



Mediation in Autonomous Practices among Novice Language Teachers while Discussing Conflicts in their Teaching Practice¹

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Abstract

Becoming an effective language teacher requires more than just the ability to teach a language well. It also depends on the teacher's ability to handle the complex emerging situations that may arise in their profession. Therefore, it is crucial to provide novice teachers with opportunities to discuss these challenges with others during their training programs. This study aims to explore how a volunteer sample of twelve novice English language teachers, divided into four groups over six sessions, mediated their discussions while reflecting on the main hardships they faced during their initiating teaching practice and what was the impact of mediation in their autonomy development. The research used a predominantly qualitative research approach that involved content analysis of the teachers' discourse and diary entries, as well as open observations by the researchers. The results show that the cognitive, social, and affective dimensions of mediation are implicated in novice teachers' discussions. Mediation also helps them build their self-efficacy and learn to overcome the challenges of their profession. Moreover, they develop the ability to make decisions about their own teaching practices and exert their autonomy as professionals.

Keywords: conflicts, mediation, novice language teachers, teacher autonomy

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Mediación en prácticas autónomas de profesores de lengua noveles mientras discuten sobre conflictos de su práctica docente

Resumen

Desempeñarse como un buen profesor de idiomas va más allá de las habilidades que el profesor tenga para enseñar efectivamente un idioma. El buen desempeño también depende de sus habilidades para lidiar con las situaciones complejas que regularmente enfrenta en su profesión. Por lo tanto, es crucial brindar a los profesores oportunidades para compartir estas experiencias durante sus programas de formación docente. Este artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación en la que se explora cómo doce profesores noveles de inglés, divididos en cuatro grupos, a lo largo de seis sesiones discutieron y reflexionaron sobre las dificultades que enfrentan durante su práctica docente inicial, y qué implicaciones tiene la mediación en el desarrollo de su autonomía docente. Se usó un método de investigación predominantemente cualitativo que incluyó el análisis del contenido discursivo de los profesores, las entradas de sus diarios de clase y las observaciones abiertas planteadas por los investigadores. Los resultados muestran que las discusiones de estos profesores noveles entretejen las dimensiones cognitivas, sociales y afectivas de la mediación, por medio de la cual construyen su autoeficacia y aprenden a sobrellevar las dificultades de su profesión. Además, la mediación les permite desarrollar las habilidades para tomar decisiones sobre su práctica docente y ejercer su autonomía como profesionales.

Palabras clave: conflictos, mediación, profesor novel de lengua, autonomía del docente

Introduction

In last few decades, the Mexican Ministry of Education has emphasized the relevance of developing life-long learning competencies, such as communication in different languages, collaboration, and autonomy, for learners of all levels of education. This emphasis is intended to enable learners to actively participate in society ([Ruiz-Mallén & Heras, 2020](#)). However, to effectively implement these competencies in the classrooms, teacher education programs must consider suitable approaches to equip teachers not only with subject knowledge but also with the necessary skills to teach the aforementioned competencies ([Reinders & Benson, 2017](#)).

While teachers play a key role in mediating learners' autonomy, research suggest that teachers who fail to exercise autonomy in their own training are unlikely to promote it in their students ([Little, 1995](#); [Lamb & Reinders, 2008](#)). Thus, we believe that pre-service teachers need opportunities to exercise their own autonomy by sharing their challenges and concerns with other pre-service teachers. Through these collective practices, they can cultivate a more reflective approach when making decisions about their teaching. Ultimately, this should be considered a fundamental aspect of teachers' training and the development of their autonomy.

In recent years, the concept of autonomy has shifted from being seen as an individualistic pursuit to one that is embedded in social practices and learning groups ([Murray, 2014](#); [Benson, 2010](#)). This shift has been explained by the sociocultural theory, which explains that teacher autonomy can also have a collective dimension as a socially constructed process, bridging the individual and the social dichotomy of the concept ([Lantolf, 2013](#)). With this in mind, this article focuses on discussions in which novice English language teachers verbalize the choices they make concerning their starting teaching activity as a way to explore their autonomy.

Teacher Autonomy

Teacher autonomy has been defined from different perspectives. Initially, [Little \(1995\)](#) defined it as the professional capacity to take control of the teaching practice while considering the cognitive and affective levels involved in the exercise of continuous reflection. Later, [Aoki \(2002\)](#) described it "as a capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching" (p. 111). In a similar vein, [Benson \(2010\)](#) explains it as a capacity to control teaching within the contextual or educational constraints. Accordingly, autonomy can equip teachers to make decisions with more confidence and feel more satisfied with their job ([Strong & Yoshida, 2014](#)).

