The role of reflection during the first teaching experience of foreign languag pre-service teachers: an exploratory-case study *

El papel de la reflexión en la primera experiencia de enseñanza de los practicantes en lenguas extranjeras: un estudio de caso exploratorio

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Abstract

This qualitative study engaged four foreign language student teachers in a reflective practice while completing their practicum. The classrooms of four educational institutions comprised the study sites: two public high schools, one private primary school and one public university, all located in a northwestern Colombian town. The researchers gathered data through student teachers' reflective journals, one-on-one interviews and classroom observations. Findings revealed that reflection *on* action and reflections *in* action (Schön, 1987) enabled participants to redirect teaching processes. In regards to Van Manen's (1977) three levels of reflection, this study found that although all the student teachers reached the first and second level of reflection, only two participants reached the third level, critical reflection.

Key Words: Reflection, teaching practice, foreign languages.

Resúmen

El propósito de esta investigación cualitativa fue dar la oportunidad, a cuatro practicantes de lengua extranjera de una universidad pública de Colombia, de abordar un proceso de reflexión. Esta investigación se llevó a cabo en cuatro aulas de cuatro instituciones educativas, dos públicas de bachillerato, una privada de primaria y una universidad en una ciudad del nororiente colombiano. La información se recolectó por medio de: 1) diarios de los practicantes, 2) una entrevista personalizada a cada practicante y 3) tres observaciones de clase. Los resultados revelan que la reflexión contribuye a mejorar la primera experiencia de enseñanza de los practicantes de lengua extranjera. Con base en las reflexione *en* y *sobre* Schön (1987), la acción, se les facilitó redireccionar algunos procesos de enseñanza. De acuerdo con los tres niveles de reflexión propuestos por Van Manen (1977), este estudio encontró que aunque todos los partcipantes alcanzaron los niveles uno y dos de reflexión; solamente dos de ellos lograron alcanzar una reflexión crítica, el tercer nivel de reflexión.

Palabras clave: Reflexión, Práctica docente, lenguas extranjeras.

Résumé

Le but de cette recherche qualitative a été de donner la chance à quatre stagiaires d'enseignement de langue étrangère d'une université publique de Colombie d'entamer une démarche de réflexion. Cette recherche a été effectuée dans quatre salles de classe de quatre établissements éducatifs : deux établissements publics d'éducation secondaire, un établissement privé d'éducation primaire et une université d'une ville du Nord-est colombien. L'information a été recueillie à travers de : 1) les journaux des stagiaires, 2) un entretien personnalisé avec

chacun des stagiaires, et 3) trois observations des cours. Les résultats font apparaître que la réflexion aide à améliorer la première expérience d'enseignement d'une langue étrangère des stagiaires. Sur le fondement des réflexions en et sur l'action (Schön, 1987), ils ont été en mesure de rediriger quelques processus d'enseignement. Selon les trois niveaux de la réflexion proposés par Van Manen (1977), cette recherche a trouvé que, bien que tous les participants aient atteint les niveaux un et deux, seulement deux d'entre eux ont atteint une réflexion critique, le troisième niveau de la réflexion.

Mots clés : Réflexion, pratique enseignante, langues étrangères.

Resumo

O propósito desta pesquisa qualitativa foi dar a oportunidade, a quatro estagiários de língua estrangeira de uma universidade pública da Colômbia, de abordar um processo de reflexão. Esta foi realizada em quatro aulas de quatro instituições educativas, duas públicas de ensino médio, uma particular de ensino fundamental e uma universidade em uma cidade do nordeste colombiano. A informação se recolheu por meio de: 1) diários dos estagiários, 2) uma entrevista personalizada a cada estagiário e 3) três observações de classe. Os resultados revelam que a reflexão contribui a melhorar a primeira experiência de ensino dos estagiários de língua estrangeira. Com base nas reflexões *em* e *sobre* Schön (1987), a ação, facilitou-lhe redirecionar alguns processos de ensino. De acordo com os três níveis de reflexão propostos por Van Manen (1977), este estudo encontrou que mesmo que todos os participantes alcançaram os níveis um e dois de reflexão; somente dois deles conseguiram alcançar uma reflexão crítica, o terceiro nível de reflexão.

