

The Need to Empower Future Teachers¹

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Resumen

Se plantea y analiza la pertinencia de que los programas de formación de profesores de inglés guen a los practicantes para elaborar su propia filosofía de enseñanza y estar en condiciones de evaluar su propia práctica profesional. Estos programas deben adoptar un modelo reflexivo que prepare a los profesores para desarrollar una pedagogía conforme a las necesidades diversas y cambiantes de los estudiantes.

abstract

This article addresses the need for teacher-education programs to guide student-teachers in defining their teaching philosophy and developing the skills required to reflect upon and assess their own teaching practices. Thus these future teachers will be able to adapt their teaching practices to cater to their learners' diverse and changing needs.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza reflexiva, pensamiento crítico, aprendizaje basado en experiencias, práctica supervisada, formación de profesores.

Keywords: Reflective teaching, critical thinking, experiential learning, teaching practicum, teacher education.

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Introduction

The *teaching practicum* (TP) is a crucial stage in teachers' education as this is when they are given the opportunity to put into practice, in a real classroom setting, what they have learned throughout their *teacher education program* (TEP). The significance of the TP lies in the fact that this stage is the beginning of their never-ending professional journey. Wallace refers to the importance of the TP in the following words: "It is during the teaching practicum that trainees are encouraged to develop, practice and refine their competence as teachers."³

This assertion acknowledges the seminal role of the TP and highlights the weight of every agent involved; namely, the *teacher-educator*, the *supervisor*, the *cooperating teacher*, and the *student-teachers*. Here, the agents involved are expected to make their utmost effort for the *teaching practicum* to have a significant and enduring impact on the entire professional journey of future teachers. As the popular saying goes: Give a man a fish, and you will feed him for a day; teach him how to fish, and you will feed him for a lifetime. In the light of this proverb, several important questions regarding TEPs arise: Should TEPs focus on surveying language teaching methods, strategies and techniques? Or should they focus instead on empowering the novice teachers to use theoretical knowledge for the purpose of assessing and building appropriate classroom practices in tune with their students' contextualized needs? Are the future teachers being equipped, in the TP, with the tools required to make sense out of the knowledge they acquire in face of their real experience?

The Problem and Its Importance

Historically, the dominant tendency in TEPs around the world has been to transmit to the student-teachers the accumulated

³ Michael J. Wallace, *Training Foreign Language Teachers: A Reflective Approach* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1991) 1.

knowledge surrounding language teaching and to encourage them to use the tendencies favored by the most outstanding scholars of the time. This effort, although commendable, fails to prepare today's teachers, immersed in a fast-changing reality, to cater to the unique and diverse needs of the learners. Parker, quoted in Richards, further unravels the inadequacy of this approach to teacher education:

Teaching-learning contexts change, and teachers' behaviors must change accordingly. The basic problem for teachers is, therefore, to acknowledge that there is no best way to behave, and then to learn to make decisions in such ways that their behaviors are continually appropriate to the dynamic, moment-to-moment complexity of the classroom.⁴

In other words, instructing student-teachers on the technicalities of language teaching alone does not suffice because by the time they graduate, what they have learned in college may not meet the needs of the learners that will be in their classrooms. This highlights the importance of preparing future teachers to be able to self-assess their own professional practice and points to the weight of the questions posed earlier in this paper: Are they mostly being taught what is known about language teaching? Or are they being educated to take what is known and tailor it to fit the diverse realities they will find in the classroom?

The position sustained here is that future teachers should be taught to reflect upon their own classroom practices and grow professionally from there. It is not uncommon, however, to find as a predominant tendency that the student-teachers are simply told how they must plan and teach their lessons. Unfortunately, this prescriptive approach to the TP, although well-intentioned, often fails to empower them to become active, autonomous agents of their own professional development. Paraphrasing the proverb referred to earlier:

⁴ Jack Richards, *Beyond Training: Perspectives on Language Teacher Education* (Cambridge: U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2000) 11.

Tell prospective teachers to follow a recipe in their classrooms, and they will do as you say for a life-time; teach them how to assess their own professional practices, and they will be empowered to grow autonomously as teachers for the rest of their lives.

