Perceptions of the Perpetual Learner

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Abstract
Life is curious. We wake up, we make plans, and we see a slight incline, but not many major obstacles in sight. In fact, we know that our day is going to be perfectly brilliant (perhaps). That is not always the case, however, and as learners, teachers, teacher researchers, teacher educators, and/or administrators our days can quickly turn into an uphill battle filled with pitfalls, bridge crossings, floods, and rainstorms until we crawl back under our rocks and wait for our next no problem day to begin. Foreign language teaching, as well, can be a difficult task, particularly when it also involves hard-core experiential learning along the way. This presentation will take the audience through a reflective journey of learning and of being involved in language teaching and language education in Colombia, South America for the past 18 years. During this presentation, we will explore the importance of critical reflection, professional development, and the importance of being a perpetual learner. By the end of the journey, the audience will discover the importance of the development of emotional intelligence, comradery, professional communities, and most importantly addressing contextual needs. Through all of this, it is hoped that audience members are able to take away what it means to consider needs and advances through their own stages of perpetual learning and growth.

Keywords: Reflective Teaching, English as a Foreign Language, Professional Development

Introduction

This anecdotal story shares my own reflective journey of learning and of being involved in language teaching and language education in Colombia, South America for the past 18 years.

Life is curious. We wake up, we make plans, and we imagine just slight difficulties throughout our course for the day, but not many major obstacles in sight. In fact, we know that our day is going to be perfectly brilliant (perhaps). Foreign language teaching can be a difficult task, particularly when it also involves tough, experiential learning along the way. As we all know, that first imagined scenario is not always the case. However, as learners, teachers, teacher researchers, teacher educators, and/or administrators our days can quickly turn into a second image entailing an uphill battle filled with pitfalls, bridge crossings, floods, and rainstorms until we reach the summit and return to our homes, reflect, and begin our next nor problem day.

Pitfalls

A pitfall can be defined as a hidden danger or difficulty. One second, we are walking along a path that is seemingly without obstacles and "BAM" something takes us off course the next second. These pitfalls are the stories of our lives, the anecdotes as to how we became who we are today. Do you remember the game Pitfall (Activision, 1982)? It was this 8MB screen, in which as Wikipedia defined "the player controls Pitfall Harry and is tasked with collecting all the treasures in a jungle within 20 minutes while avoiding obstacles and hazards." Language teaching, like the game, to me is tricky. There is no one correct path. We are all different in how we play the game. Our beliefs, our values, our perceptions, and our experiences define who we are. Some of these can be changed, but our core content cannot (Borg, 2015; Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2012). There will always be alligators and barrels to avoid. There will be pits to jump. We battle snakes, we avoid the scorpions, and we gather gold bars; but whatever path we choose, we never truly win the game. However, like the game, language teaching and learning requires practice and reflection. Through this, we can make better choices, jump fewer barrels, and master the path, some of us to excellence.

Let me start this segment with my original pitfall. In July of 1999, I arrived in Barranquilla at Ernesto Cortizo (BAQ) without a single Colombian peso in my pocket nor the Spanish ability to use a payphone if I had had the change. Eventually, a person, who happened to speak English, did me the favor to call. I learned a lot that year a about life. Simply put, I had no clue about life. None. In 2001, I was offered a position at Universidad del Norte, and I have not left. But the most inspiring and monumental part of my language learning and teaching career began at that university.

My first years at the university were about learning student culture and trying to help them learn English. I was frustrated and, through reflection, I was transferring my expectations of US students onto Colombian students. I was flabbergasted and exasperated to the extent of my own ruin. In 2005, the tides had turned, and I had the opportunity to attend TESOL in San Antonio. Henry Widdowson, was one of the plenary speakers.