[Gao \(2018\)](#), on the other hand, understanding autonomy from a social point of view, suggests that beyond the constraints that teachers may encounter, they need to work collectively with their colleagues to develop strategies and resolve contextual problems that may arise. This way, argues Gao, enables teacher to exercise their autonomy.

For the scope of this study, teacher autonomy is understood as the active engagement of educators in assuming responsibility for their professional development, taking initiatives to make good use of their own personal resources in their teaching, engaging in continuous reflection, and taking control over their own professional activity despite external limitations they may encounter.

[Lamb and Reinders \(2008\)](#) emphasize the importance of providing teachers with opportunities to reflect critically on their own process of teaching and learning. To prepare them to face uncertainties in their careers, it is important to encourage them to think through their experiences and share their expectations in a supportive environment ([Kazeni & McNaught, 2020](#)).

When starting their careers, pre-service teachers often encounter a context that is different from what they expected during their professional training. They are "inundated with a myriad of apprehensions and expectations" ([Kazeni & McNaught, 2020, p 3](#)). As novice teachers start working, they often face difficulties that they are not prepared to handle due to their limited experience, which can make their work demotivating and challenging. Some studies have concluded that teachers have not been trained to solve actual conflicts they will face in their professional lives ([Ordóñez et al., 2020](#)). This leads to frustration, demotivation, and a sense of isolation once they begin in-service

teaching. In the long run, they could feel so dissatisfied that it is very likely for them to leave the profession within the first years. Some studies have indicated that teachers' attrition rates during the first years of in-service activity range from 40 to 50 percent ([Michel, 2013](#)). Conversely, studies have also found that a high level of self-efficacy on novice teachers affects positively on their professional life ([Michel 2013](#); [Wyatt, 2018](#)). Therefore, self-efficacy needs to be improved in these teachers, as their beliefs about their ability to succeed or fail can influence their actions towards achieving their goals ([Bandura, 2012](#)). To some extent, teachers' self-efficacy is achieved through continuous reflection on their professional performance, which generates a sense of self-control or autonomy. [Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman \(2018\)](#) argue that reflection assets in the professionalization, the identity, and self-esteem in the teaching practice.

Professional reflection is crucial in the practice of autonomy and can be developed by interacting with other individuals by sharing the difficulties they are experiencing ([Bezzina, 2006](#)). In general, discussing conflicts can lead to personal and professional opportunities to share good teaching practices, learn, improve, and change ([Hakvoort et al., 2018](#)).

Mediation in Problem Solving

According to the sociocultural theory, mediation is a mechanism that helps understand mental functioning and learning. This theory claims that mental activity is mediated, constructed, and co-constructed by social means. Learning occurs through the use of cultural *artifacts (tools)* and *signs (language)* in interaction with others. This implies that the complex forms of thought are mediated socially through the use of symbolic and semiotic tools such as music, language, art, numbers, objects, and people ([Lantolf et al., 2018](#)). [Wells \(2007\)](#) explains that these semiotic tools contain linguistic and cultural meanings created by all the "spheres of activity" (work, institutions, groups of friends, family). As a result, most of our understanding of how the world works is appropriated through joint activity, interactions, and dialogue.

[Kozulin \(2018\)](#) defines mediation as a process that influences the development and enhancement of mental functions. This means that mediation in learning is crucial because it is during this process that individuals use new ways of behavior to overcome obstacles with the help of "extrinsic stimuli to control behavior from the outside" ([Vygotsky, 1980 p. 40](#)). Others define mediation as "a process of conflict management" ([Bercovitch et al., 1991, p. 8](#)), which implies problem-solving with an external intervention. These definitions entail external assistance or influence in thought and action, specifically in the decision taking to conflict settlement.

Teachers' mediation in problem-solving has been researched since the 1990s. The process is characterized as stimulating and positive for professional development of educators ([Hakvoort et al., 2018](#)). Some studies highlight the value of including conflict mediation in initial teacher education to help teachers understand the complexity of the social context they will be working in ([Kelchtermans, 2019](#); [Ordóñez et al., 2020](#)). It is thought that every meaningful learning experience starts with an emerging conflict which requires resolution.