Palavras Chave: Reflexão, Estágio docente, línguas estrangeiras.

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Introduction

This research study provided Foreign Language (FL) pre-service teachers and teacher educators at the foreign languages (FL) program at a public university in Colombia with an opportunity to begin to get a better understanding of the reflection process of pre-service teachers. This FL program, at the end of five years of training, requires pre-service teachers to complete a 16-week teaching practice in which they integrate theory and practice into teaching methods, strategies and skills in a real classroom.

In Colombia, most previous research studies on FL pre-service teachers have focused on aspects such as the strengths and weaknesses that practicum[1] supervisors have identified in their trainees (Quintero, Zuluaga & López, 2003); teaching preparation programs and curricular innovations (Cárdenas & Faustino, 2003; McNulty & Usma, 2005; McNulty Ferri, 2010; Gómez, 2011); student teachers' perceptions, research skills and experiences during practicum (Gallego et al., 2001; Zuluaga, 2005); Other studies have focused on language learning and use on the students part (Farias & Obilinovic, 2008), especially on EFL writing (Viáfara, 2008; and Quintero, 2008) and reading (López & Giraldo, 2011). Although substantial research has been carried out in the field of FL teaching practice, very little of this work has illustrated student teachers' experiences, challenges and the empowerment of student teachers as reflective practitioners (Zambrano & Insuasty, 2008; Insuasty & Zambrano, 2010; and Viáfara, 2011). Consequently, this exploratory case study was carried out with the purpose of providing participants and teacher educators with an opportunity to begin to get a better understanding on the reflection process of pre-service teachers who are engaged in their first teaching experience.

The researchers attempted to answer this question: how does a reflective process help student teachers to enhance their practicum?

Context of the Study

In Colombia, according to The Ministry of Education, the teaching practice aims to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to interact with pre-school, primary or high school students from different contexts to facilitate the development of professional competences.[2] Accordingly, the FL program where this research took place enables pre-service teachers to master the essential skills and competences that allow them to tackle the challenges they are likely to face during their first teaching experience. This is accomplished through courses and seminars that give them the required linguistic and instructional competences, knowledge and foundations for teaching and learning foreign languages. After successfully completing the coursework, at the end of four and a half years of training, undergraduate students are eligible to start a 16-week teaching practice.

This full time practicum, the culmination of their teaching preparation, includes a minimum of 12 hours of face-to face instruction per week. It is undertaken under the supervision of a professor from the FL program and a teacher from the selected institution where the student teacher carries out the practicum. The role of the supervisors is to guide the student teachers throughout the process of planning and implementing the practicum; providing feedback and the overall evaluation. Evaluation of the teaching practice includes four aspects: 1) the way student teachers integrate theory and practice into teaching methods, strategies and skills in a real classroom; 2) a small-scale research project based on their teaching

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1   In this article, practicum and teaching practice are terms used interchangeably.

2   Ministry of Education Colombia, Resolución 6966, August 6th, 2010

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experience; 3) their involvement in extracurricular activities, such as: religious and cultural events, flag-raising ceremonies, sporting activities and parades, among others; and 4) the design and implementation of a cultural or academic activity that benefits the school community. Student teachers will receive a composite grade, on a 1-5 scale where 3.5 is the minimum passing grade, based on the aforementioned aspects.

Theoretical Framework

Although reflection is a term with several definitions, the authors adopted Dewey's (1933) description of the concept, in which reflection "involves a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty in which thinking originates and an act of searching, hunting and inquiring to find material that will resolve the doubt and settle and dispose of the perplexity" (Dewey, 1933, p. 12). These researchers chose this definition because, at the foreign language where the study took place, the student teachers understood reflection as a process that began with questioning their role as future professionals and proceeded with careful thinking to determine feasible answers to the problems that might surface their first teaching experience. In other words, participants were allowed to reframe problems from different angles; and to recognize and experiment with practical solutions to everyday teaching issues.

