Conducting Action Research Projects in a Teacher Preparation Program[1]

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This article deals with a study carried out at Universidad de Caldas, a public institution for higher education in Colombia, South America. The purpose is to state the impact of the Action Research Model on the professional and personal education of beginning teachers along their English teaching practicum at public elementary, middle and high school. The study finds a positive effect of Action Research on teacher trainees, as reflected on the higher self awareness of the teachers' role, increased reflective skills, and a greater mastery of research skills and curriculum reinforcement in the participant institutions. These findings should contribute to the enrichment of Colombian public teacher education and teaching profession.

Keywords: action research, educational research projects, teacher preparation programs, novice teachers, teaching practicum.

Orientación de proyectos de investigación-acción en un programa de formación de educadores
Este artículo presenta un proyecto llevado a cabo en la Universidad de Caldas, una institución pública en Colombia, Sur América. El propósito consiste en establecer el impacto del modelo de investigación-acción en la formación profesional y personal de los profesores principiantes que desarrollan proyectos de investigación en colegios públicos de educación primaria, secundaria y

1 This article emerges from the research project entitled "Action research for scientific preparation of beginning teachers" which was sponsored by the National System of Science and Technology, through COLCIENCIAS, and by Universidad de Caldas in Manizales, Colombia. The authors are members of the research group INACMES (in Spanish, *Investigacion Acción, Currículo y Multimedia en la Educacion Superior*), which has been classified under Category A. As its name suggests, this group focuses on classroom research, curriculum research, and multimedia research in higher education settings. Its outstanding issues include the achievements of a method and a theory used to initiate the scientific competences of novice educators enrolled in the educational programs, among them the Modern Languages Program. Research participants were six advisors, two master degree students, and ten undergraduate teacher trainees whose teaching practicum was carried out in public high, middle and elementary schools, since 2004 until 2006.

media vocacional, durante su práctica educativa conducente a obtener el título de profesores de inglés. Se reporta el efecto positivo de la investigación acción en los profesores practicantes, representado en una mayor conciencia del rol del profesor, habilidades de reflexión, manejo de procedimientos investigativos y refuerzo del currículo en las instituciones involucradas. Los alcances del proyecto responden a las políticas públicas de formación de educadores en el país donde la investigación constituye un factor de mejoramiento cualitativo de desempeño profesional.

Palabras clave: investigación-acción, formación en investigación-acción, formación de educadores, profesores principiantes, práctica pedagógica.

Des projets de recherche-action au sein d'un programme de formation de professeurs

Cet article présente une recherche qui a été réalisée à l'Université de Caldas, un établissement d'enseignement supérieur public en Colombie, Amérique du Sud. Le but principal est d'indiquer l'impact du modèle de recherche-action sur la formation professionnelle et personnelle des enseignants débutants durant le stage d'enseignement de l'anglais dans des établissements publics primaires et secondaires. On a constaté un effet positif de la recherche-action chez les stagiaires, caractérisé par une conscience accrue de leur rôle d'enseignant, par le développement de compétences de réflexion et de recherche et par l'amélioration du cursus dans les établissements concernés. Les résultats du projet répondent aux politiques d'éducation publique de formation des enseignants dans le pays où la recherche est un facteur d'amélioration qualitative de la pratique professionnelle.

Mots clés : recherche-action, formation à la recherche, formation de professeurs, stage d'enseignement, professeurs débutants.

INTRODUCTION

At present, most Colombian higher educational programs at state and private universities train students to become teachers of a specific discipline, through theory-based courses or seminars that provide them with little research practice in the classroom. The history of most training programs has been related, to a certain extent, to teaching as a passive activity in which the following problems usually emerge (Cardona & Quintero, 1996; Quintero et al., 2007; McNulty & Usma, 2005):

- Lack of reflection skills
- Lack of time to conduct research
- Use of isolated teaching and research techniques
- Absence or poor knowledge of philosophical paradigms
- Instrumental use of research findings
- Few opportunities to improve professional skills to face the problems of real classroom situations.
- Adoption of experts' suggestions for teaching practices that not always meet classroom needs.

