) expressed in his reflection:

I learned English by memorizing words. The teacher had me translate sentences from Spanish into English. The teacher had me pronounce words after her. Now, I like to watch movies. I listen to music. I like to practice with other speakers of English.

The most difficult thing for me was to put words together to start a conversation. Today, I encourage people who want to learn a language to record their voice and write keywords. I am happy to know students take English at the elementary school. This event will motivate students to learn English. (see Appendix A to read his complete reflection).

In this example, it is visible, the use of rote learning which consists of memorizing material. This information is stocked in the brain through much repetition. Rote learning is a good example of a traditional way of teaching that focused on retaining much information (Li, 2005).

Despite this learner was exposed to traditional teaching methods in secondary school, it is quite interesting to notice that he recognizes in his reflection that he has changed the way he approaches learning. Although he does not mention that the traditional ways were wrong. It is noticeable that he is just doing a recount of his experience and bringing into the present.

Another example is Alba Jarquin's. She recognized in her reflection that her English teacher used traditional methods. In her reflection she expressed:

I used to memorize and translate words. Now, I prefer to read books, watch movies, videos, listen to music and practice with my friends. In the beginning, I did not want to speak because I was afraid to make mistakes. The best way to learn English is by practicing and being in contact with the language as much as possible (see appendix B to read her complete reflection).

These two examples, somehow, contradict Putcha (1999) who argued that learners are limited to the construction of new ideas if they are not connected somehow to their previous experiences. This event means learners usually turn to previous experiences to construct their present practices and actions.

Jessica Centenos' and Mayra Rodriguez' reflections are examples of how learners look back at their previous learning and reconstruct their new way to learn. They both expressed the following:

In the beginning, I used the translation technique. I think that listening to music with subtitles helped me improve my listening and pronunciation. I learn vocabulary through videos. I think the best way to learn English is by reading. I think the translation is not wrong, but it is good to use other strategies. I have fear to speak before my classmates. I am afraid to make mistakes. (Jessica Centeno)

I used to memorize the words the teacher taught in class. I repeated the words the teacher said. I remember I had to listen to audio cassettes, read dialogues and then I had to translate them. I have learned that the best way to learn is by practicing every day, listening to types of audios with different situations. When I prepare my lesson plan, I try to focus on my student's skills to give opportunities to the different learning styles. (Mayra Rodriguez)

There is no doubt that in these four examples, pre-service teachers displayed how they were taught in the past and how they have changed their attitudes to learning. In their reflection, there was a strong presence of grammar-translation method as they were

taught. In grammar-translation method, students learn grammar rules, memorize language equivalents and translate sentences into their mother tongue (Harmer, 2007).

Notwithstanding, all the participants in their reflections firmly expressed how they have changed the way they study now compared to the past. They included new ideas such as recording their voice, interaction, reading, and practice.

Second, it is crucial to mention that reflection has served as to look back on what learners have done right or wrong and retake some elements and move forward. The following three examples are part of the reflections made by three pre-service English teachers:

In secondary school, I didn't like the English class. Everything was a routine memorization of words and translate sentences into Spanish. Something I learned is to deliver my speech using my words without memorizing. I like to watch videos whenever I have free time. I think the best method to learn is by practicing daily. I think the methods used by the teachers are excellent, but we need to motivate ourselves. Leonardo Dávila

I regret having not paid attention to my teachers in secondary school. I use social networks to practice English. I learned that if I want to improve my English I have to interact with my classmates, colleagues without fear of making mistakes. I feel that the activities used by the teachers have helped me much. I like to use my dictionary when I come across words I don't know. Kelvin Tórez

I studied a course before my degree. I learned a lot of vocabulary that helped me succeed in my TEFL degree. The most difficult thing was to learn the irregular verbs. I also feel nervous when I speak in public. I think the best ways to learn English are: listen to music, watch videos, talk yourself or with a friend, and practice vocabulary. Zulema Martínez

According to William (1999), educators reconstruct their assumptions they have about learning through reflections between theory and practice. Giving pre-service teachers the opportunity to reflect on their past,

provides opportunities to shape their beliefs towards their future and impact their classroom practice.

In the examples above, the pre-service teachers illustrate how they started approaching the language and how they have changed their perceptions. Besides, there reveals how pre-service English teachers have used knowledge to reconstruct their learning. Knowledge transmission alone does not work (Jonassen, 1999).

There are huge possibilities that these pre-service teachers will be reflecting their beliefs in their teaching practice because teachers usually reproduce how they learned when they were students (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001). Some teachers believe that teaching can be rooted in the classroom influences when they were students or the relationship between teachers and students (Richards and Lockhart, 1994). It is imperative to mention that teachers were students once and this experience built their different ways to see learning. In social constructivism, learning is derived from the interaction between the actors in the group, which subsequently create learning from social interaction (Kukla, 2000). It would be delirious to think learning happens without interactions.