By empowering student-teachers to become autonomous, critical thinkers, it is expected that TEPs will make a significant contribution to the improvement of the teaching of English in Costa Rica. Thus, it is imperative to make certain that their English TEPs are based on reflective practices in order to equip teachers with the tools for reaching the goal of providing Costa Ricans with high quality bilingual education. Based on this concern, the author of this article conducted research in 2009 for the purpose of corroborating what focus predominated at that time in the TP taken by student-teachers in the *Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés para I y II Ciclos* (BEIC) at Universidad Nacional (UNA).⁵ Attention is given here to the findings of that study that may serve as a basis for reflecting upon the need to reorient the focus of the BEIC, and more particularly that of the TP.

Theoretical Background

This section provides a broader perspective on the advances in the field of teacher education, beginning with a description of the three dominant *teacher-education models* that have prevailed throughout history. Secondly, it discusses the notion of *experiential learning* as a necessary framework for educating reflective practitioners. Finally, it addresses *reflective teaching*, starting with a definition of the term, followed by a discussion of its nature and importance, and closing with a description of the tools that fit the needs

⁵ Christian Fallas, "An Exploration of the Reflective Teaching Component of the *Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés para I y II Ciclos con Salida Lateral de Diplomado*. Master's Degree Thesis. Universidad Nacional. 2009. The students of this major will become teachers of English for students in primary school.

of reflective teaching. This entire section serves as the theoretical background for interpreting the findings discussed here concerning the research conducted.

Models of Teacher Education

The prescriptive tendency that still prevails in TPs exhibits traces of what were once well-accepted practices in teacher education. Although history has witnessed a shift in paradigms, for some reason, teacher educators still resort to the main tendencies of the past to educate the students that will be leading language teaching in the future. Currently, three paradigms in teacher education are believed to coexist: the craft model, the applied science model and the reflective model.

The Craft Model

The craft model revolves around the transmission of experiential knowledge. This model conceives that senior practitioners, whose knowledge is derived from their accumulated practical experience, constitute the optimal source from which inexperienced teachers learn. The role of the novice teachers in this model is to imitate the knowledgeable master who has practiced the craft for an extended period of time. In this regard, Wallace states that “the wisdom of a profession resides in an experienced professional practitioner: someone who is expert in the practice of the craft. The young trainee learns by imitating the expert’s techniques and by following the expert’s instructions and advice.”⁶ Wallace goes on to say that the success of this teacher education model was conceived for a largely static society, in the context of which the teaching practices passed on to younger generations of teachers remain effective. However, current societies are subject to constant change and are more and more heterogeneous as they become part of the global village.

⁶ Wallace, 6.

The Applied Science Model

In contrast, the applied science model is based on the assumption that inexperienced teachers have to learn the theory that researchers and scholars have proposed about teaching, and then put this knowledge into practice in the classroom. The followers of this model argue that the success of inexperienced teachers depends upon an accurate understanding of the theory and its correct application. Thus, failure in teaching is attributed to the trainees' lack of understanding of the theory or an inappropriate application of it.⁷

The Reflective Model

The reflective model is a guiding paradigm in teacher education that bridges the gap between theory and practice. On the one hand, it encourages practitioners to understand and assess their teaching practices in the light of theory; and on the other, it promotes evaluating the appropriateness of theory in the light of practical experience. This model prepares prospective teachers to make critical choices to favor the practices that best suit their own students. This paradigm is intended to guide teachers in acquiring the skills for adapting their practices to the rapid changes of the world of today. Finally, this model eradicates the artificial dichotomy between theory and practice, and between experts and practitioners. In so doing, the reflective model dismisses the traditional hierarchy according to which experienced possessors of knowledge were at the top of the pyramid while inexperienced practitioners, called to imitate their seniors, were placed at the bottom. Instead, the reflective model gives teachers (novices or not) the role of researchers who assess the data collected in their classrooms, as they work with their students, for the purpose of testing and refining the effectiveness of their teaching practices.⁸

⁷ Wallace, 8-9.

⁸ Wallace, 12.

Experience as a Point of Departure for Learning How to Teach

The application of a reflective model to teacher education requires a thorough understanding of how experience can become a point of departure for enhancing teaching expertise. This means that before attempting to help student-teachers become critical thinkers, the teacher educators must be skillful at facilitating learning from simple and concrete experiences that take place during the TP process. As David A. Kolb explains: “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”⁹ This model has gained popularity because, rather than facilitating content-based teaching, it serves as a framework that provides learners with the tools and skills to continue learning on their own. According to Kolb, there are two reasons for calling this perspective of learning experiential:

The first is to tie it clearly to its intellectual origins in the work of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget. The second is to emphasize the central role that experience plays in the learning process. This differentiates learning theory from rationalist and other cognitive theories of learning that tend to give emphasis to acquisition, manipulation, and recall of abstract symbols, and from behavioral learning theories that deny any role for consciousness and subjective experience in the learning process.¹⁰

Put in different words, experiential learning can be distinguished from traditional approaches to teaching and learning because, rather than focusing attention on memorizing and manipulating a body of abstract knowledge, this theory—as described by Kolb (referring to Jerome Bruner)—posits that “the purpose of education is to stimulate inquiry and skill in the process of knowledge

⁹ David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984) 38.