In an attempt to respond to the above listed needs and gaps, the group INACMES conducted the project "Improving language teacher trainees' scientific competences through Action Research" in the Modern Languages Licenciatura[2] Program at the University of Caldas, a State university in Manizales (Colombia). The main objectifs of this research study were:

- to describe the impact of the Action Research methodology in the personal, professional, and scientific education of beginning teachers in the Modern Languages Program;
- to explain how beginning teachers incorporate Action Research processes into their classrooms.
- to describe the effects of the Action Research reflective cycle approach on beginning teachers' classrooms and school settings.

Colombian educational policies and system

Educational policies in Colombia claim for a better world by contributing to sustainable human development, mutual understanding among individuals, and the renewal of democracy and human values. Policies also claim for the improvement of social skills in order to enable students to act effectively in their roles inside their families, their society and their nation. The educational system intends to reduce the levels of poverty and underdevelopment by means of vocational and scientific training that enables future leaders to face the challenges of a globalizing society with responsibility, commitment, and a good sense

2 The term *Licenciatura* refers to teacher education programs in different fields.

of citizenship (National Ministry of Education, MEN, 2004; Delors, 1996). The Ministry of Education and the Institutional Educative Projects (PEI)[3] currently promote an integrated curriculum which consists of a body of pedagogical knowledge for the present time, in order to face the new perspectives related to the development of science, technology, social issues, culture and human values.

According to the National Ministry of Education (2004), Colombian educational policies define education not only from the point of view of its impact on economic growth, but also from the broader perspective of human development. In higher education, teacher training programs play a crucial role in the quality of teacher education since they have a fundamental commitment in personal and social development; that is why demands made on teachers are considerable at times when the outside world is increasingly invading the school, particularly through new communications and information media.

In Colombia, there has been a significant increase in the number of colleges, master's programs, and even doctoral programs in the field of education; there are teacher preparation language programs in the following universities: Universidad de Antioquia, Universidad del Valle, Universidad de Caldas, Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira, Universidad Distrital, Universidad Surcolombiana de Neiva, Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Tunja, Universidad de la Amazonía, Universidad Libre, Universidad Tecnológica del Chocó, among others. This increase in the interest in the teaching of foreign language is in part due to the fact that it is considered a core subject in the curriculum, as stated in the *Ley General de Educación* (General Education Law enacted in 1994) in its Article 23.

In the language teaching field, recent initiatives have led to a national interest for the promotion and improvement of research practices in the foreign language classroom. Among these, we can mention events like: the *Encuentro con Universidades* (Colombian universities conference), led by the National Bilingualism Program; the *Encuentro de Instituciones Formadoras de Licenciados en Idiomas* (national conference of language teacher education), that takes place every year at a different public or private university; the ASOCOPI National Annual Conference (held by the Colombian English Teachers Association), that gathers teachers of

3 PEI: *Proyecto Educativo Institucional* is the document that presents the mission, vision, and plan of action to achieve the curriculum goals in every educational institution in Colombia.

English at all levels nationwide; the National ELT Conference, annually organized by the British Council; regional ELT Conferences convoked by the Centro Colombo Americano; the *Encuentro Nacional de Grupos de Investigación reconocidos por COLCIENCIAS en el área de educación* (national conference of education research groups), organized by public universities; and the *Encuentro Nacional de investigación en el aula L1 y L2* (L1 and L2 Classroom Research National Conference), led by Universidad del Valle and Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

As a matter of fact, the teaching of English as a Foreign Language is a priority in Colombia's educational system. The National Bilingualism Program is a 14-year old initiative which has trained hundreds of teachers inside and outside the country; it started in 1996 when groups of teachers were sent to immersion programs in the United States and Canada through an agreement between the Ministry of Education, the ICETEX (*Instituto Colombiano de Crédito y Estudios Técnicos en el Exterior)* which is a governmental entity that provides financial credit to citizens to study abroad, and the New World Language Institute in the mentioned countries (National Ministry of Education, 1996). In the last three years, different immersion and training programs have taken place in San Andrés, Manizales, Armenia, and so on (National Ministry of Education, 2008). As a result of these new courses of action, nowadays there are 22 bilingual departments or cities[4], among them Bogotá Bilingüe, Valle Bilingüe, Manizales Bilingüe, and so on. In January 2007, the National Ministry of Education released the national standards for the English language class in private and public schools (National Ministry of Education, 2007); these standards conceive English as an important component in the preparation of the new generations for their participation in the global economy.

