Experiences that Impact EFL Mexican Teachers' Professional Development

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Abstract

This study attempts to explore the teaching experiences of students in an ELT master's program at a public university in central Mexico and how these experiences impacted their professional development. The data was gathered through narratives. This is a case study which used narrative inquiry for the analysis of the data. The analysis consisted of the identification of the experiences and their categorization in two categories; one for difficult teaching experiences and the other for rewarding experiences. The study reports that the most difficult experiences involved students' misbehavior and lack of motivation. The rewarding experiences were related to the achievement of the participants' goals in their field. Both kinds of experiences contributed to these teachers' professional development.

Resumen

El presente estudio pretende investigar las experiencias difíciles y gratificantes que los profesores del programa de maestría de una universidad pública localizada en la parte central de México vivieron durante su proceso de enseñanza y la manera en que dichas experiencias impactaron su desarrollo profesional. La información fue obtenida a través de narrativas. El análisis de la información fue hecho a través de la investigación narrativa con la orientación de estudio de caso. El análisis consistió en la identificación de las experiencias y la categorización de dichas experiencias en dos categorías; una para las experiencias difíciles y la otra categoría para las experiencias gratificantes que los profesores vivieron dentro de sus contextos reales. En primer lugar la investigación reporta que las experiencias difíciles involucran la mala conducta de los estudiantes y su falta de motivación. Las experiencias gratificantes fueron relacionadas con el logro de las metas de los participantes dentro de su campo laboral. Ambos tipos de experiencias contribuyeron para el desarrollo profesional de los profesores.

Introduction

In education in general, there is a trend to focus more on the students' learning processes and to overlook the teachers' learning processes. There are, of course, a significant number of mandatory in-service teachers' courses. However, teachers often report they learn little from those courses or have problems implementing what they learn in their classrooms.

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Current research in this field has indicated that teachers definitively play a significant role in students' learning processes. Darling-Hammond and Delta (1996) state:

> *After two years of intense study and discussion, the commission - a 26-member bipartisan blue-ribbon panel supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York - concluded that the reform of elementary and secondary education depends first and foremost on restructuring its foundation, the teaching profession. The restructuring, the commission made clear, must go in two directions: toward increasing teachers' knowledge to meet the demands they face and toward redesigning schools to support high-quality teaching and learning. (p.1)*

Thus, there is a need to explore how and where teachers learn.

In order to prepare effective teachers, "teacher education should lay a foundation for lifelong learning" (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p.359). This means teachers do not only learn from what they are taught during their academic preparation and continuing education courses but also from their experiences lived during their teaching practices. They usually face different experiences related to their way of teaching and the kind of students they have in a group. Those experiences can be diverse and they can have either a difficult or rewarding implication. The kind of experience that teachers live depends on their teaching context, their years of experiences and how they teach their classes. Teachers may implement different methodologies in their classes depending on their institutions, their students and the stage of their professional development. Those experiences, in turn, may have an impact on the teachers' beliefs about teaching and their actual teaching.

According to Calderhead and Gates (1993, p.4) teachers learn to teach in various ways, approaching their task based on different background experiences. Teachers are in a continuous learning process that occurs when they reflect on their teaching experiences. The aim of this research was to identify the difficult and rewarding experiences that teachers in this study had during the development of their profession in real contexts and the impact these had on their professional development.

Teachers' Difficult and Rewarding Experiences

Becoming a successful language teacher is not a very easy task. It requires not only to know the language, but also to know and be able to implement different language teaching methodologies, techniques and strategies in their specific contexts. Richards and Nunan (1997) state that "effective instruction therefore depends on factors such as time-on-task, question patterns, feedback, grouping and task decisions, as well as on factors such as classroom management and structuring" (p. 12). All these different factors are involved in the successful development of a class and

thus, have to be developed in order to succeed as a professional language teacher.

Many teachers receive their initial training at a university. Moore (2004) states that:

> *...teachers are trained in the acquisition of certain competences related to aspects of classroom management, long term, medium term, and short term planning, developing and sharing subject knowledge, and assessing, recording and reporting students' work-leading to the achievement of prescribed assessable and (presumably) acquired-for-life 'standards'. (pp. 3-4)*

All these competences are taught during their teacher education programs. A future teacher needs to acquire them during the courses in order to be able to apply these competences in his/her classes. Knowing how to deal with classroom management, plan classes, facilitate knowledge, assess students and keep a record of students' academic development are basic teaching competences. A teacher who is going to start teaching in a real context should also know about language and learning theories in order to construct a rationale which permeates the teacher's practice. However, novice teachers often have had little teaching experience and so have to develop the competences mentioned above in order to apply them effectively in their real classroom situation.