This study also employed Schön's (1987) concepts on reflection *on* action and reflection *in* action in order to identify within the data the student teachers' considerations of both their daily activities and the consequences of their actions during their first teaching experience. According to Schön (1987), "we may reflect on action to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an expected outcome." (p. 26). This takes place "in tranquility" (Schön, 1987, p.26), after actions are carried out. In other words, one might have pondered their previous

experiences, keeping their distance from the occurrence of the events in both space and time. On the other hand, "we may reflect in the midst of action without interrupting it" (Schön, 1987, p.26), which is referred to as reflection *in* action. "Our thinking serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it." (Schön, 1987, p.26.) That is to say, thinking on one's feet while a problem is being addressed in order to make a sudden change to the situation in progress.

The researchers also analyzed the data using Van Manen's (1977) three levels of reflectivity. According to this model, teachers' reflections are classified as technical, practical or critical. The technical level, which is the lowest level, concerns the effective application of skills and knowledge in the classroom setting. For example, at this level, teachers might ask themselves about the effectiveness of the material used to achieve a particular goal. The practical level involves an opportunity to ponder the assumptions that support teachers' actions and the consequences of such practices. According to Van Manen (1977), it facilitates "an interpretive understanding both of the nature and quality of the educational experience, and of making practical choices" (p. 226-227). At this level, teachers may be wondering whether their teaching is helping students learn faster and more efficiently. The critical level, which is regarded as being the highest level, incorporates moral and ethical issues. It may also include aspects from the two lower levels. Teachers who reach this level may weigh carefully whether the role they play in a classroom corresponds to what society expects from them.

Methodology

This exploratory case study was carried out in the classrooms of four educational institutions: two public high schools, one private primary school and one public university located in a northern town in Colombia (see Table 1).

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Table 1. Characteristics of the educational institutions

	MÓNICA	**CARLOS**	**ANDRÉS**	**SILVIA**
Institutions	Public university	Public high school	Public high school	Private primary school
Number of students	12000	250	800	175
Courses	FL students from IV semester	8th and 9th	7th and 8th	5th

Participants were chosen on a voluntary basis. At the time the project started, 31 student teachers were doing their practicum. Although all of them were invited to take part in the research project, only Mónica, Carlos, Andrés and Silvia (pseudonyms) assented. Table 2 provides background information about the participants

(language proficiency, age, total amount of hours of study an FL). The low participation of student teachers might have been caused by the extra responsibilities associated with the project, such as: keeping a reflective journal, being observed while teaching and being interviewed.

Table 2. Participants' Background Information.

Participants/ Characteristics	**MÓNICA**	**CARLOS**	**ANDRÉS**	**SILVIA**
Language Proficiency*	C1 (French)	B1 (English)	B1 (English)	B2 (English)
Age	21	24	25	20
Hours of Study in a FL	1120	480	480	1120

* According to DELF, DALF and TOEFL test results.

The entire study covered 15 weeks. After gaining approval from the practicum supervisors, the researchers devoted the rest of the time to observing and interviewing the participants; recording, transcribing, reading and analyzing the data; writing a draft of the findings; member checking[3] and writing the final report.

Consistent with qualitative research, data were gathered form several sources: reflective

journals, classroom observations and interviews. Student teachers' reflective journals were used because they "represent a good source for text (word) data for a qualitative study" (Creswell, 2005, p. 219). Participants were required to describe one lesson and to reflect on it on a weekly basis. Taking into account that participants had not had much experience on keeping a reflective journal, during the first week of the project, participants were instructed on how to write about their teaching experiences and how to reflect on them. However, there was no deliberate attempt to constrain them in their reflections. In other words,

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3 Member checking is described by Lincoln & Guba (1985) as the process of reviewing interpretations with the participants to guarantee that the findings and interpretations produced through the data analysis are credible and consistent with what the participants had said and done

they were allowed to reflect on the intricacies and underpinnings of their daily teaching.