Institutional policies, research lines and projects

At the college level, the teaching of English has also been of special interest for policy makers. The Modern Languages Program at University of Caldas has gone through important adjustments in the last decade, with which research has been incorporated as an essential component of new teachers' preparation. Institutional policies favour Action Research inside the Program in response to the requirements of the accreditation

4 Bilingual departments or cities: those that have a local bilingualism program aiming at the standards proposed by the Ministry of Education and the National Bilingualism Program.

system in which research is conceived as inherent to any educational action. The University of Caldas has stated some implicit and explicit educational reform strategies to smoothly achieve the generational relay that its faculty requires; one of those is the promotion of research training by means of collaborative research groups and "seed beds"[5]. As a result of these new educational policies, the university has institutionalized different research lines and groups in the teaching field.

The contributions of this outstanding group are the results of some of the changes the University of Caldas has gone through in the last decade. As a matter of fact, in recent years research has become the source and foundation of all educational processes in most Colombian universities (Muñoz, Munévar & Quintero, 2005), because they have become aware of the need to center their institutional mission on research rather than on a knowledge transmission model.

The new General Statute of the University of Caldas (1998) enacted 10 years ago and ratified in subsequent Decrees, states that the university "supports and promotes the investigative spirit of university community members, proposing policies that allow the definition of research lines, projects, and programs" (Universidad de Caldas, 1998, p. 19) which means that research is the pivot of academic life. Various research projects have been derived from the research work applied to education that consisted on incorporating Action Research to transform the teaching practices among teacher trainees and advisors. The following five projects have been entitled:

- Reflective action research for the improvement of theoretical and pedagogical practices (2001).
- Action research in the teaching practicum: a comprehensive narrative approach (2002).
- Transforming foreign language teaching and learning processes in the teaching practicum in public institutions (2003).
- Coffee culture, curriculum and foreign language teaching (2004).
- Action research for scientific preparation of beginning teachers (sponsored by COLCIENCIAS) (2004-2006).

5 Seed beds: research groups in which college students start their investigative experience in their field (in Spanish, the term is *semilleros de investigación).*

The above projects reported a transformation of the teaching and the learning processes in the trainees' classrooms with higher levels of motivation, a better command of linguistic and communicative competences, and higher learning awareness.

The teaching preparation program curriculum comprises three mainstays of the university mission: teaching, research, and extramural impact. To meet these institutional requirements, the teaching practicum in all of the programs offered by the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Caldas is understood as an integral reflective action to be coordinated by the *Unidad Formadora de Educadores* (Educational Studies Department). This branch of the mentioned faculty deals with Licenciatura programs such as B.A. in Modern Languages, B.A. in Biology and Chemistry, B.A. in Social Sciences, B.A. in Philosophy, among others. The practicum is based on the rethinking of the relationships the teacher trainee has with the school reality with a balance between theory and practice. That is why, the education of future teachers highlights reflection, comprehension, interpretation, and intervention on their own practice.

Since 2000, teacher trainees start their research work in early terms and a final research project is required for graduation. The research component of the program is divided in two different stages. The first stage corresponds to the theoretical foundation, observation and recognition of school contexts taking place in the seventh and eighth semesters when the trainees identify researchable problems and state preliminary proposals for intervention, equivalent to one year; the second stage corresponds to the teaching practicum in which as teacher trainees, the students conduct formal research along with their teaching duties, having to submit a final report at the end of the program as the main graduation requirement, as well as the total curriculum academic credits. In the Modern Languages Licenciatura Program the students are given a clear view of the different research methods available and applicable in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Action Research is strongly advised as one of the best ways to achieve the levels of reflection that beginning teachers need in the challenging teaching circumstances they are supposed to face, specially in the public sector. To make decisions for their future research projects, teacher trainees conduct diagnostic observations and analysis of the context of their future practicum field,

in order to get familiar with data collection and analysis processes and with the school daily life.