What I remember the most was the importance he placed on connecting with the student. "Nothing else matters, if we do not connect." The particularity of the context matters. We have to consider the social, economic, and political situations of the context and make that connection. Once we do, learning can happen. Critical approaches matter (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

Even through my struggle, I moved forward, developed a style, and shared those experiences with my students, coworkers, and peers continually. I went on to obtain my doctorate in Education and now, I feel, that everyone who has entered my life, including my undergraduate and postgraduate students at UniNorte, have impacted my learning and my language teaching development in very positive ways. I am grateful for every one of them. Pitfalls might present difficulties, but nothing that we cannot get over, get through, or go beyond.

Bridge crossings

Bridge crossings, in this case, refers to solving a problem or difficulty. The business mantra, location, location, location comes to mind. The idea that homes can increase or decrease in value due to where they are located. One of the biggest problems in education is status. The university I work in is of the top Private universities in the country, located in a prominent section of its city, and holds a high standard of learning for the students. However, other locations do not have the amenities and affordances that I have been given to teach students at equitable and fair terms. Nevertheless, location should not diminish the overall value of other areas. It is about the learning (both teachers and students).

Regarding student learning, some of the difficulties and problems can be solved on our own. For example, if a student has difficulty learning grammar or other teacher-oriented skills based and repetitive learning ideas, we know practice is the simplest solution and provide more practice. Nevertheless, it is our duty to find the resources, understand the theory, and apply these to our contexts to note what was positive and not so well received by the learners. I have participated in different learning communities and committees and though not so simple to share ideas sometimes, working together might make that difference and build that bridge: We need to find the need, measure it against the target, and provide the difference. There are many positive outcomes with learning communities, or professional development communities (Jones, Stall, & Yarbrough, 2013; Turner, Christensen, Kacker-Cam, Fulmer, & Trucano, 2018). Teachers need to participate and become leaders in their learning communities, their institutions, and in their classrooms regardless of where they are.

Floods

I attach the word flood, "to fill or diffuse completely," to students. We have all had that student for whom we cannot help completely, but we tell their story further along the line of our careers. We hold these memories near to our heart and hope that they may motivate, or deter, others further along. They also last a lifetime in our heads as we pave our way along our teaching road. I have a few examples that I would like to share. I call them, *the inundado* (literal and figurative), *the salado*, and *the problematico*.

Inundado can be translated from Spanish as flooded. The literal "inundado" is that student who lives in regions in which floods occurring during the rainy season are a part of life. Now, we may start with the question: why would foreign language learning be useful for this child as they live in that area? Well, the fact is, we all deserve the best in life, and if a second or third language provides that gateway, then it needs to happen or at least it needs to be available.

The main concern here though are the constraints that floods impose on the learning context. For weeks, if not longer, the classroom does not exist. It is filled with water and mud, the desks are ruined, and the walls are filthy with grime. The damage to the physical (social) context will take months to repair. In fact, I had a student a few years back in the Master's program and his school flooded. He tried to do his research and implement his research ideas into the classroom, but the unfortunate flooding slowed down the process. He never gave up, though. He worked hard to help students reorient into learners, and he pursued until there was success, for him and for his school. At that moment, however, the situation seemed uncertain, but persistence kept the dream alive. This student made the language and the learning available.

The figurative "inundado" is the student who constantly suffers emotional, physiological, or at times, dramatic difficulties. The student who has to help with the younger siblings or the one whose parents are divorcing, or worse yet serious difficulties with famine, social, and political issues in the region are important examples. These students obviously need affect, need attention, and most of all need understanding. In my experience though, providing the tools to help students achieve requires theirs and your social and emotional awareness (Goleman, 2005).

The salado student is that student that cannot catch a break. Nothing seems to go right for them. *The salado* is the student who consistently has something beyond their physical control or circumstance affected their day. The computer was stolen out of their car, their computer died, or the dog or little sister destroyed their homework. These difficulties are typically uncomplicated distractions, but there is a plethora of other types of reasons. However, the key factor here, for these students, is there is always something that influences their ability to get things done. These students have learned early on that excuses, real or not, were acceptable and most of the times permitted with later deadlines. Without damaging their egos and harping on their lack of commitment, we try to demonstrate understanding and permit the excuse while kindly demonstrating the need to manage environment and balance self and others (Goleman, 2005).