In addition, three non-participant classroom observations were carried out over a period of 15 weeks. The main purpose of these observations was to support and contrast the data collected through the student teachers' journals. Although three classroom observations had been planned for each of the four participants, two of the participants were observed only twice due to the cultural and extra curricular activities programmed at their institutions. The observation length varied depending on the schedules of each institution. On average, the researchers observed each participating student teacher for two and a half hours in total. During the classroom observations, researchers sat at the back of the classroom, took notes and completed an observation protocol. At the end of the study, all the participants were interviewed in Spanish. The researchers used an interview protocol including a set of open-ended questions and took notes while interviewing the participants. The interviews were recorded.

In order to have an in-depth understanding of each participant data, the researchers followed the interpretive model suggested by Hatch (2002), which "provides a process for constructing meaning from data" (p. 180). This model involves reading the data for the sense of the whole, reviewing impressions, coding, writing a draft summary, reviewing interpretations with the help of participants, and writing a revised summary. Once each participant's data were analyzed separately, data from all four participants were compared and contrasted using MAXQDA Plus. This computer software allowed the researchers to sort, code and analyze the text data more swiftly and efficiently.

Findings

After analyzing the data from all four participants separately, a comparison and contrast of them revealed similarities and differences in the type of reflection the participants were engaged in during their practicum.

Reflection *on* Action

As is characteristic of reflection *on* action, student teachers mostly reflected when they were distanced from the teaching scenario in both time and space. As Silvia reported in her journal, most of her reflections were done outside her classroom in the privacy and quietness of her room on weekends:

> "[…] I sat down, and I started to remember what I had done in a particular lesson. First, I described it based on those little notes taken right after the class or during break times. Then, I reflected on what I had thought and felt."[4]

Similarly, Andrés stated that, at a certain time during a class when the students were told to accomplish a specific task, some of them were not able to understand the simple commands that they were supposed to respond to. Although Andrés did not change what he was doing at that particular time, when planning the next day's lesson, he realized that his students were not actively engaged in class activities due to a lack of basic communication skills. Therefore, he decided to teach some everyday expressions to help learners deal with communicative situations in a foreign language class. According to Andrés, figuring out this particular situation served two purposes: first, it helped learners to play a more active role in class; and, second, it made his teaching easier. More importantly, based on the changes Andrés introduced in his classroom instruction, it could be inferred that Andrés had started to effectively reflect *on* action.

Parallel to Andrés' reflections on his students' response towards various class activities, he

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4   Translation by the author.

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developed self-awareness of his posture as a teacher, which he acknowledged in the interview. As he expressed, he jotted down both negative and positive events, aspects of the class that would allow him to reflect on his role as a FL teacher. In the following extract, Andrés expressed his concerns about the imbalance between the amount of activities and the time allotted to each one of them. "I found that the time spent was not enough to put into practice other strategies and resources." Although Andrés did not express it openly, according to the next class observation, the researchers inferred he managed to control class time more efficiently, ending in a more balanced time allocation to the different parts of the lesson.

Likewise, as stated in her journal, Mónica realized that she needed to pay attention to three specific aspects related to class activities, students' interactions and competences.

"While planning, I thought of what had happened during the previous lesson. I thought [about the three aspects I should pay attention to] based on the notes I had jotted in my journal. I wanted to do something to change the way students interacted in the classroom. Also, I wanted to balance out the activities and know how to improve the development of different competences among learners."[5]

Although Mónica was not very thorough in her remarks, her concerns became apparent during the next two-classroom observations when the researcher realized that Monica paid careful attention to the proper management of the in-lesson time. In doing so, she maintained a better pace of the lesson and developed the class activities as planned. For example, during the first class observed, Mónica was able to do a speaking activity after the listening exercise in which students were able to practice expressions

learned from the listening. Setting a specific amount of time for each part of the lesson helped her to keep track of time span working on each activity. The researchers confirmed this during the second classroom observation, when Monica took time to sum up what she had done and to explain to her students what the assignments were for the upcoming class.