METHOD

The foreign language classroom is a laboratory. Every single class move is a source of reflection and research; that is why Case Study and Action Research methodologies have become important means of teaching and learning improvement in the EFL class.

This research project was conducted within the Action Research approach (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1995; Stenhouse, 1975; Elliot, 1991) with a small group of teacher trainees whose research projects were carried out in public High, Middle and Elementary schools between 2004 and 2006. All of them followed four stages: To develop a plan, to improve what is already happening, to act to implement the plan, to observe the effects of action in the context in which it occurs, and to reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent action, through a succession of cycles. The trainees' research process was followed up by means of class observations, informal talks, life stories, autobiographies, diaries, transcripts, interviews, questionnaires and surveys administered by the authors who were part of the advisory team, in both the Modern Languages program and the Master's Program in English Didactics at the University of Caldas. Data were collected and triangulated from different sources: the teacher trainees themselves, their advisors, head teachers and administrators, and the different data collection instruments and artifacts involved in the implementation of the research procedures. Different times were agreed to meet and discuss the areas of interest with participants and non-participant subjects, among which, the end of each semester was of crucial importance as part of the final or intermediate evaluation of the practicum in both the university and the schools. Data analysis was conducted by means of segmentation and categorization (Quintero et al., 2007; Spradley, 1980) on a qualitative approach basis.

The Case Study Approach

The Case Study methodology has become very popular among teacher researchers. As stated by Stake, cited by McKernan (1996, p. 74),

> the case study is a single case or bounded system, it observes naturalistically and interprets higher order interrelations within the observed data. Results are generalizable in that the information given allows readers to decide whether the case is similar to theirs. Case Study can and should be rigorous (Stake, 1995, p. 277).

The single case may be either teacher or student issues that are followed up with ethnographic methods that lead to conclusions about specific class phenomena: a teaching strategy or approach, learning styles, effects of a particular resource, and so on. Brown and Rodgers (2006, p. 21) state that "Case Study research comprises an intensive study of the background, current status, and environmental interactions of a given social unit: an individual, a group, an institution, or a community." McKernan (1996, p. 76) also identifies various advantages in the Case Study methodology:

- Reproduces phenomenological world of participants through detailed description of events.
- Presents credible and accurate account of the setting and action.
- Uses multi-methods to corroborate and validate results.
- Tells a story in language layman and practitioner can understand.
- Data are 'representative'.

As shown above, case study emphasizes the description of settings and actions in which participants (teachers and students) take actions and make decisions that affect their performance and role in the learning process. The mentioned description is carried out by means of various data collection techniques such as diaries, questionnaires, recordings, surveys, interviews, and so on. McKernan (1996, p. 77) also states that Case Study "is eclectic, using a variety of research styles and methods; it is idiosyncratic and specific; it is process- rather than product-oriented; and it is rich in description, interpretation, explanation, and narrative."

The Action Research Approach

Scientific issues related to immediate and practical solutions to the concerns in the education of teachers as researchers have called the attention of theorists all over the world (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1995;

Stenhouse, 1975; Schön, 1983; Noffke & Stevenson, 1995; among others). These authors emphasize the Action Research approach as an alternative for the renewal of curriculum plans.

Human actions are concerned with those behaviors, interactions and feelings of what human beings do in daily life. In recent years, the reflective approach (Kemmis &d McTaggart, 1995; Nunan, 1997; Schön, 1983; Senge et al., 2000) support that every professional should improve his action when he reflects on what he does. Since the twentieth century, these authors have helped researchers to better understand how school practitioners make sense of their experience and engage in professional learning. This is a way how teachers as researchers can work scientifically in their classrooms; this means that teachers are not only collectors of data but they can also be theorists, reflective and transformers. Consequently, as Senge et al. (2000) stated in their book *Schools that Learn*, teachers' everyday life implies solving problems, experimenting new things and reflecting on what happens in their classroom so that they can make changes in their teaching learning environment. Nunan (1997, p. 175) also identifies the reflective features that Action Research comprises and states that it "is a form of self-reflective inquiry carried out by practitioners, aimed at solving problems, improving practice, or enhancing understanding. It is often collaborative".

