

Pre- service teacher training: motivation, objectives and teaching strategies

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Abstract:

Trinity College Diploma in TESOL offers a compulsory part of the course titled Unknown Language Learning Experience. It is an assessed part of the course and it accounts for 20% of the final mark. Trainees have to write a language journal guided by a semi- structured questionnaire after observing and participating in four lessons taught in an unknown language. The main objective of this experience is to introduce teaching methodologies and activities suitable for total beginners and to show how to write up a lesson plans and do a contrastive analysis. In 2003 we have organized a course on the island of Gran Canaria training 24 students from the UK, Australia and Spain. Eleven/twelve years after the experience, in 2015, we have asked them the very same questions they had to answer back in 2003 in their journals. This action research procedure has proven the validity of the unknown language experience. The questions we have analysed deal with feeling, motivation, teaching strategies, objectives and techniques. 100% of them valued the experience as a positive one and 40% of them stated that they could follow the lesson precisely because only L2 was used. 100% of the trainees said that they have used the same unknown language teaching strategies since they have considered them as a very useful in language teaching methodology. Due to the success of the experiment we have done trial experiments from 2011- 2013 at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria with the main aim to implement the Unknown Language Experience in the core curriculum at the Teacher Training Faculty.

Keywords: L2, TESOL, journal, motivation, ULE

1. Introduction

The current manuscript focuses on the on-going search for an appropriate and eclectic methodology for the teaching and learning of foreign languages, and, more specifically, on the practice of reflective teaching and learning as a pedagogical tool for teachers as learners, in this case for pre-service teachers. Recent investigation projects in the field of foreign language pedagogy within the research area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have focused on the search for more effective, communicative, student-centred and purposeful approaches in language learning contexts, as well as greater reflection on the second language teaching and learning process itself, which has, in consequence, triggered a renewed interest in teacher and learner beliefs about learning and teaching (e.g. Weimar, 2013; Wright, 2011; Pollard and Collins, 2005; Stronge, 2002). There is little doubt that a learner's interpretations and conceptualizations influence their learning achievements, and this is a premise that will form the basis of the current study revolving around the pedagogical practice of reflecting on learning and teaching. Sometimes students' beliefs do not coincide with those of their teachers, creating dissatisfaction and lack of interest on both sides and, frequently, these ideas

are very difficult to change, since these predetermined conceptions as well as misconceptions mostly consist of both good and bad previous language learning experiences.

Therefore, initial teacher training in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Methodology might be the perfect opportunity to start developing critical reflection upon successful or ineffective teaching practice, and it might even be more effective if pre-service teachers could participate in a foreign language learning context as reflective and critical learners themselves, in which they can experience those processes or feelings their own future students might undergo in their own future teaching contexts. In consequence, we propose that teacher trainees should begin to master their reflective and critical skills during their initial training in order to further support their on-going professional learning and development.

2. Literature review

A great number of us have experienced the mismatches highlighted by Van Manen (1995) as novice instructors and this feeling can, in fact, hamper pre-service teachers because of their lack of the awareness of the crucial role of reflection in combination with their limited knowledge about the learning/teaching process. As a response to this, this manuscript aims to prove the value for trainee teachers of understanding the way Foreign Language (FL) students learn, those methodologies that help these students learn and how we can enable them to feel at ease when in a formal learning context. Moreover, we consider that guided reflection during and after pre-service teaching training should form a compulsory part of official programmes as a means to further enable trainees to become more effective future language teachers. SLA research findings have furthered our comprehension of learning and teaching processes, and consequently we are aware that there are certain methods and techniques that might seem to encourage learning, but more is needed to help teachers to be more successful in their daily teaching practice.