In solving a problem, for many scholars it is important to recognize that every activity has implicit or explicit goals, and conflicts that can arise when obstacles hinder goal attainment. According to [Johnson & Johnson \(2006\)](#), a conflict can be any action, distraction or disturbance that interferes with goal achievement. Nonetheless, the study we present suggests that a conflict or problem can potentially present a constructive path for teachers' personal and professional development.

Social mediation among pre-service or novice teachers can offer several advantages by granting opportunities for stimulating reflective thinking, for sharing ideas and strategies in problem management, for learning within a collaborative and supportive environment, and for socialization. [Vauras et al. \(2003\)](#) found that sharing problems helps individuals employ strategies to enhance their learning in group activities and assume their roles in co-constructing knowledge. This, in turn, enables them to become more effective problem managers who can adapt to the challenges of their careers. It is through groupwork interactions and social collaboration that individuals can achieve more than they could on their own ([Wertsch, 1984](#)). Many advantages have been found in groupwork since participants make an effort to share needs, emotions, thoughts, ideas, and expectations.

Group mediation involves a certain level of trust in the exchange of knowledge between expert and novice teachers (Knouzi *et al.*, 2010). This is because every individual may share a greater understanding of any topic or could possess different qualities to help or assist others. In other words, each person can have something to offer to the group members, even in discussions among novice teachers. Verbalizing this assistance is considered an essential part of the teachers' reflection on their professional development. Therefore, teachers need opportunities to reflect on their practices. As researchers, it is equally important to explore the effects in language teachers particularly in pre-service teachers or novice teachers, whose experiences are still limited.

Practicing autonomous skills should be regarded as a fundamental aspect of teacher education as it enables teachers to reflect on and address challenging situations that may arise in their profession. Indeed, novice teachers are sometimes professionally challenged when they start to work, and the need to interact with their peers becomes crucial (Vangrieken *et al.*, 2017). These interactions enable them to reflect upon their educational practices, evaluating their strengths and opportunities to improve their own practice (Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman, 2018). This challenges us to inquire about how group work and contribute to novice language teachers' autonomy in sharing their concerns about their teaching, with a particular focus on the mechanisms of mediation in this process. In their dialogues, the participants are expected to elaborate complex mediation processes in which teaching strategies might be evidenced given the context of the study. For example, some guidance about how to solve any specific complication about their classroom performance might occur and then, the researchers' purpose will be to find whether they use any other kind of mediation besides the one obtained by their colleagues.

Methodology

This study considered discussion and reflection in interaction as a social construction and as a dialectic-dialogic and social phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). It had a social ontological nature and the researchers considered approaching it within a dialectical constructivism as an epistemological paradigm, as they aimed to explore the joint construction of knowledge, through the teachers' dialogues. Methodologically, given the nature of the study, it was designed as a qualitative and exploratory project where data was carefully interpreted based on the participants' viewpoints. The analysis focused on the complexity of meanings within the discourses created among the participants. This aimed to categorize elements and patterns in the content to evidence how the novice teachers generated their solutions to conflictive situations and to trace the role of mediation during their interactions.

The research focused on a group of twelve novice English language teachers, consisting of four male and eight female participants. The participants were all Spanish native speakers from Mexico, ranging in age from 22 to 26 years old. They had from 1 to 4 years of teaching experience in different educational settings, teaching English at various levels, from preschool to high school institutions, with the English language being taught from 3 to 5 hours per week. The participants were student teachers who were coursing the last year of their BA program in English Language Teaching (ELT) at a university in central Mexico. Their program had a working integrated component which mandated them to engage in teaching for at least one year. They received support and guidance from a mentor or tutor during their initial teaching activities. After having launched a call for participation in this project, twelve student teachers volunteered and were assigned randomly to one of four discussion groups, consisting of three teachers. It is important to mention that as English teaching trainees in a BA program in ELT, participants were fluent in English, and therefore their interactions, discussions, and the activities carried out during the study were conducted in English.

The research proposal was submitted to the University Research Ethics Committee, and it was approved by the board before the study began. In the first session, researchers explained the purpose of the study to the initial teachers and requested their collaboration in the project. The teachers who agreed to participate signed a consent form. As an incentive for their continued participation, the researchers promised to provide some teaching resources and materials as a reward at the end of the intervention. Despite this, six teachers dropped out at different stages before the study ended and did not return. Their information was not used in the research and the remaining informants were reassigned to new teams. The participants were also informed that their conversations would be recorded and protected, to which all of them agreed. Researchers utilized a video recorder on a tripod in a non-intrusive area of the room and the micro tape recorder was not visible for them.