As soon as the teachers get involved in teaching they start living different kinds of experiences which can be difficult or rewarding for them. Student misbehavior and lack of motivation are two aspects related to difficult experiences that teachers often face during their teaching. They have to confront students' misbehavior during their classes and these situations often irritate them. They need to learn how to handle disruptive behavior in the classroom. At the beginning this is generally frustrating for them because they believe they lack classroom management skills. However, when these teachers become conscious of their problem and start thinking about a solution, they develop professionally. Several teachers deal with their problem by reading about different classroom management strategies and activities and then change or adapt their way of teaching. Other teachers start by taking a course in teaching or study a master's program to learn more about their profession.

Another aspect that is related to teachers' difficult experiences in the classroom is the lack of learners' motivation. It is difficult for teachers to develop a class in which all the students enjoy the activities and are happy throughout the class. In fact, often learners show a lack of motivation in the language class. Furthermore, Curwin (1992, cited in Charles, 2005) mentions the class does not have to be only attractive to the learners, but it also has to be productive. It is very important to take

into account that an attractive class does not guarantee students' learning processes. A class has to be attractive and productive at the same time. Dornyei (1994) deems that motivation is a determinant that provokes second language learning. Based on this idea, teachers feel obligated to motivate their students. Consequently, when teachers face a lack of student motivation, they tend to worry. They start looking for different ways to develop their classes in order to motivate their students. They, as mentioned above, develop professionally when they identify there is a problem in their classes and start working on possible ways to solve it.

On the other hand, teachers also face rewarding experiences when teaching. Teachers feel satisfaction when learners recognize their efforts and when students demonstrate what they have already learned. These rewarding experiences contribute to increasing teachers' motivation.

Tayyab and Farid (2011) state that teacher motivation is affected by many factors, among which are classroom environment, student's behavior, and rewards/incentives. (p. 298) Teachers feel more comfortable with their teaching competences when they have recognition from their students. According to Bishay (1996) "Teachers with strong positive attitudes about teaching had students whose self-esteem was high. Students seem to recognize the effectiveness of teachers who are satisfied with their teaching performance" (p. 147). This, in turn, motivates teachers to continue working on their professional development. This can be seen when teachers enroll in a master's degree to continue with their professional preparation and when they report changes in their ways of thinking and teaching.

Both the difficult and rewarding experiences lived by the teachers help them in their professional development. According to Vrasidas and Glass (2004), "Professional development helps teachers develop the content knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their classrooms" (p. 2). The different elements that teachers develop during their professional lives are the ones that help them to perform their teaching professionally. Vrasidas and Glass (2004) state that "Professional development can take a variety of shapes: collective or individual development, continuing education, pre-service and in-service education, group work, team curriculum development, peer collaboration and peer support" (p. 2). Professional development, as Fullan (1991, cited in Vrasidas and Glass, 2004, p. 2) argued is, "the sum total of formal and informal learning experiences throughout one's career". As we can see, all the different aspects included in professional development, are what can make teachers better professionals.

It is important to know what makes a good teacher. According to Calderhead and Shorrock (1997) these are the "different aspects of the teaching role-the teacher as expert in their subject; the teacher as

facilitator of learning; the teacher as a motivator and source of inspiration; the teacher as upholder of moral standards" (p. 1). Teachers have to know about the subject they are teaching, but they also have to be facilitators of knowledge. They have the responsibility of motivating their students to learn.

As mentioned before, to be an English teacher is not an easy task. In fact, it is a demanding profession due to the different types of activities that the teacher has to implement. Feiman (2001) states that "New teachers really have two jobs to do—they have to do the job they were hired for and they have to learn to do that job. No matter what kind of preparation a teacher receives, some aspects of learning to teach can only be learned on the job" (p. 2). A teacher is not only the person who is in front of the classroom sharing knowledge with the learners, but he or she is also the one who knows how to lead the class dynamically, how to deal with the behavior of the learners in a classroom and how to manage the different situations that occur during the teaching-learning process.

Apart from all these activities they have to be aware of different experiences that can help them to change and grow professionally. Their everyday experiences can be enriching for their professional development, especially those experiences that arise from student–teacher interaction and the socialization of knowledge. Those experiences occur when students answer questions, make presentations, act in a role-play, write any kind of text and listen to different kinds of information. Teachers have to be open to improve, to change their methodologies and to carry out research on the language teaching and learning processes. At present, the education system in our country is demanding teachers who are up-to-date and have better teaching competences.