Motivation can be said to be a factor of great importance in language learning and teaching contexts as well as SLA research, and “[...] provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process” (Dörnyei, 2002:65). From the multitude of published research into this complex concept which affects the learning process, we can confirm that motivation is one of the strongest pillars when learning a second language. Moreover, Dörnyei also states that “factors underlying motivation can override the aptitude effect on the individual variability in language learning achievement” (cited in Öz et al., 2015:3). It would seem logical that the essential aim of SLA research should be to assist teachers in their daily practice in the classroom by exploring the role of factors affecting learning such as these. Unfortunately, we might suggest that some SLA investigation does not contribute much towards teaching practice unless it includes the multiple cognitive and affective factors affecting learning.

3. Methodology

Croatian was chosen as the unknown language in our ULE research project, and this is due to the fact that it is so different from Spanish and English. It is an Indo-European language and therefore it shares some minor similarities in grammar and lexis, but none of these elements (such as words of Greek or Latin origin) were used by the researcher, on purpose, to show

that you can understand and participate totally in a foreign language classroom if the context and methodology are the right one.

Content analysis is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from a text. (Weber:1990) “Two of those procedures are part of our research: code open-ended question and identify the intention of the communicator.” (1990:9) Our students by participating in answering questions and by writing a diary about the experience have offered us a sound material to be analysed qualitatively as well as quantitatively. We have calculated the percentages of most frequent answers and examined in detail both diary entries and open-question answers. We have classified the data into fewer categories by taking into account common traits among answers. According to Weber, these categories or classifications have to be reliable, consistent and they have to generate variables that are valid above all.

Since our aim was to prove the validity and usefulness of ULE in teacher training programmes, we have decided that our research design had to be three-fold: qualitative, quantitative and mixed. Regarding the qualitative data, we have analyzed the diary entries by means of content analysis procedures, for the collection of quantitative data we have the adapted Trinity College London Diploma questions, and with regard to the mixed aspect, triangulation is present since we have addressed the same research questions by means of both quantitative and qualitative data. We consider that only one type of research design would have been insufficient and inadequate, for it would have failed to give a full insight into the learning/teaching processes and the role of reflection. For us, the problem or the issue was and is mainly qualitative, since it provided richer data in this case and there seems to be insufficient research about the inclusion of ULE in teacher training, and we have wanted to show its validity in order to offer a solid grounding for its implementation within Spanish teacher training programmes, both in graduate and in postgraduate programmes. In our case, one of the main objectives was to obtain insights into motivation when teaching or learning a foreign language and the only approach we could use to investigate this phenomenon was a qualitative one accompanied by a small scale quantitative design for triangulation purposes. The nature of the design itself belongs to the social research analysis tradition: “Social research is the systematic analysis of research questions by using empirical methods (e.g. of asking, observing, analyzing data.) Its aim is to make empirically grounded statements that can be generalized or to test such statements” (Flick,2015:10.).