¹⁰ Kolb, 20.

getting.”¹¹ This approach emphasizes that student-teachers do not start the TP as a tabula rasa but walk into the classroom with a wealth of ideas and beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning.

The experiential learning cycle thus involves: (1) a concrete experience, (2) reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active experimentation.¹² The experience, which can be that which novice teachers have had prior to the TP or that provided by the teacher educator within the classroom, is used as the foundation for the activities performed throughout the reflection cycle. After the concrete experience is shared, prospective teachers are required to work individually on describing it objectively, by referring only to facts, without resorting to opinion, evaluation, judgment, or analysis. In the next step, they work with other classmates in a group session that serves as a space for them to analyze, evaluate, and assess the experience for the purpose of deriving hypotheses, making generalizations, and drawing tentative conclusions. Next, novice teachers confront their hypotheses, generalizations and tentative conclusions with relevant theories proposed by researchers and experts in the field. For this purpose, the prospective teachers are required to read selected texts on the topic under discussion to understand the concrete experience further and build upon their initial grasp of it. Finally, the student-teachers engage in active experimentation with the new learning they have gained.

In sum, experiential learning acknowledges that practical experience is a valuable source for learning and stresses that this learning should be enriched and expanded by theory. Experiential learning does not question the value of sound teaching-learning theory, but rather gives it a different role and position in the learning cycle. In other words, within this approach, theory is at the service of the learners to make sense of their own experiences through reflection.

¹¹ Kolb, 27.

¹² Randall, Mick and Barbara Thornton, *Advising and Supporting Teachers* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2001) 45.

Reflective Teaching

In recent years, a number of experts have undertaken studies on reflective teaching. This effort has resulted in a large body of theory regarding how reflective teaching is actually implemented and what the benefits are for those who tackle their jobs reflectively. This section surveys the theoretical issues surrounding reflective teaching.

The Relevance of Reflective Teaching

In TEPs, student-teachers should be prepared in areas such as teaching theories, communication skills, content-subject-matter knowledge, pedagogical reasoning, decision making, and in understanding the teaching context. These three last components are critical if the aim is to educate reflective practitioners to be capable of assessing and adapting their practices to continue growing professionally in an autonomous manner. Programs that focus on the first three components mentioned are likely to fail to educate reflective practitioners, and instead educate professionals who do not question the methods, strategies and techniques that they were taught in the TEP. Knowing about theory is not enough to have a well-prepared English teacher. Jack Richards speaks of the importance of complementing methodologies, strategies and techniques with higher levels of thinking skills: “While competence in a teaching methodology and the mastery of teaching skills and techniques may be thought of as the starting point in teacher development, they need to go hand in hand with an examination of the specialized thinking and problem-solving skills that teachers call upon when they teach.”¹³

Reflective teaching involves looking at teaching from within, as the starting point for instructors to examine beliefs, values and principles regarding teaching from an introspective standpoint. They should not just go through the motions of teaching in the

¹³ Richards, 10.

workplace, but rather reflect on what goes on in the classroom in order to improve their teaching.

The Philosophy of Teaching in Critical Reflection

Teachers that are able to draw up a well-defined teaching statement are more aware of the beliefs, values and principles underlying their teaching. As they explore their ideas regarding good teaching and appropriate conditions for language learning, they become increasingly critical of what they do. Concomitantly, as they explore the assumptions and beliefs that make up their philosophy of teaching, they become able to assess their own teaching practices, drawing knowledge from their teaching experiences. This statement is conceived as the starting point of an on-going process of reflection on their teaching practices, which will, in time, refine their teaching philosophy. Jack Richards explains how activities promoting “self-inquiry and critical thinking are central for continued professional growth, and are designed to help teachers move from guiding their actions and decisions by routine to guiding them by reflection and critical thinking.”¹⁴

Critical Reflection Tools

Among the most effective tools for critical reflection proposed by scholars are *critical dialogues*, *peer observation*, *teaching journals*, *videotaping lessons*, and *the professional portfolio*. Each is described briefly below.