Language teachers face a variety of situations during their classes which are reflected in their difficult and rewarding teaching experiences. These experiences lived by the teachers provoke a change in their professional lives. Fortunately, these changes generally help teachers to improve their teaching and can be reflected in the improvement of classroom management skills and the motivation which may contribute to teachers' professional development. Therefore, the identification of those experiences and the way in which they impact teachers' professional development may help both novice and experienced language teachers. They can take advantage of those experiences to change or improve their teaching practice.

Research Questions

The following are the questions which guided this research:

1. What are the difficult and rewarding experiences that EFL Mexican teachers face in real contexts when they teach English to their students?
2. In what way do these experiences teachers face personally have an impact on their performance?

The Present Study

The purpose of this research was to identify the most frequent experiences that teachers faced during their teaching experience. In this study, those experiences were classified into two categories. These categories were established due to the similarities in these teachers' experiences. The selected participants provided information related to their difficult and rewarding teaching experiences and how those experiences have impacted their professional development.

Methodology

The participants, instruments, procedure and orientation are described in the following sections.

Participants

This research focused on ten participants, eight females and two males. Their age ranged from 26 to 49 years old. The years of experience as English teachers ranged from three to thirty years. All the participants studied a major in Modern Languages at a public university in the central part of Mexico. Five of the ten participants had had the experience of being in the United States. Four of those five lived the experience of being foreign language teaching assistants. They taught Spanish to elementary and college students in the United States. The other participant worked in a summer camp as a counselor. From the participants, nine of them were currently working as English teachers either in public or private schools, and one of them was working as an English coordinator at her school. The participants had experience working with children, teenagers and adults and they were in contact with the policies of their schools. All of them were committed to their jobs, and were worried about being up-to-date because they wanted their students to enjoy learning a foreign language. As a result, all of them were currently studying a master's degree.

Instruments

The instrument used to collect the data was a narrative. A professor from the participants' research methodology class asked them to write a narrative describing their experiences as teachers. The narratives were used to obtain the information for the development of this research project.

Procedure

The professor asked the students to write a narrative. Then the students handed in their narrative and also gave copies of their narratives to all their classmates. This was how I collected the narratives for this research project. Once I had all the narratives, I read them three times until I finally chose 10 narratives from the 24 narratives that I received. The first time I read all the narratives and underlined the most significant information. The second time I decided to make a table with the principal categories of the narratives. The third time, I read the information from the table and picked out the narratives that contained the most significant information for the two categories that I established. The selection of those narratives was quite hard, but finally I decided to work with the ones that showed similar difficult and rewarding experiences of their performance as teachers and the experiences that have had an impact in their teaching process.

Rationale on the Orientation

Narrative inquiry was used for this study because according to Kramp (2004) "As a qualitative research method, narrative inquiry serves the researcher who wishes to understand a phenomenon or an experience rather than to formulate a logical or scientific explanation" (p.105). So, narrative inquiry was used to understand the data provided by the participants and interpret it for this study's purposes. Focused on the data provided by the participants in their narratives, I was able to understand how they had interpreted their teaching experiences and listen to their voices.

There are five qualitative traditions of inquiry: biography, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. The orientation that I followed for my research was "a case study". According to Cresswell (1998), "a case study is an exploration of a "bounded system" or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection" (p. 61). I chose this orientation because it allowed me to study the cases of different participants focused on the same purpose. As mentioned by Cresswell this orientation allows receiving information from documents and reports. I got the information from the ten participants through the use of narratives. A common context of the case existed and will be seen in the analysis. All the experiences took place in the teachers' classrooms. Through the use of this orientation I was able to analyze the information provided by the participants and classify it into two categories. The categories were chosen according to the similarities that the participants had lived in their teaching. The participants reported their difficult and rewarding experiences; consequently these two categories were established.

Analysis and Results

When I was reading the narratives, I could identify that the participants were sharing their experiences while developing their teaching methodology in real contexts. It was surprising to see that even though the participants worked in different contexts such as public and private schools, and at different levels such as elementary, middle high school and high school, they showed a lot of similarities in their experiences. Most of them emphasized that being an English teacher is not an easy task, but that it is a very rewarding activity. In fact, when they started working as English teachers, they were faced with a reality which was neither nice nor perfect. Most of these teachers believed that their classes were going to be perfect; however, they faced difficult experiences regarding classroom management and unmotivated students in their classes that changed their perspective about teaching. It was then, they realized that a teacher does not become a real teacher until he/she starts working in a school, with learners, in situations and with problems.