For instance, in one of the example, a pre-service teacher talked about how he learned English but consciously he accepted it was not correctly. He ended up proposing a method at the end of his reflection. He also included motivation as a driving force in learning. As explained by Brooks (2006) when there is a need to make things different, everyone works very hard until they find a solution to a determined need they have.

When I started learning English, I wanted to know the meaning of the words I saw. I was curious. I remember I put the meaning in Spanish next to English words. Then, I heard that it wasn't good to use this technique. Now, I study with videos. I activate the subtitles sometimes. Other times, I challenge myself to understand and decode the videos. The best way to learn English is by discovering your learning style preference and start working. Sirlem Gutierrez

I think people learn in different ways. Something that works, for some people might not work for others. The most important is that every learner recognizes his or her learning method. So, the learner may choose the appropriate activities that match their interest. Yader Cárcamo

I began learning English by memorizing dialogues. I liked to write down new words and their meaning in Spanish. When I had time, I memorized words by repeating them. I do not use the same strategies. I watch videos and read books. I like to watch conversations. Ariel Matute

Reflection can be used for further research

Many times, learners are not satisfied with their learning outcomes and teachers are not content with the results of their teaching practice. They both attempt to find alternatives. A few time, learners and teachers cease and reflect on what they are doing right or what they are doing wrong. Nunan (1990) puts forward Action research as an alternative method to diagnose classroom problems by giving educators with opportunities to explore their weaknesses and promote practical solutions. There is no doubt at all that teachers have questions regarding teaching that would like to receive answers. Wallace (1998) advises to follow these four steps to respond to some questions about teachings: collect and analyze data, reflect and implement the findings to their teaching practice. Richard and Lockhart (1994) suggested the following steps do reflection: identify a problem, resolve it, carry out an action related to the problema, identify the problem and reflect on what it is observed. Many times, teachers perceive a problem in the classroom which can be taken as to start an initial reflection and followed by a plan to improve the issue.

In closing, it is significant to provide learners with opportunities to reflect on their previous crucial aspects of learning. Their experiences are many times set aside. Learners usually reflect when they see themselves in the mirror or given the opportunity and avoid repeating the same mistakes. As shown above, research points out reflection as a tool to give meaning to the experiences and learning of new knowledge.

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APPENDIX A

Arcenio Antonio Muñoz López Linguistics_2019. Reflection

Learning English has been an intrinsic motivation which I started learning English by memorizing isolated words when I was in first year of secondary school. So, considering I was a good student in the English subject, by having good grades, and by having learned several English words. This motivated me to go on and sparked interest for learning the English language. Therefore, to continue learning more, it was necessary to use some learning strategies which were: translate the meaning from English into Spanish, listen and write the pronunciation while the teacher pronounced the words, memorize and spend time to learn the given vocabulary. The learning strategies I use now are different. I watch videos, listen to music, read and practice with other people who can speak English.

While I was learning English, everything was a little difficult, but the most difficult thing I faced was how to link words to start conversing with someone. On the other hand, as there were difficult things, also there were easy things to carry out, but the easiest things I faced while I was learning was to arrive on time in

the English subject. However, as everything was not a piece of cake, I used some strategies to overcome the difficulties which were: look for help with other students when I didn't understand the class, I had to borrow a dictionary when I had doubt of the meaning of a word, and once in a while I used to ask to the teacher what the meaning of the word was. My challenge today as an English learner is to expose myself to the language as much as possible, face the fear, make mistakes and overcome the different difficulties.

In my point of view, the best way to learn English is by using technological aids as: watch videos with subtitles, to listen to music with lyric, to read and try to interact with others in the target language. As an English learner, I encourage to those people who want to learn a second language to do: repetition of words, use voice recording and write key words may be on the wall or in a visible part of the house. So in this way, learners can remember and keep in mind the words, as the same way teachers can provide students critical thinking exercises, get them to interact with physical objects and make them solve puzzles. So, student can learn a lot, and the kind of learning styles I discourage in learners are: not to memorize words, not to translate sentences, vocabulary or paragraph from English into Spanish.

Nicaraguan students can be successful English learner by starting studying at a very early age. Besides, they can be successful English learner if the English language was implemented in the primary school. So, students would feel more motivated to learn a second language. Receiving the English language, learners of Nicaragua can improve the English by putting aside the fear of making mistakes and taking the risk of interacting with the environment.

After becoming good English learners, they can become good English teachers, but for being a good English teacher is necessary to have the following qualities such as: develop self-confidence on students, incorporate good communication skills, be disciplined and take the responsibilities as a teacher and guide. In addition, teachers can help Nicaraguan students learn

English through motivation as a main point, in order encouraged students through the different activities in the classroom and interaction with students in the target language.

The teaching methods teachers should implement in the classroom are: games, songs, roleplay and ask them to interpret abstract visual information. The advices I would give to a new high school English teacher are: get ready to face a big challenge. Second, prepare the lesson plan with many interactive activities and most of the time try to speak only English during the class. At present day most of the students have difficulties in learning a foreign language, perhaps is the way in what teachers teach, the lack of motivation or by the lack of presenting teaching materials during the lesson. Therefore, the things need to be changed to improve the English teaching in Nicaragua. Finally, do not continue using the traditional way in the teaching, increase the English subject time and use visual teaching materials during the class.