Critical Dialogues

The purpose behind critical dialogues is to discuss teaching incidents with the help of peers in order to assess personal experience and avoid biased interpretations and actions in teaching. Critical dialogues go a step beyond self-reflection because as peers interact with one another, dialogue provides a scaffold that guides reflection.

¹⁴ Richards, 23-24.

In talking to others about classroom concerns, teachers are challenged to look at their concerns from different perspectives.¹⁵ In other words, critical dialogues in the teaching arena are likely to free teachers from inappropriate and ineffective teaching practices. As teachers verbalize their concerns, their critical dialogue partners challenge them to explore other alternatives, to analyze and respond to those concerns.

Peer Observation

Another useful tool for reflection is peer observation, especially when used in a non-traditional sense. Traditionally, peer observation has involved teachers observing others or one another for evaluation purposes. The conceptualization of peer observation proposed here is non-traditional in the sense that student-teachers observe one another to learn more about what they do in the classroom, from an introspective standpoint. Bailey et al. explain this further as follows:

Practicing reciprocal peer observation allows us as teachers to put our professional selves in someone else's shoes and to have someone else try ours on as well. This process can help to build an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding. These factors are especially important if teacher development is to be promoted in institutions or educational systems undergoing rapid change, as well as in those in which attitudes and teaching behavior may have become entrenched or static.¹⁶

Teaching Journals

Another tool recommended in specialized literature on reflective teaching is the teaching journal, which is an account of complete classes or classroom events that the teacher records for later reflection.¹⁷ One of the benefits of keeping a journal is that

15 Carol A. Marchel, "Learning to Talk/Talking to Learn: Teaching Critical Dialogue," *Teaching Educational Psychology* 2.1 (2007): 1-9. Web. 20 Jan. 2009.

16 Cathleen M. Bailey, Andy Curtis and David Nunan, *Pursuing Professional Development: The Self as Source* (Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 2001) 162-163.

17 Thomas Farrel, "Reflective Practice in the Professional Development of Teachers of Adult English Language Learners," *CAELA Network Brief* (2008): 1-3. Web. 15 Jan. 2009.

in each entry teachers not only collect data about their practices in the classroom, but also take the first step into reflection as they compose the written account of the classroom events.¹⁸ In time, journals help teachers notice behavior patterns which either reveal areas that require changes, or point to successful practices. McDonough, as quoted in Farrell, also refers to the benefits of keeping a teaching journal when he affirms that those “who write regularly about their teaching can become more aware of ‘day-to-day behaviors and underlying attitudes, alongside outcomes and the decisions that all teachers need to take.’”¹⁹

Videotaping Lessons

Teachers have to multi-task, and are, therefore, always busy. In fact, there is so much going on in class that teachers have to be attentive so that important data about their teaching practices do not go unnoticed. A useful tool to manage this problem is videotaping lessons because it objectively captures many important aspects of the classroom such as error correction techniques, equity of participation, body language, etc. Videos collect facts without any judgments involved as they capture what went on in the class and allow teachers to see what students see. Teachers can learn quite a bit from looking at their teaching from the perspective of the learners.²⁰

The Professional Portfolio

A potentially powerful tool in teachers’ development is the professional portfolio, a collection of representations of a teacher’s professional growth, followed by critical reflections that attest to their commitment and efforts to improving their teaching practices. James Dean Brown and Kate Wolfe-Quintero, quoted in Bailey et al., define a teaching portfolio as a “purposeful collection of any aspect

¹⁸ Following Bartlett; Bailey et al., 48.

¹⁹ Farrell, 3.

²⁰ Bailey et al., 117-132.

of a teacher's work that tells the story of a teacher's efforts, skills, abilities, achievements, and contributions to his/her colleagues, institution, academic discipline or community."²¹

To conclude, the need to assess teaching practices constantly is based, according to the authors reviewed, on the changing nature of the learning needs and of the teaching contexts in which learning takes place. This reality, according to these scholars, calls for an evaluation of whether the instructors' teaching practices are satisfying the changing needs and demands of the students and society.