Students' Disruptive Behaviour

These teachers teach at diverse levels and their students are different; however, all of them presented similar difficulties. Based on the experiences shared by the participants, it was possible to identify that one of the main problems they faced in their classes was the learners' disruptive behaviour in the classroom. The biggest problem was when they were in front of a class and the students did not behave appropriately due to different circumstances. The following excerpts from the narratives illustrate this:

> *I was teaching children…. I had to change the activity almost every 10 or 15 minutes, otherwise they started to destroy everything. (Participant A)*

> *One of my biggest fears was not being able to control my students. In fact, I did have some problems regarding classroom management. (Participant B)*

> *…but at the end of the school day, I had class with the students from third grade in secondary level. It was terrible; one of the longest hours of my life…sometimes I feel that I do not have a good classroom management, focusing it on behavior. (Participant C)*

> *…at 17 years old I started teaching in a secondary school. I was myself a teenager teaching teenagers… My students were noisy, rude… Children were so difficult to control in class… As hard as I tried, I could not manage my classes. (Participant F)*

> *My first job was at Universidad del Valle de Puebla… I was very young and some students did not take me seriously. I have always been strict to students and at that school I had to be even more. (Participant H)*

> *The problem was that I could not handle students' behavior (or misbehavior) very well. (Participant I)*

The excerpts above indicate that six from the ten participants faced students' disruptive behavior. One influential factor was the age of the participants when they faced this problem; most of them were very young and had had little teaching experience. After facing these experiences, they felt very frustrated mainly because they were starting their careers. Although these experiences were disappointing for them, after some time they realized that they had to make some changes in order to take control of their groups. Most of them mentioned that through their experiences they learned to be more patient and stricter, as well as in time they became more mature. These changes helped these teachers to achieve better results in controlling their students' behavior. Consequently, they felt more motivated and confident to continue working as teachers and became more successful in their teaching. They learnt something from their experiences and started making changes in their teaching. As a result, they showed a growth in their professional lives that was reflected in the improvement of their teaching.

Teaching Children

After analyzing the problem of behavior, another aspect that caught my attention was that based on the participants' experiences they demonstrated that working with children is difficult. They consider that children behave in their classes; however, the children are not motivated to learn English. Children's lack of motivation can be demonstrated in the following lines.

> *I was teaching children… A difficulty was to find the best material for them, because I had to change the activity almost each 10 or 15 minutes. (Participant A)*

> *Another bad experienced was when I had class with children… I am not good with children... They got bored and they started to compare me with their last teacher… the scholar year was long. (Participant C)*

> *Children are very good learners… I faced another difficulty which was to learn how to treat them. (Participant G)*

> *I realized that working with kids was harder than I thought. Kids are very demanding and a kindergarten English teacher must be very spontaneous creative and very patient, and I think in that moment I wasn't. (Participant J)*

As we can see, four of the ten participants were really worried about knowing how to motivate the children in their classes. According to Fuller

(1969) "The motivation of the learner is generally conceded to influence his learning" (p. 207). To work with children requires the development of the teachers' imagination and creativeness, which are two difficult factors to develop and achieve in a class. It requires experience in working with kids, the use of the correct methodology and the search for activities, games and adequate material for kids. Fuller (1969) argues that students learn what they want to learn but they face difficulties with learning material that is not interesting for them (p.207).

Recognition and Achievement

On the other hand, several participants also faced rewarding experiences in their development as teachers. They have lived nice experiences that left them with positive thoughts of their profession. I have identified that the participants felt satisfied when their efforts were recognized by the learners or when they achieved their goals in the class, which is demonstrated in the following excerpts taken from the narratives.

> *I always feel glad when I see my students participate actively in class. It is also rewarding to see when they feel happy and proud of themselves because they did well on task, assignment, presentation, or in any other activity. (Participant B)*

> *…this teaching profession also includes a large amount of joy and gratitude… about junior high school...the best moments of my teaching experiences… Teenagers work wonderfully when they feel they are learning something useful. (Participant E)*

> *When I was 15 years old, I had to start working… I applied for a position as an English teacher in an elementary school nearby and I got it…that experience was great, the children were really nice and the parents, supportive. (Participant F)*

> *It was really rewarding to know that students were looking forward to be in my class again because I knew they have learned something from me. (Participant H)*

> *I feel very good when students tell me that they have understood something they had not for a long time. (Participant I)*

Five of the ten participants felt very satisfied with the goals that they had achieved. In my opinion they have gotten one of the main prizes for teachers which is the recognition from their students. This aspect helped them to become better teachers because they realized that they improved their teaching and felt motivated to continue learning and provide the best as teachers in their courses.