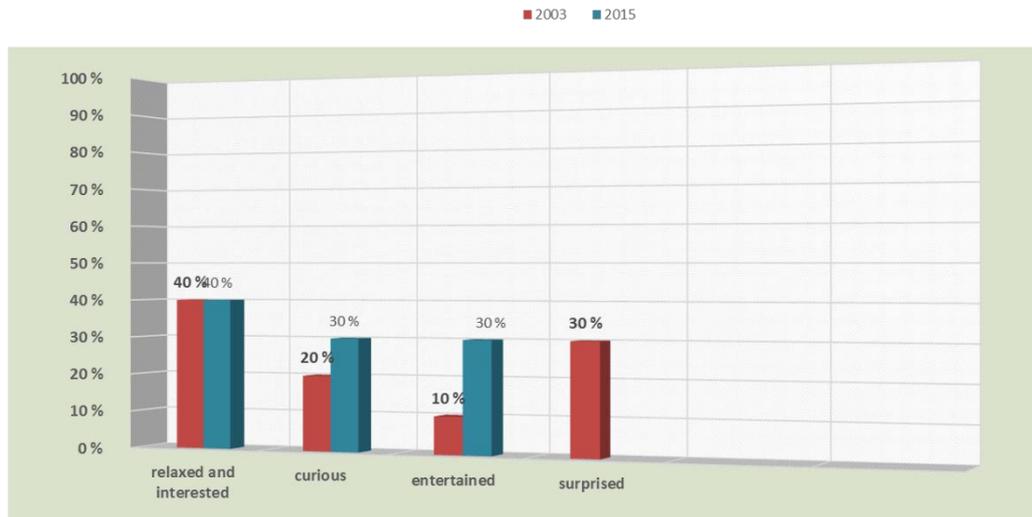
4. Data analysis

Our data are going to be presented in the form of graphs and tables. We have used the ‘Microsoft Excel’, spread sheet software to display and analyse the data. In our case, we have coded the data and used ‘Excel’ spread sheets to create the graphs and tables that are presented in this study. We have also used content analysis procedures to analyse our diary data, which is a method used in qualitative research to illustrate the meaning of analysed texts. Although at the beginning it concentrated mainly on the frequency of certain words within the given information.

This research period comprises a span of eleven/ twelve years. The first research experiment was in 2003 and was carried out for the Trinity College of London students with 23 students in total. They have participated in an absolute-beginner-level lesson of an unknown language

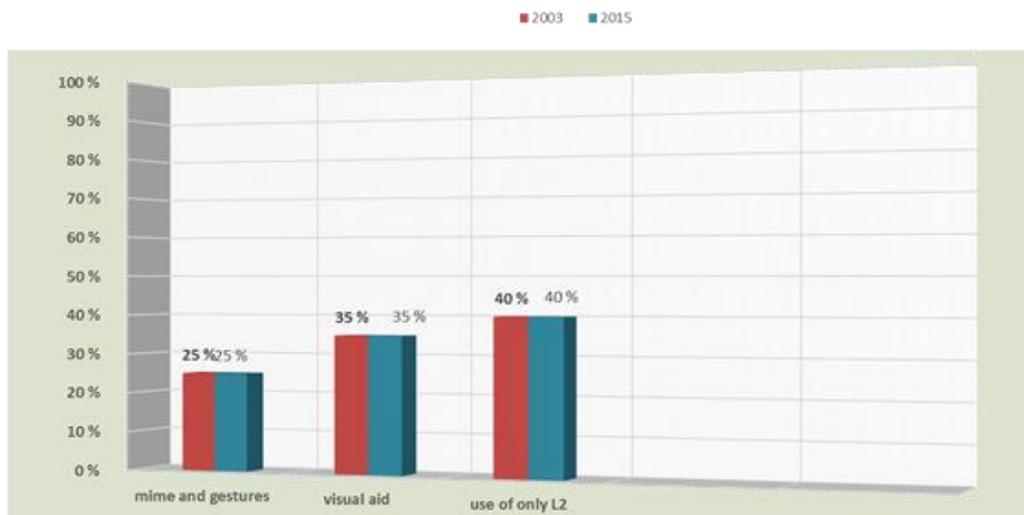
(Croatian) and apart from that, they took notes, as well as observed themselves and their peers in a unique experience of witnessing how we learn foreign languages. Thanks to the social media we have found ten of them who still kept the original diaries and were willing to answer the very same questions after more than a decade of the original experiment.