Research Methodology

For the purposes of the study conducted in the BEIC in 2009, the TP was selected as the course representing the most significant stage of student-teachers' development. For a period of six months, data collection tools such as non-participant observation, artifacts, structured questionnaires, and interviews were used to gather information about the dominant practices in the formation of student-teachers. Specifically, the focus of the study was to determine to what extent teacher educators guided student-teachers in defining their own philosophies of teaching, what reflection tools were used for this purpose, and how the teacher educators' feedback contributed to the novice teachers' development of reflection skills.

The Reflective Model in the BEIC: Fact or Opinion?

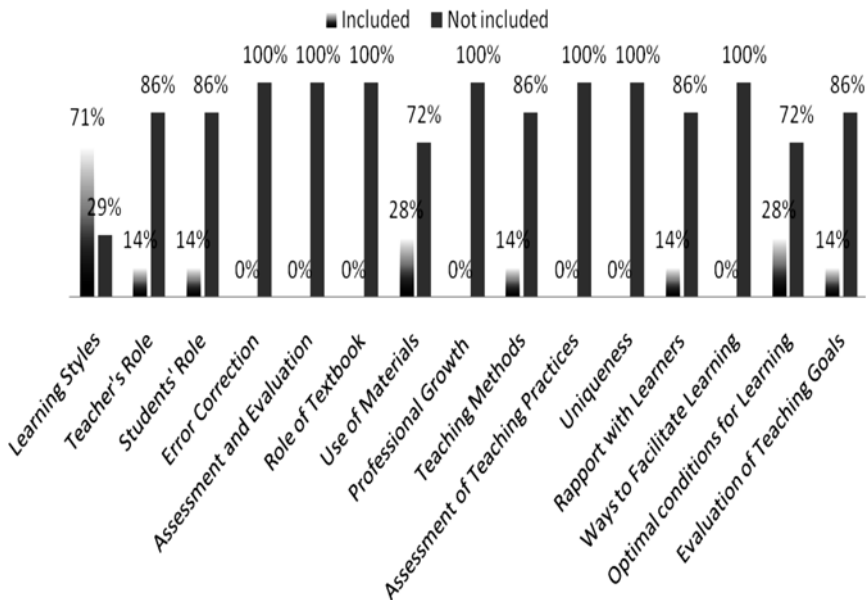
This section summarizes the findings from that research, in particular those which are relevant for this publication. In that study, the author was able to establish that there was a mismatch between what the curriculum of the BEIC states and what actually occurred in the TP classroom.

²¹ Bailey et al., 224.

The Student-Teachers' Philosophy of Teaching

A TEP that is based on a reflective paradigm is expected to help the student-teachers define their own philosophy of teaching. However, the findings of the 2009 study revealed that this does not appear to be the case in the BEIC; Table 1 indicates the aspects the student-teachers chose as components of their teaching philosophy.

Table 1. Aspects included and not included in teaching philosophy, according to the results of questionnaire applied to student-teachers (October 2009).



The information was collected with a questionnaire that included a definition of what a philosophy of teaching is (in case they were unfamiliar with the term) and a description of its main components. The administration of this instrument revealed unexpected findings. When the student- teachers outlined their teaching philosophy, the

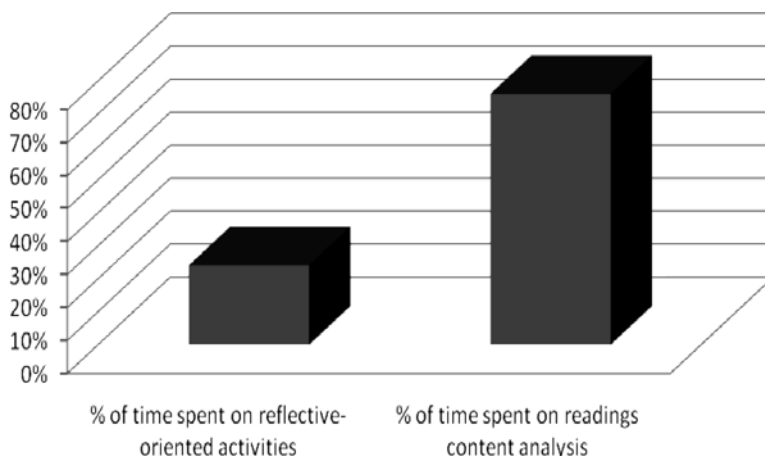
majority omitted elements such as lesson planning (86%), classroom management (86%), teacher's and students' role (86%), error correction (100%), assessment and evaluation of students' language skills (100%), professional growth (86%), and assessment of their teaching practices (100%). The only aspect that most of them did mention was learning styles (71%). Regarding their teaching style, most did not cover aspects such as the uniqueness of their own style (100%), the way they establish rapport with their students (86%), and the way they facilitate language learning for their students (100%). With respect to teaching goals, 72% did not mention the optimal conditions for language learning to take place, and 86% did not describe how they evaluate the achievement of their teaching goals.