Researchers can relate the term Action Research to the term Reflective Thought, because it represents a search for a kind of understanding that enables teachers to act wisely and intelligently in a changing world. According to Elliot (1998), when conducting this kind of reflection, teachers associate theory from the immediacy of practical experience. Cohen and Manion (1994) also state that action research can be understood as a small scale intervention in real contexts. The effects of such interventions should be evaluated at the end of the process

According to Carr and Kemmis, cited by Brown and Rodgers (2006, p. 99), Action Research "is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their practices (Carr & Kemmis, 1985, p. 220)". This ratifies the role teacher researchers play when they reflect on their own practice and try to improve the teaching/learning process everyday. Brown and Rodgers (2006, p. 100) also highlight Kemmis and McTaggart's view of Action Research as a series of steps teachers follow to reflect and make changes in their classrooms:

Phase 1: Develop a plan of action to improve what is already happening.
Phase 2: Act to implement the plan.
Phase 3: Observe the effects of action in context.
Phase 4: Reflect on these effects.

In sum, with the implementation of research approaches such as Case Study and Action Research, pedagogy, research and teaching are to be integrated with the purpose of preparing reflective and critical teachers, able to improve their own practices because, as Schön (1983, p. 58) emphasizes, "Professionals, be they physicians, architects, or teachers–or one might add craftpersons or artists–face situations of practice characterized by complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict. The problems professionals face cannot be solved by the formulas of technical rationality". As a matter of fact, this is the most enriching contribution of Action Research to the preparation of beginning teachers since it helps them to get prepared for the challenges today's classrooms are full of. As opposed to rationality and conventional formulas, reflection in action helps new generations of teachers to build their own teaching theory based on classroom investigation.

FINDINGS

The implementation of Action Research projects in our Modern Languages program during the teaching practicum reported a significant impact on the teacher trainees' growth and on their learning and teaching contexts.

The categories identified during the qualitative analysis dealt with five main aspects: self-awareness of teacher's role, reflection skills, mastery of research procedures, curriculum reinforcement, and personal growth.

Self-Awareness of Teachers' Role

The data analyzed along the study showed the gradual growth of teacher trainees as they became more aware of their role in the classroom, and they realized that the teaching process demanded a new and different view of the classroom. The excerpts from the data collection instruments (Tables 1 and 2) reflect their initial perception of teaching in contrast with their final view of their role in the learning process.

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, beginning teachers used to see teaching as a transmission of knowledge that reproduced teaching practices, implemented by their own teachers in primary and secondary education or that came from given formulas suggested by experts in textbooks or methodology courses; going through Action Research in a sequence of cycles helped them to rethink their own teaching integrating theory and practice, becoming aware of the relationship between pedagogy and research. As a matter of fact, the early experience with Action Research provided the beginning teachers with new ways of thinking, teaching, and researching making the teaching learning process more meaningful and reflective.

Another important impact on the teacher trainees' growth was the view of the classroom itself. The Action Research cycle helped beginning teachers to define the classroom as both a learning place and a social world where multiple cultures brought by the students converge; the trainees in this study found out that the social world in the classroom was constantly changing and that those changes at the same time demanded changes in their teaching; as a consequence, they recognized that each classroom setting implied a different interpretation of the real world and different paths of action. Most of the advisors' evaluation sessions and follow-up records of the teaching practicum reported that after going through Action Research, the teacher trainees:

… are able to identify social problems and propose plans of action.

… recognize their responsibilities as educators of new generations as opposed to information transmitters.

… make decisions at the right time according to real life needs.

… share their concerns and discuss different options to solve teaching / learning problems inside the classroom.