In order to achieve the objectives determined for the study, various data collection tools were employed, including semi-structured interviews conducted in English to gather general information from teachers, such as their age, language level, years of teaching experience, and the educational level in which they taught. In addition, a self-reflection format was created to help novice teachers prepare and reflect on the subject before joining the discussion groups. This format also served to register their insight after the sessions.

The sessions were recorded and transcribed. To protect the anonymity of the participants, each participant was labelled as T1 for Teacher 1, T2 for Teacher 2. . . T12 for Teacher 12. In the results section of this article, the samples of the teachers' notes used and analyzed are indicated in parenthesis (T1, T2, and so on). There were six sessions which were also labelled as S1, S2 S6 in the discourse extracts selected as examples.

The recordings were transcribed and revisited several times. Then, we conducted a recursive reading of the data to categorize the content and explore the mechanisms of mediation that the novice teachers were executing. The information was carefully analyzed in order to answer the questions of the study. There was a final discussion undertaken to reach consensus in the elaboration of a model. This process provided an objective perspective and the internal reliability necessary in the qualitative research (Polkinghorne, 2007). The transcriptions generated from the interactions and discussions in the groups were studied based on the grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) and were subjected to categorical analysis of the content. This is to say that the raw data can be transformed into significant codes when some patterns are given or when repetitive issues are found to formulate a model from the phenomena exploration. Corbin and Strauss (2014) suggest that in order to make sense of the data, coding should go through a systematic process where patterns are identified. This involves three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This analysis will be presented in the following section.

Findings

The analysis of the dialogues revealed that novice teachers shared similar concerns. Their conflicts pertained to five categories: 1) institutional or school constraints; 2) problems related to a confusion towards the parents' role in their children's education; 3) issues related to class management; 4) undervalued role of teaching; and 5) the conflict of juggling teaching and personal life. Each of the categories will be presented with some samples of the teachers' discourse.

The school constraints

The teachers' dialogues revealed that the school as an institution or the center of legal authority causes tension for novice teachers. Indeed, they mentioned facing dilemmas due to their lack of experience and the system regulations in the schools, such as subordination issues, payment differences in comparison with more experienced teachers.

T3: “. . . the school authorities consider you a practitioner and treat you as a student and they pay you (a novice) less than the teachers who have more years working here. It is not much the difference but anyway, I mean, I don't think they take us seriously. . .” (S3)

T2: “. . . They (the institutions) think you (as a teacher) have to be available all the time, even when you are studying at the University. You are obliged to come to evening meetings and take extra time to help in the festivals and decorate rooms because they feel they have the right to demand extra time for the money they pay. . .” (S4)

Some teachers explained that some institutions, especially language centers, do not group learners according to their ages, needs, or language levels (T1, T6, T8, T11, T12). Instead, they mix learners of different levels in the same class to reduce costs. As a result, teaching heterogeneous groups can be stressful for the novice teachers. According to Byrd (2012), differentiated instruction could offer a potential contribution to address variability and cope with varied interests, backgrounds, needs, profiles, and learning styles. This is a task-based method, which consists of designing general tasks that can vary in content according to the students' differences and help them to scaffold each other to complete the task respectfully and learn collaboratively. Although novice teachers attributed mixability to monetary reasons (T11, T12), diversity occurs in all classrooms, as all the students learn,

think, and speak differently. T8 highlighted that a heterogeneous classroom can bring new perspectives into the lessons and opportunities for the learners to collaborate and support one another (i.e., scaffold each other) in their learning.