My final example is what I call the *Problemático.* These students demonstrate learning difficulties or complications. The student, for example, might have a disciplinary issue or truly has difficulties learning. We as language teachers, though, are usually not necessarily equipped to forego the essential accommodations. For example, we may not have the institutional power to provide extra time for a reading exam, our school may not have psychologists or worse yet, we have never learned what to do legally or ethically.

Regardless of the types of students we receive, we as teachers and humans, take it upon ourselves to help the students surpass the negative situation and move forward

seeking opportunity and equity in life. I have on many occasions. Though it is tough on most days, I do my best within my realms of power and identity to help these students get through and continue to find solutions (Borg, 2015).

Rainstorms

Rainstorms are the thunder and lightning of our jobs. The macro and micro rulings of our lives: the curriculum and its encompassing complexities. Curriculum decisions come from the top down and from the bottom up. Throughout the past 18 years, the National Ministry of Education (MEN) has provided language programs and their teachers the *Basic Standards,* a *Suggested Curriculum for k-11*, a book series called *"English, please?"* The MEN has also provided training in some regions of the country, and has given scholarships for study at the larger universities over the years with the great hope of increasing the learning and teaching of English throughout the country.

During this time, I also have had the opportunity to learn and work with some of the key players in national, regional and local influence in the country. I attended national conferences and met many more of the language teachers and teacher trainers within the country. People from Bogota, Cali, and Medellin and further along the Northern Coast. My own work with the *Suggested Curriculum* led me to meeting (online and in person) even more language teachers and teacher educators and administrators throughout the country. The list is long and most seem to ask the same question. How can we do it?

Many believe that such top-down decisions do not fit or allow equitable and balanced learning. Nevertheless, top-down decisions are global, political, and obligatory and very often difficult to meet. Thus, the encouragement for anyone is to take the tools supplied and make bottom-up decisions. No one can determine or know what the contextual particularities of your learning situation are. Therefore, the best that can be done is to understand top-down policy and work toward harmony from the bottom-up. This way we can meet students' needs and move from the rainstorm toward a realm of positivity and equity through learning and language learning (Betenbenner, 2009; Brown, 2001).

Summit

Many of the English teachers I have met or had the opportunity to teach or work with tend to think that they cannot teach or that their students are less motivated to learn if they do not have some of the following:

a) Use of computers, tablets, books, or audios
b) Access to a language laboratory, the internet, or video beam projectors
c) Knowledge of other new technology that might out there

Well, I ask:

- Can we motivate learners in a flooded environment?
- Can we use local materials?
- Can learners be invited into projects?
- Can teachers of other subjects be invited into the development of new courses?
- Can we work together on the production of materials used in the English classroom?

The answers are a resounding "yes." We need each other; not stuff.

Conclusion

Lifelong learning is the "ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated" pursuit of knowledge for either personal or professional reasons. Therefore, "it not only enhances social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development, but also self-sustainability, as well as competitiveness and employability" (Singh, 2015). Only you know who the *inundados, salados, or problemáticos* are in your context. Only you have the idea of what is expected in your school, from your colleagues and most importantly, what your students need. Therefore, it is important to create a community of learning. We do not need the big stars in the ESOL arena to illuminate who we are; they and their research are the tools for how we build our path. We need other teachers and learners like us to get together and share pains and gains. We do not need experts from the Ministry to plan our lessons. We need to read the documents together, try out the ideas (inside and out), look for materials (or create), try out ideas, and discuss and grow together.   Work together and connect.

Therefore, before you go crawl under your rock and hide from the day's complications and challenges remember that the road becomes less convoluted and easier to manage with professional development, learning, and the willingness to reflect. Choose and participate in a community that works for you while wandering through your own pitfalls, crossing your own bridges, surviving your own floods, and weathering your own storms. Keep positive and keep learning.

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