Note: This reflection was written by Arcenio Muñoz, a student of the linguistics class. His reflection is shared under his consent.

APPENDIX B

Alba Senelia Jarquín 2019

Linguistics

Personal experience learning English

Nowadays, a lot of low level English learners think that the fastest way to improve is to study in a high level class. They think that they will be learning a higher level of English and will therefore become high level. This is a big mistake, because learning a new language is a process that requires time and start with a simple step to get a good learning level.

I started learning English at secondary school and I really liked it. I remember that, I was always happy in the English class, participating in the activities and I got good grades in that class. When I was in eleventh grade I got a scholarship to study Communicative English for six months.

After that, I decided to study English as a career for three reasons. The first was because I believed that learn a new language would be a good opportunity in my life to know other cultures, interact with other people and get a good job. The second was, many of my family members are teachers, that is why I am a teacher too. I thought that teaching English would be fantastic and I was not wrong. The last reason was, my secondary school teacher. He was one of the best teachers that I had. I liked the way he spoke, the strategies he applied to teach. He was fun and I wanted to be like him.

When I began to study English I used to translate word by word and I used the memorization. This took me many hours and I could not learn much. But now, I prefer to read books, watch movies, videos, listen to music or practice with my friends. One of the most difficult things I faced when I started learning English was face my fear of making mistakes. I did not want to speak English because I believed that I could mispronounce the words or express my ideas in a wrong way.

Thinking about it, I decided to overcome this difficulty, give me the opportunity to improve and it does not matter if I made mistakes. So I started to talk to other people, ask for information or things that I did not know and express my ideas. My challenge today in learning English is to improve the way I speak, my pronunciation and get a high level. I know that with dedication I will get it.

The best way to learn English is speaking English and put in contact with the language as much as possible during the day, is the fastest way of learning. An important thing to take into account is that students learn differently, it refers to the learning styles. The most common are visual learners, auditory learners and kinesthetic learners. Also students prefer real life examples, learn by pictures, watching videos, listening to music and interact with their classmates.

In the English learning process, teachers often do things which do not help like, insufficient wait-time, teacher's ego-stroking and classroom climate. We can

improve the English learning in Nicaragua creating spaces for students' development, teachers have to fully trained to satisfies the needs of the students and expose them to the language as it is possible to do in order to the students be successful English learners.

Every teacher wants to be good but what exactly are the qualities that make a good teacher? Some of them are expert communication skills, deep knowledge and passion for their subject matter and the ability to build caring relationships with students. Many teachers feel frustrated with English language learners in Nicaragua. There are some strategies to help English language learners like model what you teach, use many visuals, build on background knowledge, use student- friendly handouts and implement cooperative learning activities.

It is important to know that there are some teaching methods should teachers implement in their classroom. One of them is the Total Physical Response, when the teacher performs an action, both demonstrating and saying it and the students only need to listen and look what the teacher does to understand. The other one is the Audio-lingual method, which drills are used to teach structural patterns, the vocabulary is taught in context, audio-visual aids are used in the grammatical explanations are kept to a minimum.

The advice that I give to the new high school English teachers is to enjoy what they do and help their students to be better. The teachers have to make the class fun, play games, be creative and active, also do not put pressure on their students.

Finally, I can say that, learning English has been a developmental process, which has allowed me to learn more, face difficulties, take risks and improve my life to be a better person, student and teacher. There is no doubt that, study English was the best decision I have taken.

Note: This reflection was written by Alba Senelia Jarquin, a student in the linguistics class. Her reflection is shared under her consent.

APPENDIX C

- A. Write a two-page reflection paper about your personal experience learning English. The following questions can serve as guide while you are writing your reflection.

Questions to reflect (step 1: My reflection as a language learner)

1. How did I start learning English?
2. What motivated me to learn English?
3. What learning strategies did I use when I began to study English? Are these learning strategies the same I use now, or have they changed?
4. What was the most difficult thing I faced when I started learning English? What was the easiest thing I faced while I learned English? And what strategies did I use to overcome the difficulties?
5. What is my challenge today in learning English?

Questions to reflect (step 2: My reflection on learning)

1. What are the best ways to learn English?

2. What kinds of learning styles and strategies do you encourage in learners?
3. What kinds of learning styles and strategies do you discourage in learners?
4. How can Nicaraguan students be successful English learners?
5. How can we improve the English learning in Nicaragua?

Questions to reflect (step 3: My reflection on teaching)

1. What are the qualities of a good teacher?
2. How can teachers help Nicaraguan students learn English?
3. What teaching methods should teachers implement in their classroom?
4. What advice would you give to a new high school English teacher?
5. What things need to be changed to improve the learning of English in Nicaragua?

Questions to reflect (step 4: My general comments on this reflection)