T11: “. . . all kinds of students are accepted out of the season and the coordinators take them to your group. . . I can't stand it. . . 6-years-old- children mixed with adult students. . .” (S2)

T12: “I know what you mean, this happens all the time and then, you have to prepare two or more lessons for the same class or prepare appropriate materials for each student. . .” (S2)

While variability in the classroom can be viewed as a classroom management issue, the teachers in this study believed that it becomes problematic due to the flexibility in the regulations of language centers or institutions. T4: “One of the main problems I face is the large number of students in primary school groups. Now, I have four groups; this makes around two hundred students and it is difficult for me to learn everybody's name, to provide equal attention to all the students, and the class time is very limited. . .” (S4)

T5: “At the moment, I am teaching in a private secondary school and I do not have the same problems. . . it is. . . twenty-seven students in one group and twenty-two in the other group, but you know? last year I was teaching in the Secundaria 1 (a public secondary school) and I was exhausted! They were about fifty or fifty-five students in each group and three of the groups were mine. . .” (S4)

Another claim besides the learners' age differences, language levels, attitudes, learning pace, among other individual differences, was the difficulty of teaching large groups of kids. In Mexican institutes of basic public education, from preschool to high school, English language was implemented as a compulsory subject in the programs. The group sizes can be up to 50 students per class, as reported by four teachers (T1, T2, T4, T5). Once they realize that many students have different learning styles and paces for learning, they consider this aspect problematic, especially when some students complete their tasks faster than others (T4, T9, T10, T11). Moreover, teachers noted that it is impossible to provide all the students with the same amount of attention during classes that last one hour or less (T4, T5, T11, T12). They mentioned that distributing teachers' attention among all the students is something difficult to do and agreed that many of them require special attention and care (T2). The teachers shared that they were aware that they could not control these structural decisions; therefore, they needed to manage the group dynamics as effectively as they could (T08, T10).

Parents' role in children' education

During their discussions, some novice teachers agreed that parents frequently demand the teachers' attention and frequently ask for meetings to discuss about their children, as they believe that teachers share co-responsibility for their children's education (T3, T5, T6, T7, T8, T11). However, dealing with defensive and intimidating parental attitudes was a challenging aspect of their job (T5, T6). One of the teachers mentioned that they need to come up with creative ways to handle parents and try to be patient and emphatic (T4). Additionally, T12 mentioned that a more experienced colleague advised her “to listen to parents with an understanding heart, reminding them of your concerns about their children” (S5). Likewise, T5 claimed that she would be compensated and satisfied if she was valued with a good comment from her learners.

T9 also mentioned that the use of English language textbooks was a concerning issue for parents as they invest their money in “expensive textbooks which must be used and completely answered in class time not for homework” (S4).

T9: “. . . I had a problem once when I asked to complete a complete module of the textbook for homework as we were having holidays. . . I thought it was a good idea. Then, a child's father came to complain about this. He said that the set of books are really expensive. . .” (S4)

T8: “. . . parents always poke their noses into the teachers' business. Once, I had a complaint from a group of parents because they didn't see any progress in their kids' language learning and asked for the kids to speak in English. It is absurd. . . I would have to talk to them in English throughout the class but they do not understand what I say. . .” (S4)

According to T7, “it seems impossible (giving the whole class in English) when teaching beginner learners” (S4). Novice teachers underestimate students’ understanding of the language. Although these teachers were taught theories of language acquisition, they think they need to speak and give explanations in Spanish (as it is student’s native language) in their classes. Furthermore, they consider that teachers must be more patient and talk to them in Spanish as they have just started their learning process (T7, T8).

Finally, T7 recognized that parents “play an important role in their children’s education and some of them want to trace their kids’ progress because they care” (S4).

Class management

Regarding class management, three elements or subcategories arise from the teachers’ discussions: the novice teachers’ lack of experience in establishing discipline and order, their lack of expertise in teaching techniques, and their limited knowledge, making class management a recurring challenge. During their conversations and diary entries, several teachers acknowledged that their lack of experience had led to issues with control (T1, T2, T6, T7, T8, T3, T10), lack of dynamism (T6, T2, T12), time management (T3), and limitations in their class planning and teaching skills, such as providing clear instructions (T3, T7).

T9 considers that creativity and the use of games would lead to dynamism in the class. Other teachers also agreed that including a variety of materials such as board games (T2, T9), technological resources (T2, T5), music (especially songs that the students enjoy) (T9, T11), and cultural contents (T11) in the class can help students feel more self-confident (T2). Consequently, teachers advised each other to incorporate games in the class (T2, T9), as it is the most useful solution for them to feel safer and satisfied by looking at the students laughing and learning (T1).

T1: “. . . Some children don’t stay still; they shout all the time. . .”