Table 1. Views of teaching by trainees before and after the research process

Trainees' views of teaching at early stages of research process	**Trainees' views of the teaching role at the end of research process**
I am a complete failure. I am scared and insecure because teaching is a new experience that makes you feel anxious.	Now I realize that a good teacher is not only who knows about the subject matter, but the one who reflects and makes the students reflect.
I felt like a foreigner in an unknown world, among people I did not know.	The practicum helps trainees to project themselves in the school context.
I was insecure… I wanted to run away… I asked my advisor to change my class setting.	Doing research helps trainees learn by doing and sharing with other teachers.
The first class was really difficult. I over-planned activities and materials… I messed up with everything.	With the practicum we have learned that we have to plan day by day based on the whole context and not only on our knowledge.

Similar views were taken from the advisors' testimonies (see Table 2)

Table 2. Views of teaching by advisors before and after the research process

Views of teaching at early stages of research process	**Views of the teaching role at the end of research process**
In the beginning, teacher trainees stress on rigid lesson planning with little creativity, modelling their learning experiences or trying given formulas.	Teacher trainees incorporate the students' context and curriculum guidelines into their planning.
Interest in complying with the curriculum guidelines and calendar at expense of the students' needs.	More flexibility is given to lesson plans prioritizing students' needs, interests, and expectations.
Rigid separation of academic and research processes; the main goal is to complete the syllabus.	Trainees are able to conduct research while they teach.
Lack of understanding of the theory and terminology corresponding to teaching and research.	Teacher trainees differentiate their teaching and research knowledge.
Very general and subjective views of the context and class phenomena.	There is a clear identification of facts concerning particular teaching-learning issues.
Stress on results rather than teaching-learning processes.	Student teachers become aware of the need to focus on how to make the learning process more experiential to students.

Reflection Skills

The teacher trainees in this study expressed their satisfaction of knowing that through reflection they could come up with better teaching practices. They became aware of the fact that looking at the classroom and thinking about what happens in there help them to identify real needs and to solve real teaching-learning problems. The Action Research cycle approach helped them overcome the well known difficulties of higher education teaching programs in which planning according to needs analysis is fundamental. The reflective features of Action Research prepared them to gain insights through reflection rather than to master specific predefined tasks. They insisted that the nature of such model promoted greater and more thought-out participation in their school contexts than traditional models.

Reflection contributed to trainees' decision making at different stages; those decisions dealt with planning, teaching strategies, materials, grading, testing, and all sort of class-related issues thought of before or after conducting the classes; before, to decide on the best options to achieve curriculum objectives, and after, to assess the effectiveness of the chosen alternatives in the search of permanent improvement. In this respect, some of the data stated that at the end of the process there was:

> *… self-criticism, self-reflection, more autonomy when making decisions.*
>
> *… problems or challenges are faced with a clearer understanding of the context.*
>
> *… differentiation of facts and opinions on a description-interpretation basis.*

In the trainees' words, the impact of Action Research is expressed like this:

> *Language teachers must help students to analyze, reflect, observe and identify real problems concerning their lives.*
>
> *Educational research prepares us to be more reflective and to analyze the situations that happen in the classroom.*

Mastery of Research Procedures

As teacher trainees grew as reflective individuals who made decisions based on real classroom events, they also reported having become more skilful in research procedures such as collecting and analyzing data, designing data collection instruments, conducting observations or interviews, administering questionnaires and surveys, and recording daily school life events on various formats. They emphasized on the information overload proper to the beginning stages of their projects and described how they could learn, through Action Research, how to systematize and classify data on a description-interpretation basis. According to the trainees' comments, one of the most challenging activities was the recording of descriptions and interpretations. It took a long time for them to differentiate these two components in their research process. Some excerpts from data collection instruments stated:

> *At the beginning we did not know how to handle so much information. Categorization was hard. However, this research work was very enriching because we learned how to classify information.*

> *At first, it was hard for me to start writing and analyzing data… at some point I cried because I had not systematized all the information and the defence date was coming.*

Another important finding reports difficulties in the identification of research topics. Most of the trainees admitted bias at initial stages of the practicum since they thought they knew in advance what they were going to do research on. In fact, the beginning teachers in this study considered several thematic concerns even before they arrived at the host schools; it was certainly frustrating and difficult for them to identify one issue that was really relevant for the school or class and manageable for them. The teacher-trainess in the study told by different means how Action Research helped them to identify thematic concerns starting small and focusing on real needs that could be met in a few months or during the academic year they were supposed to be at the chosen schools.