5. Results



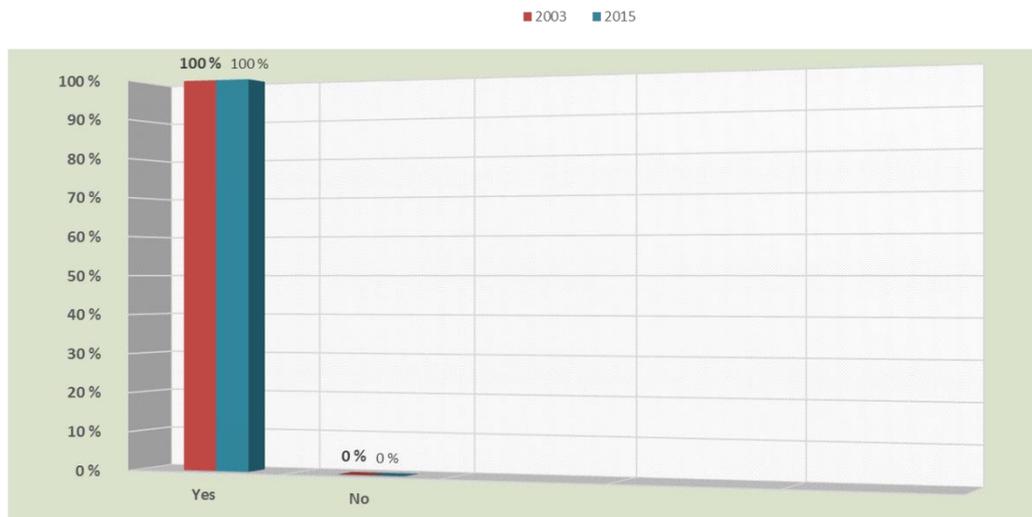
Question 1: How have you felt? (2003 and 2015 respectively)

For these subjects who were participants in the Trinity College of London Diploma training course from the 2003 research period, only positive feelings such as ‘relaxed’, ‘interested’, and ‘entertained’ can be perceived in their questionnaire responses. It shows us that positive feelings correspond to the most frequent in both cases, accounting for almost 50%, and ‘amazement’ and ‘fun’, with approximately 12%, were the same given answers. Once again in the responses to the same questions obtained from the same subjects in 2015, we have only positive feelings expressed in the following terms: ‘best part of the course’, ‘very useful’ and ‘memorable’.



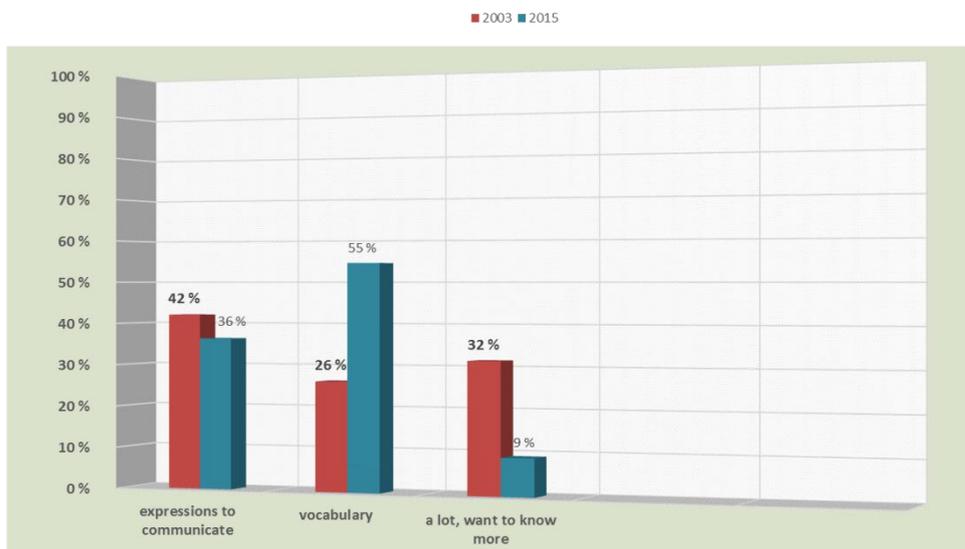
Question 2 :What methods, strategies, activities and teaching techniques were used by the teacher to help you to make sense?

Here, we can encounter surprising positive responses to this question: the most popular was ‘because you have used only L2 (40%), which was followed by visual aids (35%). The same responses were offered eleven or twelve years after the original ULE: ‘visual aspects’ (35%) and ‘body language’ and ‘mime’ represent approximately 20%. In 2015, 40% answered ‘use of L2’ and the other 60% account for ‘visuals’ and ‘concept checking’.



Question 3: Will you be able to apply any strategies to your own teaching?

In this case, the results are exactly the same as the ones obtained in 2015 as 100% of the subjects answered ‘yes’ to this question.



Question 4:What do you remember now/ what did you learn?