T3: “Yes, telling them to be quiet takes much class time. At times, I find very difficult to have dynamic activities to keep their attention. . . that distracts the children”

T2: “You have to prepare many, many activities and play, play, play with them with board games, using colorful power point presentations”

T1: “Then [you will see] . . . your kids laughing and that is a great sensation for a teacher. You can feel satisfied (laughs)” (S6)

One topic of discussion among novice teachers was the difficulty of empowering students and trusting them to effectively work in groups due to their limited proficiency to communicate. As a result, these practices can be time waste (T1, T7, T8). The other teachers gave support and advice on planning and consider that it is necessary to prepare their lesson plans in a more careful way (T9). They also suggested being ready for improvisation when time runs short (T10), and to keep in mind that the attention span time is limited in students (T8, T9), especially in children. Despite some students being careless and disrespectful, some teachers acknowledge the benefits of group work for students’ socialization and mutual support (T3, T9, T11).

Many pre-service teachers find minor distractions or disturbances during the class to be problematic (T1, T8, T3). Some consider these distractions as a complete lack of discipline, where students are expected to be silent, still, and attentive throughout the class. T5 believes that respect needs to be instilled in students by shouting at them at the beginning of the class and providing them with clear and straight instructions. Overall, teachers mentioned several times that losing the control of the class causes distress in them (T1, T2, T6, T7, T8, T3, T10).

T5: “. . . shout at the kids when you start the class, and you will not have to do it again. Tell them that the class is about to begin, and you want them to be attentive. . . The secret is to give clear and sound instructions. What else can you do in a group of fifty students? Do not think with your heart. . . I think it works well to be respected. . .” (S6)

Most teachers concurred that one of the main challenges is discipline and they align with the notion that establishing norms at the beginning of the course is essential for effective teaching (T1, T2, T6, T7, T8, T3, T10).

For instance, T9 commented that she expects her learners to take notes and complete the exercises in a careful and appropriate way while she is lecturing. This showcases teachers' expectations from their students, and how they value to teach them study techniques that encourage them to remain quiet. T9 also mentioned that there are specific moments for the students to play and shout and activities in silence must be respected.

The discourses also refer to the differences in students' motivation as a difficult situation that most teachers must work on. They think that students can show more interest in learning English if teachers provide them with a positive remark and feedback (T2, T4, T5, T6, T7, T9, T11, T12). They also believe that one of the teachers' duties is "to push the students to participate in classes" (T1, T3). In general, during the different sessions with their peers, teachers expressed their belief that motivation can increase with the use of games and fun activities in their lessons.

Teaching as an undervalued profession

The group conversations revealed a common sentiment among the teachers regarding the undervaluation of the language teaching profession. They also believe that teaching can be "stressful and frustrating" at times for several reasons (T1, T2, T5, T6, T7, T8, T3, T10, T12). Teachers working in public elementary schools reported feeling unappreciated by the students' parents (T1, T3, T9), the institution authorities (T2, T3, T11), or even by their colleagues who teach different subjects (T6, T7, T8). All of them consider teaching as a profession that is not socially considered as important as it is. T1, T3, T5, and T6 discussed, among many other things, that the English class is not considered an important subject in basic education because the students' grades cannot be reported formally with the other subjects.

They also mentioned that the devaluation of their teaching as pre-service teachers with little experience has impacted their reduced monthly payment compared to more experienced teachers receive. This unequal condition, approved by the institutions, contributes to legitimizing the discrediting of this profession. Additionally, T7 and T8 agreed that full-time teachers view English language classes as a "happy hour" or "party time" for the students, as they only spend three to five hours per week at most. A teacher shared with her peers that she went through a difficult situation she thought she would never experience.

T4: "One day I noticed there was another teacher in my classroom. The principal had asked her to observe my class and the following day I was told the Language Department Coordinator decided to dismiss me. They dismissed me without an explanation of what I did wrong" (S5)

Other teachers in the group (T5, T6, T7) provided support to T4, who expressed that she did not believe she could share this frustrating situation with other teachers, as she thought her experience dealing with that situation was unique. Moreover, she mentioned that she had confided in her sister, who advised her to prioritize her studies over work (S5). As can be seen, family bonds are just as crucial in the mediation process as colleagues or friends are.

Teachers' authority and their right to exercise absolute power in the classroom is being challenged and questioned in Mexican society. Students, parents, institutions, and society on the whole are challenging teachers more frequently. This seems more common when teachers have less experience, since hierarchical positioning is related to knowledge, attitude, and teaching skills, as expressed by the novice teachers.