Generally speaking, participants illustrate how reflective teaching entails an ongoing examination of the nuances and simplicity of everyday situations that take place in a classroom. Student teachers are expected to reflect on a regular basis in order to draw conclusions that allow them to redirect their future actions or implement necessary changes to improve their teaching.

Reflection *in* Action

As is characteristic of reflection *in* action, student teachers reflected "in the midst of action," while teaching or while developing their lessons. For example, during a classroom observation, one of the researchers evidenced that Andrés reflected in the midst of action. As the students entered the class, they expressed their disappointment due to the hard time they had had while taking a high stakes state test. Andrés realized that students were not in the mood for having an English lesson. Immediately, he decided to go over an easy activity from the textbook. Although Andrés did not express it openly in his journal, it can be inferred that he was able to recognize that the class was not ready to move on, or at least, to start a new topic.

Likewise, Mónica described in her journal the way she sorted out a challenging situation her students faced while watching a movie. As she explained:

"The film began to play without subtitles but the students complained because they understood

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5   Translation by the author.

only isolated phrases. For this reason, it was necessary to use subtitles in the target language."

It appeared to the researchers that the environment of the classroom setting could trigger reflection *in* action. However, it is important to remark that Mónica was aware of what was really going on in the classroom and paying close attention to the annoyance expressed by her students.

The following excerpt from a researcher's field notes exemplifies how reflection *in* action helps to redirect certain class activities while actions are being performed:

"[While doing a listening exercise,] most students were struggling to understand the main idea of the conversation. Then, the teacher decided to split the listening into small sections that were then played several times. In this way, it was easier for the students to understand every word while listening."

It seemed that the student teacher had planned to do the listening exercise differently. However, based on the difficulties experienced by her students, she decided to reconsider her previous plan. She then provided the students with more than one opportunity to listen to it and divided the listening activity into several more manageable sections. These simple actions are examples of how reflection *in* action provided participants with opportunities to self-assess their daily teaching and to look for ways in which then can grow both personally and professionally. This can be inferred from Silvia's interview when she stated that "one is always looking at what was wrong and how it can be improved." In this brief remark, Silvia provided an overall self-assessment of her performance. However, substantial improvements will require from her a more rigorous and continuous process of reflection.

Level of Reflection

Van Manen's (1977) model was used to analyze the extent to which student teachers engaged in reflection. The first level was reached when the participants reflected on the effectiveness of the resources and materials used during the classes taught. Mónica, for example, devoted time to thinking about what had happened in the classroom and the changes she would make in order to be more effective during the upcoming classes. Mónica pointed out that she would need "to reduce the number of questions from the literature book and include more different activities." Although Mónica did not expand on her remark so as to explain in detail what had happened in her previous class, it is clear that she wanted to exploit the textbook differently.

Likewise, Silvia realized that carefully considering her past actions in class would help her to understand not only what went wrong but also to find ways of improvement. During the interview, Silvia stated:

"Thus, one says: 'I have enough time to think about what I did. To think about what can be better, to think about what I can improve [pause] what I can keep on doing because it worked.'"

The researchers infer that Silvia's remark exemplifies the way a student teacher can take advantage of a reflective process to develop her understanding of what goes on in the classroom.

Along with the range of responses described above, all four participants were engaged in practical reflection. Most of them were concerned with how their actions were supported by their views of language and language teaching. Mónica, for example, reflected on the importance of the use of the communicative approach, its methodological implications, and how it might have influenced her role as teacher. In her journal, she pointed out that "using the communicative

approach allows students to develop their communicative competence. It also gives them the opportunity to interact with their teachers and classmates." In her comment, it can be inferred that using the communicative approach facilitates the development of communication skills among her learners. More importantly, the approach she adopted allows her to develop other skills that go beyond linguistic competence.