Considering that these student-teachers will be on their own once they finish the TEP, it becomes even more important for them to acquire the knowledge and skills that could enable them to continue to assess their teaching practices. However, unless they become aware of how they teach and why they teach that way, they will not be able to tackle the task of self-assessment to grow professionally. The causes related to the student-teachers' lack of capacity to articulate their philosophy of teaching include the type of activities carried out and the nature of the feedback provided to the student-teachers in the TP course.

Reflective-Oriented Tasks in the TP

Information was gathered about the type of tasks developed in the TP class and classified according to the reflective or non-reflective orientation of each task. A series of structured observations were carried out between August and October 2009. The time spent on each type of task was recorded in the observation instrument and summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of reflective and non-reflective activities in the course *Praxis pedagógica*.



The data revealed that only 24% of the class-time was spent on reflective-oriented activities, and 76% on other non-reflective activities. A description of both the reflective and non-reflective activities carried out in the TP is provided below.

Critical Incidents

Among the three reflective-oriented activities observed during fieldwork, the one most frequently recorded during observations was the analysis of critical incidents. This activity consisted of having the student-teachers observe the cooperating teacher in the elementary school setting for the purpose of identifying an event (either positive or negative) that caught their attention. Then they had to carry out a literature search for a better understanding of the incident selected. If the incident had a negative nature, they were required to propose a solution. The final product was a written report that each student-teacher had to submit to the teacher educator.

Several aspects have to be pointed out regarding this activity. Firstly, the student-teachers reflected on somebody else's practices, which is fine if done as a complementary activity to reflecting on their own practices. However, the student-teachers did very little reflecting on their own performance as they focused on assessing the cooperating teacher. That focus limited the student-teachers' opportunities to learn about their own teaching style and philosophy of teaching and to collect data about their own performance in the classroom. Secondly, the student-teachers came to the sharing session in the TP class with a pre-conceived solution for the incident. Thus, when other classmates provided alternative analyses to the novice teacher sharing the incident, these suggestions had a limited impact on the process of arriving at an objective solution to the incident. Finally, the student-teachers observed the practices of the cooperating teacher for evaluative purposes and not to learn about their own practices. This implies that the focus of these activities was much more on criticizing the classroom practices of others and much less on analyzing the effectiveness of their own habits.

One interesting pattern that emerged from the data collected by means of observations was that almost 100% of the critical incidents were about classroom management issues. This was further verified by examining some of the written reports that these student-teachers submitted. The same pattern emerged; the reflection that was derived from these critical incidents was almost exclusively about classroom management. That did not enable them to grow in other areas.

Critical incident analysis could have been used for having student-teachers observe themselves and reflect on their own practices as part of their TP. This significant variation in the activity would have allowed them to become more aware of their teaching philosophy. Likewise, having them vary the topics of their critical incident analyses would have resulted in more enriching experiences. In fact, one of the student-teachers actually made a comment in this regard during one of the sharing sessions, towards the end

of the semester: “I don’t know what I learned from this because the incident did not happen to me.”

Journal Keeping

The other reflective activity observed in the TP was a narrative account (journal) that the student-teachers were required to keep throughout the four weeks that they performed as teachers in their cooperating teacher’s class. In this narrative account, they were asked to describe the development of their lesson plans. However, these reports were turned in to the teacher educator, and not much time was spent on sharing or discussing them in the TP classroom. Occasionally, time was taken to have the novice teachers discuss how they had gotten along during their teaching experience, but again, much of what was shared turned out to be related to classroom management problems.