‘Communication’ and ‘vocabulary’ account for 68% of the given answers in 2003 and it shows that ‘vocabulary’ and ‘expressions to communicate’ were the most common answers (between 26% and 42%) in 2014/15. Moreover, 91% state ‘basic vocabulary’ and ‘expressions’.

With regard to the qualitative data obtained for this research period, we shall present here a selection of diary entries that match each question asked and the quantitative data described above. Content analysis of these above-mentioned contributions has revealed semantic groups and key words. For example, for the first area of feelings as we have mentioned before, only positive feelings were felt by the subjects: 'confidence', 'excited', 'keen', 'positive reinforcement', 'feeling good' and empathy. For the second questions, we have found the following categories: 'pair work', 'scaffolding', encouraging students to talk', 'creating a friendly atmosphere', 'the power of gestures and 'visuals', VAK', 'interaction patterns' (teacher- student, student- student), 'paralinguistics' and 'multiple intelligences'. Some of these former diploma students remember more what they learnt, and other remember more why they have learnt it. One of them mentions Vygotsky and his ZPD. The concept of ZPD is crucial in any learning process and it is related to scaffolding, mainly as it shows how to be effective teachers. It involves encouragement provided by the teacher, who gradually lets their students perform more independently.

6. Discussion

We have found out that some students felt uncomfortable at the beginning of the ULE process, but thanks to encouragement and appropriate teaching strategies they have overcome those initial negative feelings, as their own future learners might be able to do. Moreover, being in your learners' shoes is an unparalleled experience that cannot be replaced by reading or listening about strategies or techniques that really work. They have reflected upon the learning process itself on a metacognitive level, and offered some very valid answers to the questions posed. In addition, they believe that the Communicative Approach is an appropriate method for learning languages, since it caters for the innate human need to communicate and to be a member of a group or community. It promotes real contexts and interpersonal or discursal features, so it is not surprising that students prefer or benefit most from this kind of teaching.

The sample diary contributions and open- ended questionnaire answers we have selected once again confirm the importance of triangulation between quantitative and qualitative data since when analysing quantitative data; we cannot obtain a full insight into the complex process of learning languages. In this case, these students mention scaffolding (keep it simple and get the basics taught first.), learning styles (VAK), and a highly important strategy that any teacher should use with their students since it ensures solid and sequential progress from using simple words to complex sentences. This phenomenon is connected to the way we learn our L1. Additionally, knowing our own learning styles can be beneficial, not only for language learning but for learning in general. Nowadays, we cannot imagine any lesson preparation or discussion of competences if we do not mention Gardner. His Multiple Intelligences theory shows us that all of us are different in the way we approach tasks and learning, so in class we should cater for all these different kinds of intelligences, ensuring that our students do learn and, even more importantly, learn to learn more effectively.

7. Conclusions

The Unknown Language Experience (ULE) seems to be a unique opportunity to develop reflective criticism towards ones' own learning and teaching processes. If future teachers become accustomed to using reflection thanks to the inclusion of reflective practice offered by participating in a ULE as part of their training, then it is highly probable that they are going to continue doing it in the future. This experiment should enable them to construct their own meanings and to determine their level of reflective engagement, and these findings are going to influence their future teaching and pedagogical abilities. Moreover, this experience should help them to make appropriate decisions in the classroom and to develop the practice of critical thinking as well as the active, on-going habit of reflection. According to Ellis, teacher's cognition influences highly the way they act, since they hold their own theories about how to learn languages, but sometimes these beliefs come into conflict with something that Woods (cited in Ellis, 2012: 12) has called 'hotspots'.

Due to their participation in the unknown language learning experiment, future teachers have the opportunity to train their own abilities to assess concepts and (mis)conceptions about learning and teaching. Reflective thinking is essential for any teacher, no matter the level of their experience, because if teachers reflect upon the foreign language learning and teaching process, then they can take control and make decisions which will affect the success of their own teaching practice. As a result, teachers should become more skilled or able professionals, and even act as change agents in the educational system.

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