In contrast to the example just described, Silvia reflected on particular issues she found problematic when delivering instructions:

"When giving instructions, I faced some difficulties related to the way [students] interpreted them. Then, it was necessary to repeat the explanations several times and/or to translate them into L1 as well."

This permanent state of thought made her aware of what really restrained her students and stopped them from accomplishing a specific goal during a class. This is part of a practical reflection because Silvia wanted to better understand why certain activities went wrong in the classroom. Although she did not specify how she came to this conclusion, she explained what underlined her actions and their consequences. Once she had identified a problematic situation, she described what she did in order to help her students to overcome a particular problem.

As regards critical reflection, it was noticed that only two participants achieved this level. Their reflections were concerned with social and ethical aspects of their role as FL teachers. Carlos, for instance, examined his behavior carefully, and how teachers and administrative personnel might have perceived him as a social agent and not only as an FL teacher. Carlos' perceptions can be summarized in the following interview excerpt:

"Because we are young, we still act like youngsters. Maybe it is the way we dress.

However, when we enter a classroom, everything must change even the way we speak and dress. Also the way we talk to the teachers in the school."

At this level, Carlos is not concerned with the way he teaches his lessons but how his behavior may change due to the role of teacher he is supposed to play in the school. His constant questioning of the new role he is playing may result in a change of behavior on his part. Apparently, he has assumed a different role that is aligned with what society expects from him as an FL teacher.

Silvia was similarly concerned with the social context in which she was immersed, and with the need to be aware of the external aspects that deserved to be taken into account during her teaching practice. In her journal, she commented:

"I think it is hard to be in front of an amount of children who come from different worlds from ours, who come from different roots; different from the idea that most of us had before entering these schools. I think this reflective process has helped us to be aware of where we are; to be alert; to start paying attention to little things that otherwise would be unobserved. And that is really important in our learning process."

This was another step in Silvia's reflective journey - moving from her classroom as the center of action, to the school, a more general context in which she is more aware of her choices and actions.

Conclusions and Implications

Based on the analyzed data from reflective journals, classroom observations and interviews the findings of this exploratory study allowed the researchers to conclude that student teachers' processes of reflection *on* action and reflection *in* action (Schön, 1987) helped them to redirect certain actions in their classrooms or to implement necessary changes aimed at improving their

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teaching. For example, they were able to question the type of materials used, better balance the allocation of time to class activities and implement sudden changes based on the students' particular attitudes and reactions.

With regard to Van Manen's (1977) three levels of reflection, this study found that, although all the student teachers reached the first and second level of reflection, only two participants reached the third level: critical reflection. These findings may reveal that student teachers lack the knowledge, strategies and guidance needed to reach higher levels of reflection. Therefore, these findings have several important implications for FL student teachers, FL programs and researchers. Providing EFL pre-service teachers with an opportunity to become a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987) is based on the belief that "if teachers are actively involved in reflecting on what is happening in their own classroom, they are in a position to discover whether there is a gap between what they teach and what their learners learn" (Richards, 1995, p. 4). However, it is necessary to design a special training program for student teachers to help them to reach higher levels of reflection. Furthermore, attention should be given not only to the conceptualization but also to the appropriate methodology that a more rigorous process of reflection entails. Providing student teachers with specialized training will eventually change the way they deal with their first teaching experience, making them more critical of and responsible for their professional and personal growth.

Findings should also encourage professors at the FL program to adopt reflective practices in the context of their own classroom in order to better understand the nuances and foundations of assisting student teachers through a process of reflection.

Finally, research on a more comprehensive scale is needed to shed light on the underpinnings of reflection that includes a larger sample and comparisons among different groups of student teachers in order to look at changes over time.

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