Finally, the participants in this study also referred to time as one of the most serious constraints. They often complained that they did not have enough time to accomplish what they expected. It was difficult for

them to play the roles of teachers and researchers at the same time and to comply with the requirements in the Modern Languages Program and the host schools. Time management arose then, as the most challenging aspect in the accomplishment of research proposals and curriculum guidelines.

Curriculum Reinforcement

In the analysis of the Action Research cycles in this study, curriculum reinforcement arose as one of the most significant aspects school administrators and head teachers highlighted in the teacher trainees' performance; they repeatedly referred to the student teachers' interest to comply with curriculum guidelines both at the school and the Ministry of Education levels; according to most of the administrators interviewed in the study, beginning teachers made big efforts to design research proposals to respond to the schools' needs and curriculum requirements, making so valuable contributions to the achievement of curriculum standards. According to the documental analysis of research reports, it was stated that 85% of the proposals adapted lesson plans and materials to the schools' emphases; as a matter of fact, the schools' Educational Institutional Projects determined the chosen teaching strategies, language contents, themes, and evaluation criteria in most of lesson plans or workshops. Teacher staff also interviewed throughout the data collection process, referred to research projects as updating sources in the fields of methodology, materials design, and class management. Teacher trainees were referred to as innovation agents that promoted a fresher learning atmosphere into the foreign language classroom.

At the university level and according to the practicum advisors, the teacher trainees contributed to the development of institutional policies concerning the research component stated in the University of Caldas General Statute (1998). The research proposals conducted in public and private schools provided the university with feedback to reflect on its role in the education of professionals to improve the quality of EFL teaching, by means of theoretical insights and scientific findings that, put together, helped the Modern Languages Program and the Faculty of Education to make important changes in the curriculum such as the increase of research courses, the extension of the program duration from four to five years, the implementation of different emphases according to languages (French, Spanish or English), and so on.

Personal Growth

Important aspects reported by teacher trainees when referring to the impact of Action Research on their personal lives are: time management skills, discipline and responsibility at workplaces, social interaction competences, and self-confidence. The analysis of the information reported a high level of satisfaction when the trainees described the way in which they became more mature to deal with everyday issues. Some of their comments stated:

> *Now I know how to plan my daily activities.*
>
> *Before the practicum, I was too overwhelmed by the lots of work the school demanded. Now, I can plan my classes and plan my personal life at the same time.*
>
> *Interacting with students, teachers and administrators gave me the abilities to recognize and respect differences among people who live together.*
>
> *Now that I am finishing my practicum I feel stronger when I talk to students because I feel that they see me as a professional.*

Both head teachers and administrators agreed on the positive aspects that the process of conducting action research reported to the beginning teachers. At the end of the practicum they were seen as more mature teachers who could handle and balance their personal and professional lives exchanging skills from one field to the other; according to their testimonies, the trainees adapted to the institutional contexts and learned how to make decisions dealing with different academic or disciplinary issues reaching almost the same status and recognition of head teachers among the community members. The same feeling of personal growth achievement was pointed at by the trainees when they reported having perceived higher levels of acceptance among parents, teachers and administrators who approached them looking for advice, opinion or help in different situations.

Introduction of Action Research in the Classroom

One aspect that was highlighted in most of the data collection instruments was the consistency with which the action research cycles were implemented; they were the support to plan and sequence the lessons which mostly consisted of workshops in which the problematic situation was intervened, reflected on and evaluated. The cycles were planned in such a way that they fitted the schools' curriculum and responded to the educational needs of the students. The process of reflection and evaluation were shared for the most part with head teachers and administrators, mainly coordinators, who also benefited from the innovative ideas taken to the classrooms. The workshops implemented in the different institutions responded to the schools' pedagogical models and always tried to meet the requirements of the academic emphasis, mission, vision, and philosophy of each school.

CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The implementation of Action Research at early stages in the preparation of new generations of foreign language teachers, is a very effective way to integrate theory and practice in a harmonious relationship between pedagogy and research, in which teachers rethink their practice and adjust their daily school life to a reflective approach that makes them aware of the need for changes that lead to excellence in teaching and learning. Administrators, advisors, and head teachers are to take into account the important contributions that beginning teachers bring to the hosting schools and support their research projects at all stages, since they are an important update to teaching and learning approaches inside the classrooms.

The Action Research Cycle model is of vital importance in the professional growth process of language teachers, since it provides them with insights and new perspectives about teaching and learning as a result of a more meaningful and reflective approach to their own classrooms. Teacher educators should incorporate reflective practices in every course of study in the teacher preparation programs so that trainees get used to self-assessment, self-criticism, and permanent rethinking of their school life.

The cycled Action Research methodology makes teachers define their classrooms from different perspectives: a learning place, a social world, a multi-cultural setting, a changing context, an innovation generator, a permanent decision-making and challenging field that implies various interpretations of the real world, demanding so different paths of action. An open-minded culture should be promoted among teacher trainees so that they be enable to face the diversity that the classroom offers in relation to either social, political or economical features of the population they might work with.

Foreign language teachers are to be prepared to identify real needs and to solve real problems inside their classrooms. Action Research gives them the tools to have a significant impact on the curriculum, due to the detailed look at the teaching process as a whole, coming up with solutions that deal either with teaching methodology, learning strategies, materials selection, or any other issues being object of investigation.

As opposed to traditional models, Action Research provides teacher researchers with countless opportunities to gain insights rather than to master specific predefined tasks, promoting so greater and more thought-out participation in curriculum changes. Hosting schools need to take advantage of the research projects that beginning teachers conduct in their settings, because they help institutions to discover problematic situations, and at the same time to find the right plan of action to solve them with the resources at hand.

Action Research constitutes one of the most important ways to make teacher trainees reflect on their practices; reflection builds professional maturity, self-confidence, self-assessment, social awareness, creativity, decision-making skills that help trainees become better teachers. Action Research is an important opportunity for new teachers to reflect and build on principles, stages and strategies with which they make important decisions for innovation inside the classroom based on the combination of various approaches, techniques and instruments. Action Research, as a cyclical process, makes beginning teachers grow and mature, giving them tools to take the necessary time to observe and reflect on their teaching, avoiding so the rush, anxiety, assumptions or misbeliefs common at early stages of the teaching profession. That is why, advisors and head teachers need to understand and follow up the mentioned growth as facilitators in such a learning process.

The cycled Action Research model allows teachers to make opportune right decisions concerning teaching or learning instances; teachers are able to observe and analyze their settings and make adjustments or changes when necessary. Action Research is a very good way to train beginning teachers in the thinking of teaching as the integration of theory and practice, with a clear understanding of the relationship pedagogy-research. Action Research gives teachers the skills they need to look at their classrooms and see what is really going on, contrasting theory and practice, from both a pedagogical and a social perspective that determines the path to lesson planning, evaluation, and all kinds of curriculum-related actions. Institutions hosting beginning teachers need to be willing to make adjustments, changes, and innovations that derive from a real analysis of the schools reality and that are supported by the theory that proves those changes effective.

Action Research procedures as conducted in the Modern Languages program, provide student teachers with the necessary skills to objectively handle information separating facts from opinions, differentiating descriptions and interpretations of class phenomena, classifying and systematizing data according to real classroom concerns, and drawing conclusions that lead to plans of action that meet the schools needs and expectations. The training of beginning teachers inside the Action Research methodology makes them grow as professionals who are able to overcome the constraints proper to most educational settings such as time, lack of resources, changing policies, etc.

Action Research as a permanent reflective and transformative process is a good source of information for professors, advisors and administrators in charge of teacher education. The feedback this model provides helps them assess, at different points of the program, the effectiveness and quality of the curriculum.

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Fecha de recepción: 11-08-2009

Fecha de aceptación: 02-10-2009