The Portfolio

The third kind of critically-oriented activity was the portfolio, which was meant to include the materials and lesson plans that the student-teachers used in the development of their classes. This portfolio was supposed to include a critical reflection at the beginning, in the middle and at the end, about the learning gained from the TP. However, the teacher educator did not provide feedback about the student-teachers’ reflections on their performance in the TP because the portfolio was seen and worked on as a product. If the educator had checked advances of the portfolio, she could have asked questions to trigger further reflection, critical thinking, and retrospection. Bastidas explains that a portfolio should provide evidence of a process of reflection and self-evaluation and that one of the essential components of a teaching portfolio is the teacher’s set of beliefs:

The teacher should begin with a statement of ones’ philosophy of education and one’s basic principles and beliefs about language, and

about learning and teaching a second or a foreign language. This information can prompt reflection on how teaching choices match one's beliefs about teaching.²²

Portfolios can be very powerful tools that trigger growth. However, in the case of the portfolio put together by the student-teachers, no class-time was spent discussing and orienting its development. In addition, they were not required to include their philosophy of teaching. This appears to indicate that the portfolio was conceived to be handed in as a product rather than as a process from which to derive meaningful learning, resulting from introspective scrutiny of the student-teachers' performance.

Non-reflective Tasks in the TP

The non-reflective tasks, which took up 76% of class-time throughout the observation period of the TP course, mostly consisted of student-teachers giving oral presentations based on readings assigned by the teacher educator. These presentations were based entirely on theory, with no pre- or post-activity to trigger reflection on the part of the student-teachers. Upon the completion of each presentation, the teacher educator asked if they had any questions and if there were none, the class moved on to another oral presentation. If no other presentations were scheduled, the teacher educator would dismiss the class.

The Nature of Feedback in the Teaching Practicum

The type of feedback given is also essential in student-teachers' development of reflective teaching skills. Prescriptive feedback creates passive and non-reflective habits while feedback that triggers reflection empowers them to take control of their professional development. Instead of being told what they need to improve about their

²² Jesus A. Bastidas Arteaga, "The Teaching Portfolio: A Tool to Become a Reflective Teacher," *Forum* 34 (1996): 26.

teaching practices, student-teachers must be allowed to reflect on their own performance autonomously. In this way, they develop the skills enabling them to continue assessing their teaching practices upon the completion of the TEP. Two professors were in charge of the TP: one responsible for the course itself (Professor 1) and the other responsible for supervising the student-teacher practicum in the elementary school setting (Professor 2). Both provided feedback for the student-teachers in the group; however, the kind of feedback differed.

Professor 1 (P1) provided both reflective and prescriptive feedback. In class, P1 asked questions triggering reflection and suggested better ways of teaching as well. In addition, P1 gave prescriptive feedback consisting of anecdotes or direct recommendations. Both types of feedback (reflective and prescriptive) were observed in the classroom activities; nonetheless, the latter predominated. Notwithstanding the above, P1 gave very little feedback in response to the student-teachers' written reports. Most of what P1 wrote on these, after reviewing them, was comments such as "Very nice!", "Good job!", and other forms of approval with no further specifications.

On the other hand, the teaching practicum supervisor (Professor 2) almost never resorted to questions to trigger reflection. Instead, P2 gave direct feedback. The prescriptive comments found in the rubrics returned to the student-teachers include phrases such as the following (collected August-October 2009):

1. "You need to improve the projection of your voice."
2. "The album activity took up the 2 lessons. I think that kind of activity should take no more than 40 minutes."
3. "Set clear limits and rules (in the classroom)."
4. "You need to make sure the students know what they have to do."
5. "The review could have been done in less time."
6. "Try to be more structured when giving instructions."
7. "Give students enough time to finish the tasks."

8. “The activity was too guided; when they finished, they could have practiced in pairs.”

In the rubrics analyzed, there were mostly positive appraisals, followed by direct suggestions and recommendations about aspects requiring improvement. Although these direct comments have an important impact, in the sense that the student-teachers modify their practices to improve their performance, this type of feedback does not give the novice teachers the opportunity to become reflective; this type of advice tends to contribute to make prospective teachers passive.

The inability on the part of the student-teachers to articulate their philosophy of teaching, a clear orientation of the TP course towards non-reflective activities and a tendency to provide prescriptive feedback were the three most salient findings of the 2009 study. These findings point to a need to reorient the TP towards practices that would empower novice teachers to become autonomous reflective practitioners.

Final Remarks

The study conducted with the BEIC revealed information of interest not only to those involved in the administration of that program, but to administrators of other similar programs as well. The findings consistently suggest a mismatch between what the curriculum states regarding reflection being one of its basic paradigms and what actually occurred in the TP classroom.

It was discovered that student-teachers were being sent to primary schools, with no clear idea about their beliefs concerning very important aspects of language teaching, such as classroom management, the teacher's and students' roles, teaching methods, assessment and evaluation, error correction and teaching goals. This situation is not surprising when analyzed in the light of the other findings

on the orientation of the activities carried out in the TP classroom and the nature of the feedback given to the novice teachers.