Teachers' Perceptions of Their Work

Based on some other information provided by the participants, I realized that some of them had different experiences and based on them they considered working with learners a difficult, but at the same time, a rewarding experience. This is shown in the following excerpts:

> *I was teaching children. I can say that it was really difficult, but also wonderful. (Participant A)*

> *...in a private school, there, I had the most wonderful experiences, but also I lived, not just bad stories, they were like a horror movie. (Participant C)*

> *Working in a kindergarten has been the most wonderful experience I have had as an English teacher... children are very good learners. However, if you are not strict with them, they can be a nightmare. (Participant G)*

> *For me working with adolescents was hard but also it was interesting because I took advantage of their interests and likes to do my classes.(Participant J)*

As seen above, four out of ten teachers shared the same ideas based on their experiences and had the same feelings. These teachers seemed to feel afraid of new challenges; however, when they achieved their goals, they felt really proud and even looked for more challenges.

Discussion

After analyzing the data provided by the participants, it was very interesting to realize that both difficult and rewarding experiences contribute to the teachers' professional development. When they first started teaching, these teachers believed that the knowledge obtained from their teaching preparation was enough for teaching in real contexts. However, through the difficult experiences they lived regarding misbehavior and the lack of motivation of their students, they realized that their beliefs were unrealistic. They considered that a teacher becomes a real teacher when they live these experiences in a real context. All these aspects contribute to their professional development. According to Vrasidas and Glass (2004), "Professional development helps teachers develop the content knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their classrooms" (p. 2).

The different participants mentioned that after living these difficult and rewarding experiences in their teaching they changed several aspects of their teaching. They were aware that through the years of experience they had become more knowledgeable about their subject. At the beginning of their careers they questioned themselves about different elements of the language; through their teaching practice they had learned more about the aspects they had to teach.

Another aspect in which they had improved was in the area of classroom management. At the beginning of their careers they considered that they were not able to control a group and they could not perform their classes in the way they planned them. Over time and with experiences they learned that they could have better classroom management if they were stricter with their groups.

Related to the learners' lack of motivation, participants considered that they had to prepare each one of their classes with different materials, activities and strategies. This way of working helped them to be better prepared for the future and they even developed a keen sense of improvisation. They planned their classes carefully but also there were times when they had to improvise an activity in order to keep their students' attention.

The rewarding experiences motivated the participants to continue working hard and to continue striving to improve their teaching. Apart from this, the good experiences showed the participants how they had improved during their teaching trajectory.

General Discussion

After analyzing all the data obtained in the narratives and the experiences provided by the participants, I can conclude that in the teaching process teachers face many difficulties, but also rewarding experiences. These experiences have an impact on the teachers' professional development. Teachers change their way of teaching by adopting different methodologies, techniques and activities. They also continue studying in order to be up-to-date. Teachers work on their professional preparation in order to teach according to the present education guidelines and individual school regulations. They became better teachers and they learned to deal with classroom management and how to motivate their students to work and learn in their classes.

The problems that I identified in the participants were classroom management and students' lack of motivation which are also present in my own experiences as an English teacher. I also reflected on these results in order to improve my teaching and to provide my learners with better tools for their language learning process. As the participants mentioned the good moments are when teachers achieve their main goal which is that students learn English and they are able to use it. Another point that was important to see is that some of the participants faced, concurrently both difficult and rewarding experiences.

Suggestions for Further Research

One of the interesting things from this study seems to have something to say about the *ways* these teachers developed. Like all types of learning there are formal and informal routes to development. Formal types could generally be described as institutional, planned, collective, and

occasionally mandatory. In contrast informal types of development seem to be primarily led by desire, motivation, necessity, and even desperation. As these examples above show, there is a distinct lack of reference to the more formal types of development. All of the teachers talked about their own self-discoveries which were the result of some kind of perceived need, some internal motivation that drove them to solve their problems or seek out new ways to teach.

In light of this, one of the most interesting lines of research might be related with looking at the implications of institutionally and externally driven professional development compared with personally and internally driven types of professional development. How can institutions provide development opportunities that equal the effectiveness of the personal need-driven development?

A number of other questions could be investigated as a continuation of this study. One directly related to the above could be looking at which experiences force or impel teachers to work on their professional development. Other lines of investigation could be related to the teaching aspects of the study. For example, researchers might like to know what the participants did to overcome the problem of misbehavior that they faced in their classes. It could be interesting to examine the different factors that are involved in provoking those difficult and rewarding teachers' experiences in the classroom and feelings while living those experiences.

Clearly, there are a lot of unexplored areas in research which could seek to understand teachers' development and experiences. It can provide a career's worth of investigation that enlighten our understanding as well as illuminate our own experiences as teachers.

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