Conflict of juggling teaching and personal life

The final category of conflicts discussed in the dialogues pertains to the difficulty that some teachers encounter in trying to balance their professional with their personal lives. Four teachers (T6, T10, T11 and T12) mentioned that teachers need to exert their right to enjoy "a normal life". T8 mentioned that he had to visit a counselor as he was entirely engaged in schoolwork and grading in his free time and he struggled to find time to meet friends or engage in sports or other leisure activities as he was studying and working at the same time. All the teachers participating in this project share similar experiences. They all started teaching while enrolled in BA programs, making it difficult for them to find time to do extra activities.

T6: “. . . Sometimes I go dancing, go to the gym because teaching is absorbing me but . . . it is difficult, I don't have much time and I prefer to sleep more. . . (laughs)” (S3)

T4 expressed frustration about investing “too much effort and time in her teaching”, without receiving adequate recognition from her institution. She also shared that her counselor recommended that she engage in self-care activities at least once a week, turn off all the electronic devices at least one hour every day, and plan her activities in an agenda.

Discussion: The Mediation Process in Groups of Novice Teachers

After having scrutinized the pre-service teachers' diaries and the discussions in video and audio recordings, the following features have been summarized and are presented here:

1. Even among the novice teachers, some appeared to be more experienced than others and sometimes they took a leadership or advisory role in the group. This illustrated scaffolding and mediation in the experience of sharing solutions. Three of the teachers agreed that being open to discussing their experiences gave them anxiety at first as they did not know if the problems they had would coincide with those of their colleagues, some of whom seemed to be “more advanced” or “to have more experience” in teaching.
2. During their discussions, teachers recognized their strengths and weaknesses, which is a necessary process to improve their teaching (Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018). They also acknowledged that they share the same difficulties and find these practices necessary to enrich their professional experience so that they do not “feel so lonely in the confrontation of these difficulties”. Hastings (2012) stated that some people might feel more self-efficient in some tasks than others and this feeling could self-encourage teachers to adapt to change and hardships.
3. The more experienced teachers noted that they felt relieved once they noticed that all of them struggled with the same kind of problems and dealt with the same feelings of frustration and stress (Hastings, 2012). Teachers noted that socializing provided them with comfort and helped them recognize that the teaching activity differed from their initial expectations. In their diaries, they also emphasized that reflecting on their educational practices was an engaging exercise, as it allowed them to accumulate experience in the matters of their professional life, including shared values and their perceptions of how a language class should be conducted.
4. Some novice teachers admitted to ignoring or minimizing their problems, despite knowing that they were impacting their daily teaching performance. However, some of them thought that avoiding the difficulty would give them “better results than facing it”. In each group, at least one teacher shared that when they did not know how to handle a challenging situation, they typically ignored it and pretended as if the problem didn't exist.
5. Not only was it relevant for novice teachers to socialize their constraints and their feelings with their colleagues but also with those around them, such as their families. They had different external sources of support with whom they shared their difficulties. These could be a “more experienced” person in their families such as their parents and siblings, or some other colleagues who shared the same beliefs and values. An external opinion could prompt them to reflect on their expectations of an ideal professor.
6. Novice teachers engaged in reflective thinking, which helped them explore the complexities involved in their initial expectations, talents, and weaknesses, in relation to the professional expectations they had formed. Zuckerman (2004) mentioned that the process of reflection consists of the development of three abilities. First, the ability to identify the goals, strategies, methods used by ourselves and others. Second, to listen and to be open to others' ideas and viewpoints. Finally, the ability to consider that we have strengths and limitations.

Considering the findings of the article, we propose the model depicted in [Figure 1](#) to elucidate and encapsulate the mechanisms of problem-solving mediation in novice teachers.

| Some conflicts are: | Dimensions of Mediation | Tools of mediation | Engagement in discussion leads to | For |
|--|-------------------------|--|---|--|
| 1. The school and institutional requirements | Social | Cultural conventions of the teaching professions, institutional demands, social expectations. | Self-efficacy | Decision Making in problem solving (Autonomy) |
| 2. the parents' role their children's education | | Support and motivation from other teachers, encouragement, empowerment. | Awareness of their strengths and weaknesses | |
| 3. Class management (teaching skills and discipline) | Affective | Formal and informal knowledge, experience, teachers' training, research on language teaching and learning. | Self-confidence | |
| 4. Society (how teaching is valued) | Cognitive | | | |
| 5. Professional vs personal life | | | | |

Figure 1. Mediation Model in Novice Teachers' Discussions

As presented in the results and the first column of the diagram, the situations that caused tension among novice teachers were related to the way schools organize their norms and regulations, the intervention from parents in their children's education, and class management. This includes a lack of language skills practices and group control techniques, the devaluing of the teacher's role, and concerns regarding how to balance their profession with their personal activities.