Over 75% of class time was spent on activities (such as oral presentations and oral reports) which did not have a reflective orientation. Although there were some cases of attempts to help the novice teachers become reflective, most of what went on in the classroom fell within the applied science model of education, which states that theory should guide teaching. At times, however, the teacher educators' anecdotes and demonstrations about how to teach revealed traces of the craft model, which assumes that inexperienced teachers should imitate the experts in the craft.

The few activities that did have a reflective orientation were single-focused and pointed in the wrong direction. That is, the discussions on critical incidents revolved around classroom management problems that the cooperating teachers had. There are two problems here: the repeated occurrence of a single topic and the fact that the student-teachers were observing others for evaluative purposes, and not for the purpose of learning about the beliefs and assumptions that make up their own philosophy of teaching. That is the traditional approach to peer observation: to evaluate the practices of others. This opportunity could have been used to provide a space for these future teachers to learn about and reflect upon their own professional practice.

The dominance of a mixture of the applied science and craft models in teacher education is even more evident in the type of feedback that they were given. Although the teacher educator at times resorted to questions to trigger reflection, her dominant approach was still mostly prescriptive. Her strategy was basically to ask a few questions to guide the novice teachers' thinking and analysis, followed by anecdotes from her own teaching experience to exemplify what should be done in the classroom. Most of the feedback provided by the supervisor was in the form of positive appraisals and specific instructions about what the student-teachers had to improve and how that

might be achieved. As explained above, this prescriptive approach to giving feedback, rather than empowering the future teachers to reflect upon their own teaching practices, can cause them to become passive professionals who are less capable of growing autonomously.

However, student-teachers who have been exposed mainly to non-reflective activities and who have received mainly prescriptive feedback about their teaching practices cannot be expected to have a well-defined philosophy of teaching. Novice teachers who have not been given the space and tools to reflect upon their own concrete experiences cannot be expected to be able to grow autonomously by reflecting on their teaching practices. These findings appear to reveal a mismatch between what the BEIC curriculum establishes as one of its main paradigms (reflection) and what actually occurs during the TP. The question arising here is: How can the student-teachers become reflective practitioners if the TP, one of the most significant stages in their formation, does not provide them with the space and tools to do so?

The BEIC is based on paradigms and cross-curricular themes which, if implemented properly, could provide student-teachers with an outstanding preparation. The BEIC curriculum establishes that student-teachers are to be guided to “construct their own theoretical perspectives, subject to confrontation and reconstruction,” and that the purpose of the program is to “educate autonomous, creative, proactive and innovative professionals capable of shaping and giving direction to their professional development in response to the natural social context in which they perform as teachers.”²³

These very crucial goals of the BEIC call for the implementation of a reflective approach to teacher education because it is precisely this approach that can empower student-teachers to construct and reconstruct their theoretical perspectives of language teaching

²³ Giselle Miranda, Rafael Jiménez and Lelia Villalobos. Plan de Estudios de la Carrera de Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés con Salida Lateral de Diplomado (Heredia: Universidad Nacional, 2004) 17.

autonomously. It must be realized that the reflective model cannot not be implemented successfully, if the teaching staff is not previously instructed in the procedures, implications and nature of that paradigm. Thus, it is highly recommended to begin a process of educating all professors that will eventually be assigned as teacher educators or supervisors of the pedagogical courses for the BEIC, and of the TP, in particular.

Those in charge of designing and redesigning courses have to make certain that a significant amount of tools used to trigger critical reflection are included, because that would give student-teachers more opportunities to reflect on their performance and their philosophy of teaching. Furthermore, a set of guidelines should be designed for using tools such as critical dialogues, portfolios, teaching journals, student surveys, video-taped lessons, action research, and peer observation, so that they are always used following a reflective approach that encourages the student-teachers to assess their own teaching practices. Likewise, it is advisable to write a list of tentative aspects of their performance that the student-teachers can assess when using the tools.

In conclusion, student-teachers in the BEIC will become “autonomous, creative, proactive and innovative professionals capable of shaping and giving direction to their professional development in response to the natural and social context in which they perform as teachers,”²⁴ only if efforts are invested into aligning what the curriculum establishes and what actually takes place in the classrooms. By adopting a reflective approach to teacher education, future teachers will be better prepared to continue to grow autonomously for the rest of their professional lives.

²⁴ Miranda et al., 17.