According to the teachers' dialogues, the initial expectations that they formed during their teaching training differ from what they were encountering in their professional experiences. This discrepancy led to stress, frustration, and a sense of disappointment among them. According to [Hakvoort et al. \(2018\)](#), teachers may be more likely to share their difficult experiences and seek advice if they feel they can trust the person they are talking to. These incidents could come to light in talking with their peers, other more experienced teachers and even some mentioned the talk with friends and family relatives, whose viewpoints, beliefs, and experiences served as mediators or stimuli (input) for their reflection.

Three types of mediation were observed in the process of discussing problems: social, cognitive, and affective, as shown in the illustration. Through collaboration and dialogue, they constructed and developed their own knowledge socially mediated. At the same time, they regained their agency as trusted professionals aware of their social responsibility and their limitations, as mentioned by [Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman \(2018\)](#).

Teachers' knowledge and cognition were also mediated through the cultural and structural elements contained in the profession itself, such as conventions and established practices which might be shaped and reshaped as their expertise increases ([Hermansen, 2017](#)). Their understanding of what teaching involved was mediated by their beliefs, their expectations, their formal and informal knowledge, an array of professional conventions, and certain institutional values. All these elements helped them justify their actions and their decision making in their classrooms ([Hermansen, 2017](#)). Moreover, these teachers considered that discussing their predicaments with people facing the same difficulties created opportunities to devise creative solutions and gain awareness of the accountability of a teaching position, particularly in relation to societal expectations. In other words, recognizing the existence of the cultural elements and their meanings surrounding the profession can lead student teachers to engage with their development and reflect upon the necessity of sharing their anxieties to "more experienced" others ([Vangrieken et al., 2017](#)) to regain their self-confidence.

Finally, mediation served as an important factor in developing the novice teachers' self-efficacy by helping them realize that they were not alone in facing these challenges. Initially, they tended to be more concerned about searching for short-term solutions to survive but as the project advanced teachers got involved in a more complex reflective research-based-activity. This exercise provided a sense of enhancement and empowerment, as they expressed in their diaries.

Conclusions

The model presented in this study and their findings provides an account of the existing interdependence of mediational tools and its semiotic significance for reflecting upon and developing teachers' self-efficacy, particularly in novice teachers. As demonstrated, their concerns are mostly related to external circumstances in their contexts, such as institutional norms, external educational policies, the parents' involvement in their children's education, as well as the social and cultural conventions. Nonetheless, the collective discussions help teachers become cognitively, affectively, and socially mediated to work on their self-efficacy and learn to overcome the hardships of the profession. In short, they helped teachers make decisions about their own teaching practice and exert their autonomy as professionals.

Mediation naturally unfolds within the group dynamics, particularly when individuals share similar circumstances. These discussions motivated novice teachers to exchange advice and talk about their worries of their teaching experience, socializing their challenges. Not only did the interactions compel them to create immediate solutions, but the more they engaged in reflective exercises, the more they began to recognize the need to search for more research-based solutions and act in their teaching activity. Through a reflective practice, mediation reinforced teachers' self-efficacy, motivation, and self-confidence when making decisions. Consequently, mediation becomes a bridge between the action of thinking and its manifestation when making choices, solving problems, and taking responsibility for the teaching practice; in other words, exercising their autonomy as teachers.

It is important to acknowledge that there is not a single solution to problems as different opinions and positions may arise during discussions. The purpose of discussing difficulties is not to generate a consensus but a trustful environment. These practices during professional training provide the novice teachers with a more integral capacity to confront uncertainty, to foster better ways to teach, and better prepare the teachers-to-be for emerging conflicts they may face so that they can take more informed decisions to solve them. The mechanisms of mediation observed in the model contribute to strengthening the autonomy and self-regulation of novice teachers. As they become empowered within the groups, they learn to approach problems with a more natural open attitude without feeling that internal choking of incompatibility with their own values. In conclusion, by sharing their experiences, novice teachers acquire greater self-confidence, autonomy, and responsibility, and gain a deeper appreciation for their own value..

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